The Trick Is to Keep Breathing

by clio_jlh

Summary

Three years on, the second war still casts a long shadow. When facing challenges like a compulsive addiction, a baffling mystery, a life changing decision, an impending career shift, or simply moving in with your boyfriend, maybe the best strategy is to lean on your friends, put one foot in front of the other, and let the saving-the-world bit take care of itself.

Notes

Sequel to Eight Ways from Sunday (LJ | DW | AO3) and the interstitial Entr'Acte (LJ | DW | AO3). Title and all cut-tag text from the Garbage song of the same name.
Thank you to ali_wildgoose for reading a rather different earlier draft and telling me I should just write what I want to write, and then helping me put it together, and also to slytherincesss for her enormous help and encouragement.
This story would not exist without Ely's ideas, input, support and encouragement. I wish I'd finished it sooner, but I hope she's someplace where she can read this anyway. Knowing her, she probably is.
An intervention is called for.

11 May 2001

Draco lay on the couch in Ginny's flat, enjoying some much-needed downtime. They'd driven up to the seaside cottage for a few days—ever since Draco had discovered that riding in his somewhat illegally modified convertible was as good as foreplay for Ginny he took her driving whenever he was in town, even though, as wizards, they had much more convenient means of transportation at their disposal. The rest of the mini-break was fantastic, too, and Draco was hopeful that they were back on track after that blistering "I'm not Narcissa" battle at New Year's. Ginny had enjoyed the car and the cottage without comment on either his family's wealth or her family's lack thereof, which seemed like a good sign.

But this morning it was back-to-work, and Ginny had gone to her job as an entertainment editor at Witch's Weekly, leaving Draco to his business, which consisted less of reading the dossier in his lap and more of munching on some Hob Nobs while listening to his aunt Andromeda's cooking show on the WWN. Not that his new assignment was dull—it was actually rather intriguing, and May was a nice time to be in Italy. But it wasn't his case, which was getting colder by the day. Pansy didn't seem as frustrated as he was, which was in itself frustrating, but damn it all, if someone was going to run about stirring all the old feuds up again he was bloody well going to find them.

Ginny's sudden reappearance startled Draco. He turned off the wireless and sat up. "Did you miss me so much you decided to skip work?" he asked, grinning.

Ginny thumped down on the couch and handed a folder to Draco. "Witch's Weekly is publishing this next week. We have 72 hours."

He raised his eyebrows at Ginny's silence, then began to go through a rough edit copy of a story, with accompanying photographs. "You're really going to print this?" he asked.

"If we don't, the DP will," Ginny answered. "They aren't rumors. There are plenty of people willing to go on the record on this one. And the jilted girlfriend checks out. She'll get her story out through someone."

After a moment, he said, "Gin, when's the last time you saw Harry?"

"We had lunch about a week ago," she whispered, staring into space.

"Did you notice if he was agitated, or light-headed? Trouble concentrating?"

Ginny thought for a moment. "Come to think of it, the conversation did meander all over the place. And as soon as he came into the restaurant, he wanted to sit down. He said he was tired."

Draco nodded. "Anything wrong with his hands?"
"I noticed that the tips of his fingers were a little bit black, but I figured that was just ink. Why? What are you getting at, Draco?"

Draco took Ginny's hand and looked her in the eyes. "This is very important, Ginny. Did Harry apparate to the restaurant, or did he fly there?"

"He flew. He flies everyplace. He's always got a broom with him, all the time. What is this, Draco? What is going on with Harry?" Ginny was feeling even more worried than when she had read the article.

But Draco wasn't answering Ginny; instead, he threw a handful of powder into the fireplace and shouted, "Seamus Finnigan, Corfu."

After a few moments, Ginny saw Seamus' face appear. "Draco? What's going on?"

"Witch's Weekly is about to publish an expose on Harry."

Seamus' eyes widened. "What has he been up to?"

Draco waved a hand dismissively. "Parties, girls, the usual Quidditch star nonsense. Though lately he's been creating a few public scenes when he doesn't get his way. Threw a chair into a koi pond in a sushi place last week."

Seamus frowned. "That doesn't exactly sound like Harry, playing the arrogant star."

Draco continued. "One of his ex-girlfriends is talking about some unusual flying habits of his."

"He does like to use his broom all the time," Seamus said. "Ever since the war anyway. But Oliver is like that, too, when he doesn't have the kids. Isn't that just a Quidditch player thing?"

"Ginny says that the last time she saw him, he was having trouble concentrating and his fingertips were blackened."

"Oh, God, Icarus?" Seamus asked.

"I wanted to check with you, see if there was something else it could be."

Seamus shook his head. "Probably not. Definitely the top warning sign that things have gone too far. He must have declined quite a bit since he was here for the Euro Cup, but that was almost a year ago now."

Ginny said, "What is going on?"

"Hold on, Gin, I promise I'll explain in a minute," Draco said. Then he turned back to Seamus. "What should we do next?"

"Hold on a minute; I'll get you a name." Seamus' head vanished from the fireplace.

Ginny got off the couch and sat on the floor next to Draco, wrapping her arms around his waist. Icarus? Ginny searched her brain for where she had heard that term before.

Seamus reappeared. "You'll want Marc Samuelson at St. Mungo's. Hermione and I will be on the next portkey from Athens, and we'll contact you as soon as we've arrived."

Draco nodded. "Thanks, Seamus. This Samuelson, he'll be discreet?"
"Well, you haven't heard of him, have you?" Seamus replied.

"Good point. Right, we'll talk to you as soon as you're in London, then."

Seamus nodded and then his head disappeared from the fireplace.

Draco hugged Ginny tighter, then let go and stood, pulling Ginny to her feet. "Come on. We don't have a lot of time."

"But aren't you supposed to meet Pansy for lunch today?"

"Damn," Draco said. "Well, I'll send her a note, she'll have to understand."

Ginny raised one eyebrow.

"I know, I know. Thanks for reminding me, at least. I owe you one."

"I'll collect later."

Back in Corfu, Hermione wandered into the living room of the bungalow she shared with Seamus. "Who were you talking to?"

"Draco. Pack a bag. We're leaving for London as soon as possible." Seamus walked into his bedroom, and Hermione followed.

"Why? What's going on?" she asked.

"Harry. He's gone Icarus. We need to be there for the intervention." Seamus was rummaging through some of the mediwizard books on his shelf, throwing them into his bag along with a few clothes.

Hermione was confused. "Icarus? What is that?"

Seamus stopped for a moment. "Sorry, I thought you might have come across it. Icarus Syndrome. Named for the myth. Can happen to people who spend a lot of time flying on broomsticks. Seekers are particularly susceptible to it; Hooch makes sure to warn them particularly, which is probably why it was Draco who put the pieces together. You fly up, extremely high into the air. The lack of oxygen gives you a high. It's very addictive, even fatal if you're not careful. Oxygen deprivation leads to very bad judgment—you think you're fine, perfectly in control, until it's too late."

Hermione tried to remember what she had overheard of Seamus' conversation. "So lightheadedness and an inability to concentrate are signs of oxygen deprivation?" she asked.

Seamus nodded. "And the black fingertips are signs of frostbite. Very cold temperatures in the upper atmosphere."

"But then doesn't that mean the flesh is dead?" Hermione asked.

"We can just take a potion to reconstruct the flesh—he's probably making it himself—but the blackness lingers. Most wizards would just see it as ink stains, but I'd bet that he's been hiding his hands from his team's mediwizards, because they'd spot it immediately. If he's starting to get frostbitten, he's definitely lost his sense of boundaries. The more you do it, the more arrogant you become, and the more arrogant, the more chances you'll take."

"Oh, Seamus," she said, "when he was here, last summer, his finger tips … if I'd known …"
Seamus took Hermione by the shoulders. "Spotting Icarus is not your job, nor is taking care of Harry. He's an adult. Now, go pack. We don't have a lot of time." As she walked out he called over his shoulder, "And don't brood over this!"

Later that morning, Sirius Black, Ron Weasley, and Oliver Wood sat with Ginny and Draco in Marc Samuelson's office at St. Mungos. "I'll guide the progress of the intervention. If he agrees, I'd recommend McCormack Centre for the inpatient treatment—and for outpatient, I know an excellent addiction specialist near Salem, and I recommend he go there."

"The States?" Sirius objected. "Isn't there something closer to home?"

Dr. Samuelson shook his head. "Mr. Potter needs to recover in relative anonymity. Americans have heard of his heroism, but they probably won't know him on sight. And they don't follow Quidditch whatsoever. It will be the best place for him. Erika Weitz is the top expert on Icarus Syndrome."

Draco turned to Sirius. "What about Larkspur Cottage?"

Sirius nodded. "That would do, actually."

Oliver sank his head into his hands. "Why didn't I see this coming? Or notice how he was hiding his hands from me?"

Sirius put a hand on Oliver's back. "He's been smart. Pulling away from everyone just enough, saying that he was busy or tired. He assumed we wouldn't compare notes, and we didn't."

Parvati and Dean were sitting in his flat having a late breakfast and looking through some works he wasn't sure he would put in his final end-of-art-school show. With Seamus in Greece and Lavender gone, the two had become even closer than they had been at school, and Dean relied on her taste as he always had on Seamus's. Parvati came to him with her romantic disasters—she had a penchant for bad girls—and, shyly at first, with her fashion sketches. Dean thought the clothes she created and sewed for herself were as good as, and sometimes better than, the clothes she was paid to model.

Today they were also giggling about the behavior of a photographer they both knew, a fellow at Dean's school who had used Parvati as a model a few times when she was first starting out. Now that he could no longer afford her, he led others to believe that he'd discovered her, when he wasn't even a fashion photographer. But one photo or another from the two shoots they'd done nearly three years ago could always be found in his portfolio. Dean found him idiotic, pretentious and snobby without the eye or the skill to back up his wild statements, and was more than happy to bring Parvati to the show, which he was sure would completely nonplus the photographer.

Then Seamus's head very suddenly appeared in the fireplace, and immediately started talking.

"Glad you're home," he said.

"Yeah, what's going on?" Dean asked, sobering very quickly.

"Something's up with Harry," Seamus replied. "Don't wanna say too much more—you'll find out about it soon—but I'll be home this afternoon. Wanted to not just show up on your doorstep."

"Thanks, but you don't need to warn me."

Seamus shrugged. "Seems polite."
"But what is the problem, Seamus?" Parvati asked.

Seamus leaned forward, as if to whisper. "Icarus," he said. "Just look it up, you'll find it. And then find Draco; he's probably trying to get hold of you anyway." He squinted and then said, "Say, is that the work for your show?"

"Yeah."

"Well, one thing, it'll be nice to be able to see that, you know, before it goes up."

"Yeah, yeah, that will be good," Dean replied, a bit absently.

"Unless you don't want me to, of course," Seamus added.

"No! No, of course, I'd love your input," Dean said quickly. "C'mon, Shay, I always do."

"Sorry," Seamus said. "It's just, it's going to be a stressful few days, and exams, and —"

"Seamus," Dean said. "You're fine."

Seamus held Dean's gaze for a long moment. "Yeah. So are you."

"Yeah."

"Okay, we need to go. I'll see you in a few hours. Love you."

"Love you, too," Dean said, and Seamus's head vanished from the fireplace.

"Let's see," Dean said, wandering over to the bookcase. "This should be it." He handed Parvati a slim volume. "You find 'Icarus', while I tidy up and put some clean sheets on the bed."

Parvati watched Dean climb up the stairs to his bedroom, her brows knit in thought. Odd, how one word from Seamus and Dean's entire demeanor changed. Well, that was love, she supposed.

Ron returned home, deep in thought, or really, trying not to think. That had very much not been a meeting he'd wanted to attend.

Padma, damn her, was sitting in the front room, guitar in her lap, working on something or other. "Bit early for lunch," she said, not looking up.

"Yeah, er, not here for lunch. Just got back from St. Mungo's."

"What?" Padma said, setting the guitar down and jumping to her feet. "Are you—"

"Wasn't about me," he said, pulling a butterbeer out of the cooling cabinet.

Padma crossed her arms. "What's he done now?" she asked, coldly.

"Nothing new," Ron said. "Apparently threw a chair into a lake at some restaurant last week?"

Padma winced, but said nothing.

"Anyway some journo got hold of it—"

"That was just a matter of time."
"—and now we have less than 72 hours to get him to the McCormack Centre before it's all over the front page of Witch's Weekly."

"Ginny?"

"Well, I mean, it's not her story—"

"Of course not. How could she know since you didn't tell her?"

"Padma, I—"

"Do they know about the airplane?" she asked.

"Yeah, but I don't think they can tie it back to me," he said. "Or at least, the only one who can is Kingsley, and I doubt he'd think to."

She sighed. "It was bound to come to this."

"Yeah," Ron said, taking another long swallow. "Wish it hadn't."

"You tried. A bit too hard, actually."

"Padma, I can't. Not now."

"I just don't like how he's treated you."

"Oh, I got that loud and clear."

"Because you're my lookout."

"Yeah, well, he's mine," Ron said, slamming the bottle down on the counter.

"Not any more he isn't," Padma replied. "Maybe never should have been. Not like this."

"Well, this is how it is," Ron said. "Are you even interested in helping him?"

"Of course I am. How could you ask that?"

"Well, you don't seem to like it when I—"

"Because that wasn't bloody helping him, now was it?" she shouted.

"NO. No it wasn't. Happy now?"

Padma swallowed, hard. "No." She walked toward Ron. "What's to be done now?" she asked.

"Meeting, intervention thingy, something. Get him into McCormack. After that he's supposed to go to the States for a while, get himself straight."

"And you're thinking of going with him, aren't you?" she asked.

"Someone will have to."

"And you can't see how very much it can't be you?"

"What, you mean because I've already failed him?" he asked.
"Oh, Ron, no," she said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Your shift is over, is what I mean. You've done enough."

Ron turned to her then. "Padma," he said, and then stopped.

"Oh, sweetheart," she said, pulling him into her arms. After a moment, he slid down to his knees on the kitchen floor, wrapping his arms around her waist and pressing his cheek to her waist. "It's okay," she said, rocking him slightly, feeling the wetness against her stomach.

Pansy was quite put out. She had been looking forward to her lunch and now Draco had fucked off to hold the hand of Harry Potter for some mysterious reason and she had reservations that were going to go to waste. Really, she couldn't just bring Queenie to a restaurant like Mooncalf, and it would have been so good for her and Draco's cover, too. Not that they really needed one of late, but any excuse to get her best friend to herself was welcome. She liked Ginny just fine, but she also liked seeing Draco alone from time to time; without his girlfriend around he was infinitely bitchier. Besides, she had a new suit she wanted to show off; she adored the grey wool trousers with their tiny blue pinstripe, and she'd finally found someone who could make shirts that fit without looking like blouses.

She looked up, and coming toward her was a girl who would absolutely fit the bill, in terms of a luncheon date. She was beautiful, interesting, knew which fork to use when, they had plenty of things in common including fashion, and they'd probably get their picture in the paper. And the frock she was wearing was the perfect thing this spring, a tiny flower print with a handkerchief hem that she'd no doubt picked up on some photo shoot or another, and her long straight hair flowed out behind her, feminine and lovely.

Too bad she was a dreary Gryffindor who'd pretty much hated Pansy since they were five.

"Waiting for a bus, Parkinson?" Parvati asked.

Pansy scowled. Really, she was so tall already; why the heels? Must she tower? "Not that it's any of your business, but Draco was called away on urgent business, and now I have a much-coveted reservation and no one to take advantage who would truly appreciate the experience."

Patil didn't look surprised; apparently she knew of the Potter crisis du jour. "That's very unfortunate. They have what, a six month wait now I think. My schedule is so uncertain that I haven't tried but I've heard very good things."

Pansy bit her lip, then thought, what the hell. After all, they'd seen each other at parties over the past three years, since Pansy came back to England, and they'd managed to be civil, if a bit catty. And catty was certainly better than boring, or eating alone. "Look, Patil, if you're interested—I'm sure we can be civil for long enough to have lunch, if only out of respect for the food."

Patil cocked her head. "I admit, I've been wanting to go here. Well, I reckon I can behave like an adult if you can, Parkinson."

She nodded, and turned to walk into the restaurant, then paused. "Er, I think—it would look better, anyway, if we called each other by our first names."

"Pansy," she said, rolling it around in her mouth like a sherbet lemon. "All right."

"After you, Parvati," Pansy said, holding the door open.
Hermione and Seamus were met at the International Portkey Arrivals room by Percy Weasley around one that afternoon. "Everyone's at our place. You'll want your lunch. Are you up for Apparating?" Percy's words came at them in a rush. Hermione was worried already but seeing Percy in full officious mode made her stomach flip. She nodded slowly, and the next thing she knew she was in the kitchen of Percy and Oliver's small house.

Sirius stood immediately from the table and gathered her into an enormous hug. It wasn't until he let her go several minutes later that she was able to see who was gathered around the kitchen table: Remus, Ron, Padma, Oliver, George, Ginny, Draco and Dean. She nearly lost her composure when she saw all their somber faces but she managed to keep herself together, for Harry's sake. "So, what happens now?" she asked shakily as she sat down in an available chair.
Chapter Summary

Many things are beginning.

I August 2001: Casco Bay, Maine

Hermione thought seagulls were not especially attractive birds. She had heard their call described as beautiful and lonely but she thought they sounded vulgar and aggressive. In flight they soared and dipped like noble birds of prey, but up close they were ugly, with enormous curved bills and white-grey feathers the color of bird droppings.

It was a gorgeous day out on the water, a cloudless blue sky above them and just enough of a breeze to cool their skin from the hot sun. Not, she suspected, that it ever was all that warm out on these islands, even in August. The ferry, helmed by a small sturdy witch "of a certain age" named Yvette, skimmed over the waves, maneuvering easily around the lobster trawlers and pleasure boats that took no notice of them. Even though she was casually dressed in a cap, jacket, t-shirt and jeans, Yvette reminded Hermione of that very tweedy sort of woman one found in the Scottish countryside. But then, she hadn't seen any American witches or wizards in robes yet, even though she'd been mostly in official surroundings since leaving England.

She turned to look at Harry, who sat on the bench at the stern of the small ferry, legs under him, one hand resting on the seat of his motorbike. He wasn't watching the birds flying, wasn't even looking up, but instead stared into the cold dark blue water. He'd said few words since they'd left England that morning, but Hermione supposed that with all the talking he'd been forced to do at the McCormack Centre over the past eight weeks, he'd earned his silence. She wondered if she should feel more uneasy than she did, more anxious about the year ahead. But she had a job to do here, and as much faith in Harry as she'd ever had, their current situation notwithstanding.

"Should be comin' up now," said Yvette, who had such a thick accent that Hermione couldn't always make out what she was saying, except that her r's had been moved from the right places and inserted into the wrong ones. No one at the Portkey office in Salem or the small ferry house in Portland talked like Yvette, which gave Hermione hope that she wouldn't spend this year on the island asking everyone to repeat themselves—or worse, pick up their accent herself.

"You can see the island through the mist theah," she continued, pointing off the starboard side. "Larkspur Cottage is 'round the othah side."

Hermione followed Yvette's gaze. Past the mist, no doubt magical in origin on such a clear summer day, was a rocky shore lined with pine trees and scrub brush. A small wooden dock jutted out into the water and a few buildings could be seen scattered amidst the trees.

"So," Harry said, "that's Chip Head Island, then."

London
"I hope they're settling in okay," Ginny said as she hulled the last of a quart of late strawberries.

Draco, who was placing a vase of daisies on the dining table, replied, "They're adults. I'm sure they're fine."

Ginny's small flat was still a bit stuffy, but they'd flung open the windows to bring in what air was available on this still evening. The table was set simply with a crisp white cotton tablecloth and inexpensive but pretty flatware, with mismatched tumblers for water and wine. Ginny still felt a little self-conscious whenever she hosted Padma, mostly that the odds-and-ends she'd scavenged from the Burrow and scattered around the flat didn't denote "witty casual style" but rather "can't afford things that match." Padma wasn't a snob but she was very proper and Ginny worried about the impression she made no matter how many times Draco reassured her. After all, he was her boyfriend, so he had to at least humor her.

"I just feel guilty that Hermione is the one who has to go with him," Ginny went on. "She was the most appropriate person to go. And she wanted to."

"Yes but *I'm* the one who started the whole mess."

"Ginny," Draco said firmly, "Harry started it, not you. You did the right thing by telling everyone."

"No, you're right. She stopped and sighed. "It's just, this job has become much closer to gossip-mongering than I'm comfortable with."

"Or maybe now it's close to home?" Draco asked.

"Probably," Ginny conceded. "But when I was just a staff writer, I could just pay attention to what I was writing, the arts and entertainment pieces. Now that I'm an assistant editor I have to work with all of it, including the bits I'd rather not know about."

"Couldn't you go back to writing?" Draco asked. "They adore you there; I'm sure they'd at least listen to your suggestions. And you know you could write whatever you wanted to. I still say you should make those letters you sent me when you were at school in India into a book."

"Well, with the naughty bits taken out, perhaps," she said, grinning.

"But those were the best parts!"

She stuck out her tongue at him. "I'll think about it," she said. "Maybe a change is in order." She put the bowl of strawberries in the cooling cabinet. "Well, that's dinner done."

"And not a moment too soon," Draco said at the knock on the door.

"Remember your promise."

"Oh, I'll behave."

"You'd better, or I'll break your arm." Ginny walked to the entryway of her flat and opened the door. "Welcome!"

"I hope we're not early," Padma said, handing Ginny a package.

"Not a bit," Ginny replied. "Ooh, what lovely bread, thank you."

"At least you'll eat it," Ron said as he walked into the flat.
"Ron, you know Parvati has to watch her figure," Padma replied. She turned to hug Draco.

"Well, I'm just glad you're not a model," Ron said. He extended his hand to Draco. "Malfoy."

"Weasley," Draco acknowledged, shaking it. The four stood silent for a moment, then Draco cleared his throat. "I'll get the wine going, shall I?"

"Thanks, darling," Ginny said. "It's so hot tonight, I thought we'd just have something simple—gazpacho with shrimp, and your bread, and strawberries and cream."

"That sounds lovely," Padma replied. "Doesn't it, Ron?"

"What? Yes, well you know I like simple," he said.

Draco came out of the kitchen with four flutes in one hand and a bottle in the other. He handed out the glasses, then worked the cork out of the bottle with a soft pop and poured them each a glass of champagne. "Here's to the happy couple," he said, holding up his glass. "Congratulations on your engagement."

"Cheers," Ginny added as they clinked glasses. "And thank you for asking me to be a bridesmaid, Padma."

"Of course," Padma said. "After all, we're going to be sisters now. With Parvati traveling so much I'll need your help with the wedding planning."

"Oh!" Ginny said, feeling her nerves again. "I, er—"

"After all, the New Year's party at Malfoy Manor turned out so splendid," she continued.

"Actually, Draco did most of that," Ginny said. "I just showed up and put a dress on."

Padma looked around. "And your flat—you put things together in such an interesting way, and I don't want this to be just another society wedding, no matter what Mother says."

"I don't see how it can be," Ron said, "with that many Weasleys there."

Draco cocked his head and raised an eyebrow at Ginny.

"Of course, I'd be happy to help in any way I can," Ginny said. "Please, sit." She walked into the kitchen, Draco hot on her heels.

Draco grabbed a knife to slice bread, muttering low, between his teeth, "Don't pull Padma into this fixation of yours. It's one thing with me—"

She glared at him. "Don't worry about it," she whispered back, then turned to take the tray laden with bowls of soup to the table.

Draco followed shortly after, with thick slices of crusty wheat bread for each of them and a small plate of sliced avocado.

Ron took a spoonful, then said, "Uh-oh."

"What is it, Ron?" Ginny asked, looking a bit alarmed.

"I hate to say it," Ron replied, setting down his spoon and putting his hand on Ginny's shoulder, "but I think you forgot to cook the soup!"
They all stared at him for a moment, Ginny just on the edge of losing it entirely, and then Ron winked.

"Oh, Ron!" Ginny said, but she smiled a little, in spite of herself, and Draco even relaxed. She never thought she'd be grateful for her brother's corny sense of humor, but maybe that would help her get through the night.

Parvati could hear the raised voices all the way down the hallway. She knocked on the door of the flat, a bit apprehensive about what she'd got herself into.

Seamus flung the door open. "Thank God you're here," he said, ushering her inside. "Promise me you won't take his side every time? Dean, where are the menus?"

Dean walked out of the kitchen, handing some parchment to Seamus. "Nice welcome for our guest, Seamus. Parvati, thanks so much for coming over. We really appreciate it."

"I'm just glad I'm in town and can help," she replied. "And of course I'll be entirely neutral."

"I'm welcoming her by feeding her, Dean. How does falafel sound, Parvati?"

"Just fish and veg for me until October. Can't be puffy on the runway for fashion week."

"That's a reason not to hate you for being beautiful. Here, a salad place," Seamus said, handing her a menu.

"Thanks. I see you've mostly finished unpacking."

"Yeah," Dean said. "Seamus's boxes arrived from Greece a week ago, and we found places for everything."

"Then what is the problem?" Parvati asked.

"That," Dean said, and gestured to several frames stacked up against the wall of the sitting room. A pile of smaller frames, for snapshots, lay on the coffee table.

Parvati shook her head. "Only you two, after being in separate countries for three years, would have no trouble agreeing to move in together, no trouble finding a new flat, no trouble painting or unpacking or furniture arranging, and then have a three-day argument over hanging a mirror."

"It isn't just a mirror," Seamus said. "It's the art, our family photos, everything. The Artist thinks he knows what's best."

"Of course I do, Shay," Dean replied. "I've only, I don't know, studied the subject!"

"Stop!" Parvati shouted. "No more arguing until I've been fed. For the next twenty-one minutes, you're to say only happy things about this move." She gave the menu to Dean.

"Twenty-one minutes?" Seamus asked.

"Think of it as a time out," she replied.

Seamus shook his head. "I knew Dean had got you watching Muggle television but nanny shows?"

"They make order out of chaos," Parvati said. "It appeals. So, good things, come on now."
"I've got one," Dean said, circling his choice on the menu and handing it to Seamus. "He's become quite a good cook. We haven't ordered takeaway since we unpacked all the kitchen things."

"Hermione has whatever the black thumb equivalent is in the kitchen." Seamus explained. "She ate a lot of salads and pita bread if I wasn't around."

"And you, Seamus?" Parvati asked. "Something positive?"

"The sex." He looked at Dean. "What?"

"That's all you have to say?"

"No, it's just the biggest change. I had the talks and the art and the hearing about your life when I was in Greece. I didn't have the sex and the lying about in bed and the going to a museum with you just to watch you look at things. There, that's two things besides sex. Happy?"

"You watch me look at things?" Dean asked.

"Call in the order, Dean," Seamus said. He turned back to Parvati. "And what are you smirking about?"

"It's good to have you back, Seamus," she said, shaking her head. "That's all.
He grinned back. "Thanks. 'S good to be back. And, er, thanks for taking care of him, yeah? While I was gone?"

"He probably took care of me more than I did him," she replied.

"I expect not," Seamus said. "But, how are things? I mean, dating-wise."

"Er, well, I have met a few people. I don't know, I travel a lot, and I don't really like going out to those bars, especially on my own, and the women there, they just aren't what I'm looking for, I don't think."

"What about through work, then?" Seamus asked.

"No," Dean said firmly, as he closed his phone. "No more coworkers. No more insane models, no more married photographers, no more obnoxious designers, no more snooty editors. No."

"And that sums up my dating life for the last three years," Parvati said.

"Surely they're not all bad," Seamus said.

"They are if I'm attracted to them," Parvati said. "Or if they're attracted to me. If you're inappropriate, I'm interested. Right, well, why don't you start by showing me what needs to be hung. Have you at least agreed on what goes in which room?"

Dean opened his mouth but Seamus put up his hand. "That will just get us going again. Let's start with the family photos."

"All right," Parvati said, pushing up her sleeves. It was going to be a long night.

Unlike most homes named "cottage" by wealthy families, Larkspur Cottage was not large, though it was bigger than the bungalow Hermione had shared with Seamus for the past three years. At the back, on the road side, a small garage held several bicycles and other assorted odds and ends, though
it was not difficult to make room for Harry's motorbike. The back door led into a mud room, with the kitchen beyond. On the kitchen table was a note:

_Hermione and Harry,_

*Welcome to Larkspur Cottage. We're so pleased to have winter people again. Your trunks have been placed upstairs in the two front bedrooms. We've left the boxes of books in the office downstairs. We've also put in some staples in the pantry and ice box. Tom will be by later today to make sure you've settled in._

_Tom and Margaret Hughes_

"Who are these people?" Harry asked.

If Hermione had doubted whether Harry really needed looking after, she didn't now, as he clearly hadn't listened to a word Sirius had told them about the family cottage. "They're the caretakers," she replied.

"Are they Squibs? You know, like Filch?"

"No. Margaret has written a few books on North American herbology and Tom designs houses."

A dark hall led past a small bathroom toward a cozy sitting room lined with bookshelves. Two armchairs flanked the fireplace and a side cabinet held a wireless that looked to be at least 50 years old. The small front office was on the other side of the stairs; its long desk with three chairs reminded Hermione of a library. Two bookcases and a cabinet of quills and parchment stood against the one wall, while a large south-facing window dominated the other. Looking out Hermione could see the kitchen garden and other flowers and plants clinging to the rocky soil, including a rather large pine tree. At the front of the cottage, the dining table sat on a screened-in porch that overlooked the ocean. The upper floor contained four bedrooms and a large bathroom.

"Well," Hermione said as they stood in the upstairs hall, "if you want to get cleaned up and settled in, I'll look in the kitchen and see what I can put together for lunch."

"Reverse that," Harry said. "I've had your cooking. I reckon that's something I can take care of, while we're living here."

"I've become a better cook in the last three years!"

Harry gave her a look. "So have I. Come on, I know you're dying to unpack your books." He turned and walked down the stairs.

Hermione watched him go, thinking that his teasing her was probably a good sign.

Later that afternoon, as promised, Tom Hughes stopped by to check in on them. He was much younger than Hermione had expected, no more than 30, and with his brown wavy hair and hazel eyes he looked more like a film star than an architect. Harry and Hermione stood talking with him by their back door.

"You came here on a bicycle?" Harry asked.

"We live just down the road," Tom replied, "and this island isn't very large in any case, so we don't run the Floo network except in winter. It's bike, or take a broomstick."

"Neither of us are big on broomsticks," Harry said abruptly, avoiding Hermione's eyes.
Hermione smiled to cover any awkwardness and asked, "How do you talk to people?"

"Oh, right, you Brits are still firechatting, aren't you?" Tom chuckled. "We're more modern over on this side of the pond. We use the phone."

"The phone," Harry said, and his eyes blinked several times, as though he'd not quite been paying attention. "Sorry, Tom. I've been, er, ill recently. Came here to get back to full strength. Travel must have taken more out of me than I expected."

Hermione said, "The mediwizards didn't say anything about exhaustion."

"But the mediwizards don't know everything, do they?" Harry replied sharply. At Hermione's look, he closed his eyes and sighed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to snap."

"You didn't," she said.

Harry turned to Tom. "I think I'd better go in and lie down. But if you're free tomorrow morning, I'd very much like to see the village."

"Sure, of course," Tom said, shaking Harry's hand. "Take care of yourself, now."

"Will do," Harry said, walking back into the cottage.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, once Harry was well inside and out of earshot. "He's been—"

"In rehab, I know," Tom finished. "It may be an isolated island, but we still get the papers."

"Oh," Hermione said. "We weren't sure how much coverage it got over here."

"Not as much as in England, I'm sure. I'd guess most witches and wizards have heard about it. No one will bother him here; it's not our way. But if you ever need any help, Maggie and I are just down the lane."

"Thanks, Tom," Hermione said, shaking his hand. "I really appreciate that."

"Boys, these are the last two," Parvati said, shouting over the argument. "Can't we just get this done?"

"We could if he would stop being impossible," Dean said.

"Me, impossible? Sure. Look at yourself!" Seamus shouted.

"Maybe we should just flip a coin," Parvati replied.

"Flip a coin?" the boys shouted back in unison.

"I still think the orange looks better here, above the chair, than in the hallway," Dean said.

"But this green one isn't as welcoming," Seamus insisted.

"The orange can be just as welcoming in the—Parvati?" Dean moved over to the fainting girl, catching her and helping her to sit on the nearby chair. "Parvati?"

"Oh," Parvati mumbled, pushing herself up with her hands.

"No, darling, don't try to stand up," Seamus said. "Dean, get her a glass of water, would you?"
Parvati, how much did you eat today?"

"Plenty," she replied. "It wasn't that. I felt like all my energy left me all at once."

"That's what happens when you don't eat; you don't have any energy," Seamus said as Dean handed her the glass of water.

She waved her hand. "No, not my regular energy, my magical energy," she said, then sipped the water.

"What?" Seamus asked.

"Your magical energy?" Dean asked. "Parvati, you have to talk to Trelawney."

Parvati nodded. "You're right. Why didn't I think of that?"

"Sometimes you don't see it and someone else has to tell you," Dean said.

"What are you two talking about?" Seamus asked.

"See what happens when you drop Divination to be a mediwizard?" Dean asked.

"It's a sign that a prophecy is coming," Parvati said.

"Like the one about Harry? Really?" Seamus asked.

"No, they're not all that important," Parvati explained. "The thing is, sometimes they come in two halves to two different people, and Trelawney always thought I'd get a second half. Which usually happens when someone unearths the first half and then starts making it happen."

"So now?" Dean asked.

"So now we wait and see," Parvati said.

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By the time they'd finished the strawberries, and nearly finished a bottle of rosé, Ginny was in a much better mood than she had been when Ron and Padma arrived, and Ron liked to think that at least some of that had to do with him. He'd certainly applied himself, keeping up a string of the kind of silly jokes their father often told, which always got Ginny giggling. Draco didn't look as amused, but he didn't say anything, which Ron figured was one of the reasons he and Ginny managed to stay together.

Ron was in far too good a mood to let Draco under his skin anyway. Every time he looked at Padma he felt so proud he thought his chest would burst—proud that she'd chosen him, that she was happy to wear the simple diamond ring that had once belonged to his great-grandmother, that they'd got past their recent troubles. But now Harry was through rehab and off in America. Ron had been taking care of Harry one way or another for the past three years; now it was Hermione's turn.

Then there was a knock at the door.

"Who could that be?" Ginny asked, as she got up from the table and went to the entryway. Pansy Parkinson's unmistakeable voice drifted down the hall.

"I'm sorry, Ginny, I know it's late, but I had to see Draco," she said, walking into the room. "Oh, you have company. Well, Weasley, that's all right then. Wait, Patil—"
"Don't worry about her. What is it?" Draco asked.

She pulled an envelope out of her pocket. "The first one in over ten months."

"Are you sure it's from him?" Ron asked, getting up from the table.

"Are you sure it's a him?" Pansy responded.

Ron scowled. "What does it say?"

Draco opened it and read aloud: 
"'Are you still with me? The great work begins.' Nice and cryptic, that."

"It's a line from a Muggle American play," Ginny said. "An angel presents herself to the lead character, telling him he's to be a prophet, and then says, 'The great work begins.'"

"That's portentious," Padma said.

"More like pretentious, if you ask me," Ron said.

"Not particularly original, though," Pansy said.

Draco shrugged. "And that Euro Cup stunt was original?"

"Put you out of commission for a while," Ginny said.

"I was just collateral damage," Draco muttered.

Ginny scowled. "Draco—"

"All right you two, not now," Ron said, holding up his hand, because that was an old fight that didn't lead anywhere good, and Ron was not interested in having all of his hard work getting Ginny into a good mood going to waste. Turning to Pansy, he asked, "Have you answered him yet?"

"No, I wanted to talk to you first. Should we go to Sirius?" Pansy asked.

"I'd say, answer now and tell him you are still with him," Draco said. "We shouldn't delay that any further. We can find Sirius in the morning and talk about next steps." He folded the letter. "Er, that is, if you agree, Weasley."

Ron nodded. "We should probably let Harry and Hermione know as well."

"Oh, Ron," Padma said. "Harry is supposed to be in recovery."

"I think it will be a good distraction for him," Ron said. "Keep him from brooding."

Padma opened her mouth, then closed it again, but Ron knew precisely what she wanted to say.

"The mediwizards said he should continue to do things that were unrelated," Ron insisted.

"I didn't say anything," Padma replied, though of course she had, just not with words.

"See, you two are as bad as we are," Ginny scolded, and she was right. Ron put his hand on Padma's back, and after a moment he could feel her relaxing into him.

Pansy raised her eyebrows. "Glad I'm single," she said.
"What happened to that girl at the museum?" Ginny asked. "She seemed pretty enough for you, anyway."

"A little too fond of spending my money," Pansy replied.

"Beauty ain't cheap," Ron said, thinking of Parvati. Padma glared at him, and Ron couldn't think why. "What?"

"Gossip later," Draco said firmly. "Pansy, go ahead and answer, and we'll see what happens next."

She pulled parchment out of her bag and sat down at the table.

"Wine?" Ginny asked.

"That would be lovely," Pansy replied.

"Have you had your dinner?" Ginny called from the kitchenette.

Pansy looked up and smiled. "Yes, thank you, Ginny," she answered.

"Since when are you two so chummy?" Ron asked.

"Given the situation, it's the mature thing to do. You're familiar with the concept?" Pansy asked.

Ron ignored the remark. "Dunno that the mission requires you—"

"Not that situation, Weasley," Pansy said, her eyes on her letter. "The one where she's dating my best and oldest friend."

"Oh, right," Ron said, and sat back down next to Padma, who took his other hand in hers.

Ginny placed a glass in front of Pansy, then perched on Draco's lap. "We'll, I'm glad they're friendly," Draco said. "I have a feeling Pansy and I are going to get rather cozy in the near future."
29 September 2001: Calcutta, India

"Is that the daily owl post?" Pansy asked, watching Draco scribbling out a letter.

Draco smirked. "You know it is. What of it?"

"Nothing …"

Draco and Pansy had been in Calcutta for three days, staying at the house of a Black cousin who had briefly followed some Maharishi or another in the sixties but was now teaching yoga in Pasadena, California. They'd wandered through any number of the Durga Puji parties, but really they were just marking time, which had been trying Draco's patience. That morning they finally had a note telling them to be at an outdoor bar in the inner atrium of one of the fashionable hotels. They'd been sitting at their table for nearly an hour, and the sun was making Draco peckish.

He stopped writing. "I know you don't think much of her—"

"This is what I think about Ginevra Weasley: As long as she makes you happy, I'm all for her. If that stops, I will kick her arse."

"All right," he replied, smiling a little at her uncustomary display of protectiveness.

"That said, disappearing for almost a week does tend to make one's girlfriend anxious."

Draco scowled. "Don't remind me," he muttered.

"Hey," Pansy said, putting a hand on his. "What happened at the Euro Cup wasn't your fault."

"Right, that's why Sirius brought in Weasley to supervise us."

"Now, I'm no fan of Weasley, but he doesn't outrank you. It was just an acknowledgment that this is a larger case than they originally thought."

"We were doing just fine until then."

"So were they," Pansy said, raising one eyebrow. "And anyway, it was my slip-up—if I hadn't been seen, he wouldn't have been brought in."

"Fine," Draco said grudgingly, but his thumb rubbed against the back of her hand. "Anyway, what would you know about anxious girlfriends? When's the last time you saw a girl more than twice?"

Pansy made a face, then looked up. "Smile for the camera, darling."

"You've spotted him?" Draco whispered. 
She picked up her camera and he obliged, holding up his cocktail as if in a toast, but her lens was focused on the man in the background, a not particularly well disguised Terry Boot, who was approaching the far end of the bar of the outdoor cafe.

"Do you think he has it on him?" Draco asked through his teeth.

"I hope he's not that stupid."

A few minutes later, a waiter approached their table carrying a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket. "For you, miss, from the gentleman at the bar."

Draco turned to look, then back at Pansy. "Do you know that man, darling?" he asked.

"I don't think so, but then, one meets so many people. It must say in the note." Pansy made a show of opening the envelope, though only a quick eye could catch her palming the key inside. "Thank you again for the lovely party at your villa in Majorca. Best wishes, Stephen." Draco, do you have a villa in Majorca?"

"I've never even been to Majorca," he replied, reaching for the envelope. "Oh, there you are—this is addressed to someone named 'Debo.'"

"Oh! Well," she said to the waiter, "this isn't ours. I'm sorry."

"The gentleman has left, miss," the waiter replied, "and he already paid."

"Then we may as well keep it," Pansy decided. She looked back toward the bar, and her smile faltered, just for a second.

"What is it?" Draco asked softly.

"I think your future sister-in-law is at the bar," she whispered back.

"My what?" Draco turned his head to the bar, then back to Pansy. "Right, at best she's my possible future brother-in-law's future sister-in-law."

"Your marriage odds are down to possible?"

"I'm sorry, were you at the same New Year's Eve party I was?"

"Well, she's seen us," Pansy said, waving.

Draco beckoned, signaling the waiter for another glass and clearing a chair.

"Fancy seeing you here," Parvati Patil said as she sat down. "What are you celebrating?"

"A mysterious benefactor who thought he was sending a bottle in thanks to a Majorcan hostess named Debo," Draco replied.

"Oh, Pansy, I don't think you're as common looking as that," Parvati said, smiling.

"Why thank you," Pansy said. "And what brings you to Calcutta? Couldn't get booked at Milan Fashion Week?"

"I was offered a very lucrative commission, actually. Georg is doing a book of female deities around the world and asked me to be Lakshmi."
"Georg?" Draco asked.

"He's a top fashion photographer," Pansy answered, not taking her eyes off Parvati. "Why this week? Why not two weeks from now, after Paris?"

Parvati shrugged. "I don't know, but it's a good thing we took the photos this week. We had permission to use some of the jewelry artifacts, and the cuff was stolen from the temple the next day."

"Oh really?" Pansy asked, looking at Draco as he poured glasses of champagne for her and Parvati. "What a coincidence."

"Did you wear it?" Draco asked as he handed her a glass.

"Thank you. As a matter of fact, I did. Beautiful, gold studded thickly with pearls."

"What made you think it was magical?" Draco asked.

"Oh, you know, you can feel it. When you touch it, it hums against your skin."

"You can tell just by touching?" Pansy asked. "How very elemental of you."

"I like to think of it as hidden depth, thanks," Parvati said. "And why have you blessed Calcutta with your presence, exactly?"

"Festivals, parties," Draco answered. "Usual life of the society set."

"But when you visit places trouble follows," Parvati said, her eyes narrowed.

"Me?" Draco said. "You exaggerate my importance. Just sightseeing, I assure you."

"Hmm. Well, if that's the case, my cousin is having a dinner for me tonight, if you'd like to come. Give you some of that 'authentic local color,'" she said, using her fingers to mark the scare quotes.

"I don't—" Pansy started.

"Thank you," Draco interrupted. "We'd love to come."

Pansy glanced from Draco to Parvati. "Yes of course," she said. "I'd like nothing better."

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*Chip Head Island, Maine*

Hermione lay in her bed in the afternoon watching the fall breeze stirring the curtains at her window. At lunch she'd asked Harry to take himself to that day's therapy appointment because she had a sick headache and needed a lie-down. But that wasn't strictly true; she'd been restless and distracted because she just couldn't think of anything other than sex. She'd already masturbated that morning before she got up, thinking about Richard, which probably wasn't the healthiest thing she could have done given how that ended. She even conjured up her other ex, Theodor, briefly, but there had been so little that was sexy about him that she was rarely turned on even when he was present, never mind now. But then, as Ginny said once, "Can't you have a normal boyfriend?"

Apparently not. She rolled over and tried to think about film stars, musicians, quidditch players, all to
no avail. To her dismay, her mind kept drifting back to the last seriously good sex she'd had, about a year ago. That it had been with another ex wasn't the problem; it had been with the ex she was currently sharing a house with, who had issues with a capital 'I' and had almost certainly been not-dealing with them when they'd had this wonderful sex. She'd had amazing sex with him when he was, let's face it, a junkie, and she hadn't even realized it, and here she was, wet over the memory of it.

Well, in for a penny, in for a pound. Maybe in remembering it the memory would lose its power.

It was late August 2000, and the European Quidditch Cup Championship was in Greece. Many of her fellow students had cannily sublet their flats and bungalows to Quidditch fans, and the school was housing teams and officials in the small amount of on-campus housing. She and Seamus had a houseful that week, as England had made it to the final match, and there were mattresses on the sitting room floor for Ginny and Draco, Ron and Padma, with Dean in with Seamus and Parvati bunking in Hermione's room. Harry came by whenever he had some free hours, which wasn't often of course, given his pre-match training and press schedule; the reporters loved the story of the boy hero who'd led his team to their first international final in almost forty years. Hermione, for her part, couldn't help but remember the house party Remus and Sirius had thrown for Harry's sixteenth birthday, four years before. One night Parvati had said that she had never felt the presence of Neville and Lavender more strongly than she had that week, and Hermione had to agree.

She was sitting on the porch of the little bungalow in the early afternoon, staring out at the sea, when she heard footsteps on the path from the front door.

"Oh, Harry," she said. "I thought you were tied up all day."

He shrugged. "I managed to get away, at least until after dinner. Where are the others?"

"Seamus took them into town. You know, sightseeing, shopping, dinner, that sort of thing."

Harry nodded. "And you didn't go. Too much togetherness? Have you become a hermit academic?"

"No, I just wasn't feeling quite as energetic and you know Seamus."

"Yeah. The other day when I was here I thought he'd shake apart he was so hyper."

"Well, that's because Dean is here, you know." She looked down. "Why do you have your broom with you?"

"Oh," he said, looking down at it as though he'd forgot it was in his hand. "I just prefer to fly when I can."

"Right. Well, can I get you something to drink? I think there's still some juice—"

"Water is fine," Harry said. He followed her into the house, setting his broom down in the corner of the living room. "So, er, you said the other night that you were applying for something?"

"A research fellowship," Hermione said over her shoulder as she stood at the sink filling a pitcher with water. "Salem offers one-year fellowships for historians and they have some archives I'll need to go through for my thesis anyway." She slipped some lemon slices into the water and grabbed two tumblers. "Let's go back outside."

They settled back out onto the porch, a small table between them holding the water and Hermione's abandoned book. "Another year abroad?" Harry asked.
Hermione shrugged. "I've been gone for a while now. Another year wouldn't be the end of the world."

"You'd been thinking about staying in Greece for a while longer, weren't you?"

"Oh, right, well, that plan changed."

"Changed because you broke up with that mystery boyfriend?"

Hermione laughed nervously. "More like he threw me over in June to spend this summer in Spain wooing next year's model."

Harry started to nod, then cocked his head. "Wait a minute. Was he your professor?"

"I don't want to talk about it. It was humiliating enough at the time."

"All right," he replied. He took a drink of water. "So you've spent the summer in the library licking your wounds."

Hermione looked up sharply.

"Who knows you better than I do?" Harry asked. "Well, maybe Seamus. But who else?"

Hermione stood up to lean against the porch railing and look out at the sea. "It's disappointing that I'm so predictable." She dropped her head down, leaning it against her forearms.

"Nah," Harry said, standing next to her. "We all cling to what's familiar."

"Like your broom."

"Now, that's professional," he said quickly. "But the game, sure."

Hermione turned slightly. "What else have you been doing, other than single-handedly bringing England to the Euro Cup final?"

"Oh, you know. Usual man about town business."

"No one special?"

"No one as special as you."

Hermione raised one eyebrow. "Does that line really work for you?"

"Er, no," Harry said, and they laughed.

"That gives me some respect for those women you're dating."

"Well, I can't say the same for the men you've dated. Pretty stupid to let you get away."

"You did."

"As I recall that was a mutual decision," Harry said. "But yeah. I was stupid, too."

"Well. Thanks?" she replied.

"Hermione," Harry said, and raised one hand up to cup her cheek. His fingertips were slightly smudged with black, as though stained with ink.
"Don't do this because you feel sorry for the dumped girl," Hermione whispered.

"You'll be fine. If anything, I feel sorry for myself," he said, stepping closer and rubbing his thumb across her cheekbone. "I just want to feel something real." He leaned in and kissed her.

Hermione sighed into his mouth. It was familiar, heady, not as wrong as she thought it should be, hotter than she remembered. Somehow she was not only kissing him back but had hopped up into his arms, her legs wrapped around his waist and her arms around his neck, and he carried her back into her bedroom. The sex was incredible, the way it looked in movies, better than it had been when they were together, and Hermione wondered if they really had some kind of amazing sexual connection, or if he was just better than the men she'd been with since him, or if, prosaically, they'd both picked up some techniques in the intervening two years.

After, they ate a dinner in bed of bread, cheese, yogurt, fruit and tomatoes scrounged from the cooling cabinet, and it was comfortable in a way it hadn't been since their breakup. They filled in the details of stories sketched out by mutual friends, confessed a few sins, fooled around a bit more. Finally it got close to Harry's curfew, and Hermione thought it was probably best that he left before the others returned.

"I'm really glad I came by," Harry said. "And that the others were gone."

"Me too," Hermione replied, walking him back out onto the porch. "I think we needed this."

"I'll come find you all after the match."

"I know. We'll see you. Good luck." She gave him a last kiss.

Harry got on his broom and just before he kicked off, he looked at her over his shoulder and seemed about to say something, but then just smiled and waved, and was on his way.

If you'd asked her before that day, Hermione would have told you that she and Harry had had their closure, that they were friends now, like with Ron. But standing on that beach in Greece she realized that this, really, was goodbye. She thought of Calypso, who had Ulysses for a while but let him go, and that seemed about right. Perhaps now he would settle down, and she would find a boyfriend that wasn't her academic advisor or otherwise unsuitable.

The tears came then, in a way that they hadn't since the day of that last fight, and she wondered if she'd been hanging on to Harry in the back of her mind, hadn't been as over him as she thought she had. She went back into the house to erase any clues that he'd been there from Seamus's sharp eyes; she'd tell him eventually, but not while they had a houseful, not while Harry was still in the country.

She just hoped she could stop crying before anyone saw her.

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Salem, Massachusetts

"So after I saw her in Greece," Harry said, "I decided that I really wanted to quit, that I couldn't have Hermione back if I was still doing, well, what I was doing—"

"You need to say the words, Harry," Erika said patiently.

Harry sighed. It was moments like this that he really hated therapy. He picked up the bottle of glue that sat on the end table. "If I was still flying. If I was still flying. If I was still flying, I didn't deserve her." He squirted lines of glue onto his right hand.
"Deserve her?"

"I couldn't be with her if I couldn't control my behavior," Harry said. "She's not, I mean, Hermione, she's great, but she can be rather unforgiving of weakness. She thinks everyone should be always achieving, doing their best. She expects that of herself and the people around her. Or at least, me. Anyway, that was why I tried to quit."

"And you couldn't."

Harry picked at the drying strips of glue. "No. I couldn't, not even for Hermione. And if I couldn't for her, then I couldn't at all. So I stopped trying."

"You didn't have another reason to quit?" Erika asked.

"I didn't really want to," Harry said. "Nothing bad had happened yet. The airplane, the thing at the restaurant, all that was later, when I didn't care anymore. I got sloppy."

"Why didn't you care anymore?"

Harry looked up. "I said, because of Hermione. Because I couldn't quit for her."

"What did you do to try to quit?"

"You mean, did I ask for help? No, I didn't ask for help."

Erika just nodded.

"I know, I know, I'm not good at asking for help."

"And now?"

"Now all I am is dependent on people."

"Is asking for help and being dependent the same thing?"

Harry sighed. He looked around the small room, at the desk in the corner, the painting on the wall of a walkway to the sea, the dark blue carpet on the floor, the window looking out on Salem's waterfront. "No, it's not," he whispered. "It's not," he repeated, louder this time.

"Would you ask Hermione for help now, if you needed it?"

"I have asked her for help in the past, you know."

"Have you? Personal help, not help doing …" Erika flailed her hands about.

Harry smiled, mimicking her movement. "Saving the world from evil?" He put his hands back in his lap. "I, well, maybe I did? About Cho or something? Well, no, actually, I think she volunteered that. Um."

Erika glanced at the small clock on the side table. "Our session is almost over anyway. Something to think about for next time."

Harry rose and accepted a warm hug from Erika. Her small stature and wild curly hair had initially reminded him of Hermione, as did her intelligence and formidability, but her manner was warm and accepting, even when she was pushing him to dig deeper. (Also, Erika didn't have Hermione's tits, which in Harry's estimation was a very important part of Hermione being Hermione.) He had this
place to go five times a week where he didn't have to worry about doing the wrong thing or letting anyone down or just plain failing, and only two months in he found he looked forward to it more often than not. He'd once thought that he didn't know what he would do without the weight of the world on his shoulders. But now that he'd been forced, by events, by friends, by loved ones, to only think about himself and get himself together, he thought he might be able to work it out.

After taking the Portkey from Salem to Portland, Harry got on his bike—flying charm removed to avoid temptation—and rode back to the ferry. He stopped off at a market to pick up some late wild blueberries for Hermione. She'd been in a mood all morning, the look in her eyes almost feral, the way she'd look at him just before she pounced, back when they were dating. It was that, that reminded him of that day in Greece, that day he realized that he wasn't over her, maybe would never be over her, but would keep returning to her like Ulysses to Penelope or something. Which meant he really needed to get his shit together. He couldn't expect her to wait around forever. He wasn't even sure she was waiting around for him now.

Well, maybe some blueberries and cream would cheer her up.

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**London**

Padma and Ron had been engaged for all of two months and already planning the wedding had become contentious. It had taken the combined persuasive skills of Ron, Ginny and Arthur to get Molly Weasley, who was still upset that Percy and Oliver had failed to have a "proper" wedding, to concede the planning to Padma and her mother. But Padma had insisted on Ginny's active participation, even if it was Padma's family paying the bills. Ginny had never been involved in anything so elaborate, and it gave her new respect for how well Draco had taken care of the details of the New Year's party he'd thrown at Malfoy Manor. They were in an exclusive kitchenware and china shop on Diagon Alley to start Padma's registry list, and Padma wanted help narrowing down the choices into a manageable shortlist for Ron.

"So when is Draco returning?" Padma asked, running her hand along the stem of a champagne flute.

"Sometime tomorrow," Ginny said. "He said they'd run into Parvati."

"Yes, isn't that strange? And Parvati only just started traveling all the time. I'm sure she was pleased to see Parkinson."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, they were great rivals at school," Padma replied. "Before Hogwarts, that is—at Miss Bridgerton's. And once it got around, you know, about Parvati being a lesbian, Parkinson was quite nasty about it."

"Ironic," Ginny said.

"Yes, but that's so often the way. I can't decide about these colored stems."

"They're very in right now."

"So that's a no," Padma said, putting the glass down. "I want timeless, especially since we won't be able to afford anything like this ever again. Not on an Auror's or a musician's salary."

"What about those?" Ginny asked, indicating a display of leaded crystal with simple lines that were just a little rounder than the other glasses.
"Oh," Padma said. "These are just the thing. You have such good taste, Ginny. Red, white, champagne, water—I wonder if they have cordials? Though I suppose those don't have to match."

"Not necessarily, I believe," Ginny said.

"Anyway, that's three for Ron to look at, so let's move on to the china. Oh dear," Padma said, "I didn't know this was available." She held up a dinner plate commemorating the war, with dates around the outside and Harry's face at the center. "Look, there's Ron on the bread-and-butter plate."

"And Hermione on the soup bowl. How much are these? We should have them for Christmas." The charger had the Hogwarts Express running around its rim, and the vegetable server featured a portrait of the entire Weasley clan. "Ugh," Ginny said, "my hair looks terrible."

"How cute, Sirius and Remus salt-and-pepper shakers. Is this supposed to be Draco, or Seamus?" Padma asked, looking at a coffee cup.

"This one is Dean, and there's Neville, so I think it's Boys of Gryffindor. Yes, this other one is Draco, see?"

"At least none of them have Harry on his broom."

"No, that would have been in poor taste," Ginny agreed. "But you have to show these to Ron."

"The battle scene on the platter is a nice touch," Padma said.

"It looks more like one of those tapestries of Hastings or the Goblin Wars." She shook her head. "When I was a child we had commemorative plates of the founders. If only I'd known."

"You had plates of the founders?" Padma asked.

"Well, they were on the wall," Ginny said quickly, fidgeting a bit. "We didn't eat off them."

"Of course," Padma said, smiling, as they moved further into the china section.

Ginny was annoyed with herself; she was quite sure she hadn't seen any commemorative plates hanging on the walls of Patil House. "I don't think Ron is going to want to eat off a color," she said.

"No. I thought Art Deco style china had gone out?"

"Apparently not," Ginny said, looking at the several rows of platinum-edged plates. "So did you end up going to that audition?"

Padma made a face. "They wanted singer-dancers for a girl group, you know, like that audition you and Parvati came to with me a few months back, the one you wrote the article about. Loved me when they saw my face, less when they saw me dance, and they weren't interested in my songs at all."

"Frustrating," Ginny said.

"But I have another coffeehouse show this week in Hogsmeade. So all is not lost. Oooh, sauce spoons!"

Ginny had been to nice restaurants, but she didn't realize there were spoons just for sauce. One look at the flat bowl and off center notch, though, and she could see the appeal. She wondered, vaguely, if there were been sauce spoons in the Black silver and thought yes, there probably were. "Should you marry a man for sauce spoons?" she asked.
"Well, not just sauce spoons," Padma said. "Relish forks and fish knives, too."

Dean checked his watch again. To be fair, Seamus tried to keep him from these St. Mungo's mixers, but this one specifically included spouses, and Seamus had asked nicely, so Dean came out. The mediwizards gathered not at the Leaky Cauldron, but at Mooncalf, a newish upscale bar/restaurant that Dean had been to only a few times since it opened, the young artist crowd being both too impoverished and too enamored with gritty authenticity to frequent any bar with such pricey martinis.

It wasn't even that Seamus was talking shop—that was to be expected at a professional function—nor that Dean was keeping himself busy talking to the other partners. It was more that whole bizarre way that people regarded him when they found out he was an artist. At Hogwarts he was simply "good with a quill" and even after he came out no one made much fuss over him as being different because he was an artist, though this might have been because they were distracted by war and Harry and all of that. And since Hogwarts he'd been immersed in the overlapping circles of art, fashion, music and media. But the spouses of Seamus's fellow mediwizards seemed to think he couldn't be a regular bloke who listened to the Quidditch on WWN. Instead they kept asking him about his latest project, and he wasn't sure if they were really interested, couldn't find anything else to make conversation about, or might be thinking about offering him a commission. He felt even more horribly self-conscious than he usually did in a crowd, and thanked his luck that they would have to leave early to meet Ron.

And it was odd to see Seamus so calm. Sure, they'd both grown up, and Seamus had been serious about his schoolwork once he decided on mediwizardry, but he always had an affect of vague flakiness, even when he was studying in Greece. Now Dean saw Seamus across the room looking very quiet and still, even when all the others were listening to him. If Dean hadn't seen him these past three years, he wouldn't have known him. Oh, he still had that hyperawareness of Dean, just as Dean did whenever Seamus was in the room, but he just didn't look like the same old Shay. It had been happening a lot since Shay had come back home, and while Dean hadn't been so naive as to think that they'd be able to just move in together with no problems, he didn't think he'd ever look at Seamus and not be sure who he was.

Seamus looked up then, and Dean pointed at his watch. Seamus nodded and downed his drink, and they both said their goodbyes and walked out quickly. No Apparition for them; they were headed into Muggle London, so Seamus hailed them a cab.

"So was it terrible? Am I going to owe you when we get home tonight?" Seamus asked, winking.

Dean smiled; if Seamus was offering sex in exchange for something, perhaps he hadn't changed that much. "It wasn't terrible, and you'll only owe me to go to the preview and the opening of the group show."

"Like I'd miss that!" Seamus said. "Besides, you're always shy at those things."

"I've got better!" Dean protested. "I've had to. But it will be easier to have you there."

"I'm always glad to be of service."

"That's not what I meant. I also just want you there, you know, for you."

"Of course you do," Seamus said, holding his hand. "I know."

They arrived just a few minutes late; Ron had already found a booth near the back of the large pub
and Seamus and Dean slid onto the bench opposite him. Since they’d left school, the former roommates had a understanding: drinks on Thursday nights in a Muggle pub. Low profile, no press, no fans, just friends sitting around a table.

"Odd," Ron said, "but we've almost never been four at this table. Now you're back and Harry's gone."

"Heard from him recently?" Seamus asked.

"Yeah, got something the other day," Ron replied. "He's doing well, or seems to be. I reckon you've heard from Hermione, anyway."

Seamus nodded. "But she doesn't say much about Harry, actually. Mostly talks about her research, her writing. Probably doesn't know what to say. I mean, about Harry."

"Yeah," Ron said. "She didn't say much about it to me, either." He took a drink.

Dean and Seamus exchanged glances, and then Dean said, "But how are you doing, Ron?"

He shrugged. "All right I guess. They have these meetings Padma likes me to go to, you know, 'friends of the addicted' and whatnot. It's all right, nice to know one isn't alone. But all the same, it's sort of, 'if I'd known then what I know now,' you know?" He paused, taking another drink. "I dunno, not sure what good it does, except making Padma happy." He shrugged.

Seamus nodded, then smoothly changed the subject. "How is the wedding planning coming?"

"I'm trying to stay well out of it," he replied. "Padma knows all my friends and Mum all the relatives, so that's the guest list. Don't care much for things like tablecloths and engraved invitations and such—and anyway, Padma has good taste and I trust her. Music is important, but she knows more about that anyway."

"So what are you doing?" Dean asked.

"Food. And she's letting me choose the china and things off a short list. But she knows the only thing I'm really interested in is the food."

Seamus whistled. "Sounds like you made out then."

"Not hardly. Just because I don't care about the details doesn't mean that I don't hear about every time her mother disagrees with her, or every time the florist or the dressmaker or the hall doesn't have what she wants, or how her father is adding all sorts of extended family to the guest list and she doesn't even know who they are. Tears, mate. Lots and lots of tears."

Dean made a face. "Ugh. Seamus, if we get married …"

"Yeah, small wedding. Tiny," Seamus said. "Relatives and close friends."

"I'd recommend it," Ron said. "Of course, with just relatives and close friends we'd have 150 people anyway, but like this, it's going to be a damn circus, and we're the elephants or something."

"Well, maybe you're the elephant," Seamus said, "and Padma is riding on top of you."

The corner of Ron's mouth turned up, just slightly. "She is going to be wearing something spangly."

"We could be the trapeze artists," Dean said.
"I'd quite like to fly through the air and have you catch me," Seamus replied.

"The girls could be those acrobats," Dean went on.

"Ginny could hang from a rope by her teeth," Seamus suggested.

Ron snickered. "She always did have a strong mouth."

"Remus and Sirius, the dog and his trainer," Dean said.

"We've all seen Sirius jump through hoops for him," Seamus said.

"But who's the ringmaster?" Dean asked.

"I can't believe you're even asking that," Seamus said.

Dean scowled, not quite getting it, and Seamus and Ron both said, "Hermione!"

"Oh! Of course, sorry," Dean replied.

"But where are the clowns?" Seamus asked, singing the line a little.

"Oh, I know that one," Ron said, taking a drink of his pint for effect.

"C'mon mate," Dean said. "Out with it."

Ron grinned. "With this hair? My family, all however many of 'em, crammed into one of those tiny Muggle cars." He laughed. "Can't you see 'em spilling out onto the Patil's garden path? Poor Percy, tumbling out end over end?"

Dean, chuckling, looked at Seamus and winked. He didn't think he'd heard Ron really laugh out loud since Harry left, and he hadn't realized how much he'd missed the sound. Seamus winked back, laughing, and maybe they hadn't changed so much after all.
Chapter Summary

Information is exchanged.

1 November 2001: Mexico City

"Damn it's bright out here," Pansy said, squinting despite her sunglasses and hat.

"Not much shade in a stadium," Draco replied. "And I do hate it when people come only for the parties and not the event."

"You've always been so sporty, Draco," Pansy said, fanning herself and sipping at an ice-cold lime drink.

"Good thing, or we mightn't have got these seats," he pointed out.

Draco had rejected the covered luxury boxes at the top of the stadium as being unsuitable for watching the contest (and privately to Pansy, less visible to any potential contacts) but Pansy suspected that Draco had mostly grown weary of playing the wealthy English playboy. Not that his Spanish wasn't still quite good, but the war had made him into much more of a man of action than he'd actually been raised to be, and his patience for the idle rich frequently wore thin. Pansy had spent more time around them—most of the year or so she'd been out of the country, in fact. It had been great fun at first, honing her cat claws around others with similar sensibilities, but playing the game all of the time made it much less fun, and after a while she found that she didn't want an idle and empty life, either. At least the general decadence had allowed her to come to terms with her sexuality somewhat out of the spotlight, unlike the rampant gossip she would have had to weather at Hogwarts. Instead, her being a lesbian was just another way the continent had changed her.

They were quite good seats, in a box at the center of the arena with cushioning charms on the seat and back of the stone bench and a little buzzer for calling on the wait staff. Below the level of seats was a sunken stone court, not unlike a squash or jai alai court, called a batey. Along the top edge of the batey, about six feet above the heads of the players, was an intricate dynamic mosaic that detailed the history of the mesoamerican wizards. The done thing among the local pure-blood wizards was to trace their lineage not to the Spanish conquerors, but to the Aztecs who had come before.

"It's starting," Draco said, and Pansy looked down to see the procession, which was greeted by the crowd with complete silence. Held aloft on two chairs were a man and woman dressed as Mictlantecuhtli and Mictecacihuatl, the god and goddess of the dead. They wore skull masks, their robes decorated with eyes and spiders, and two owls swooped above them. Bejeweled crowns sat atop their heads.

"I could do without the skulls," Draco muttered. "They're so overused."

Pansy smirked. "You mean, by other people who stole them from this ceremony."

"True."
Behind them entered the two teams, wearing replicas of the stone collars and belts the ancients had worn. The procession moved slowly around the perimeter of the batey, and then the god and goddess and their attendants exited, leaving the players on the court. As the door closed behind them, a great cheer erupted. One of the officials held up his hands, then threw a ball into play.

"Something tells me one of those crowns is going to go missing in not too long," Draco muttered.

"Wouldn't surprise me," Pansy said. The men and women in the batey moved about for reasons Pansy didn't really understand, but they were interesting just as patterns of brightly colored fabric against the stone grey of the batey, like an intricate ancient dance. The game had been going for about twenty minutes when something stirred near her.

"Fancy seeing you here," said a voice just above them, and there was Parvati Patil sitting down next to Pansy, in the next box over.

"Don't tell me," Pansy said. "You've been modeling Aztec jewels."

"No, just spring dresses," she replied.

"Ah, those new Mesoamerican prints. How very unimaginative of your editor to photograph them here."

Parvati shrugged. "Not my lookout," she said. "And the dresses are very pretty." She regarded Pansy. "Scarves, too, and you could do with a bit of color. Frozen grape?" she asked, offering a small container.

"Thank you," Pansy said, offering it to Draco, who took two green. Pansy took a large black one for herself and handed it back to Parvati. "I rather like wearing black and white, at least in the city. Prints so often hide bad tailoring."

"Bad form to blame your fear of color on poor workmanship, Pansy," Parvati said, shaking her head. "Ooh, that was a bad miss."

"Don't tell me you know the rules of this game."

"Don't you?" Parvati asked. "Not so different from Quidditch or football, really. A keeper in the goal, a ball you can't touch with your hands, offense and defense, just no snitch. Or rather, the ball is like a cross between a snitch and a quaffle, I think."

"It hovers," Pansy said, "but how do they move it?"

"Magic!" Draco said, waving his fingers like a Muggle.

Pansy rolled her eyes. "I'm serious."

"The belt and the collar, they create this sort of field thing that they use to maneuver it," Parvati answered.

"A 'sort of field thing'? Is that the technical term?"

Parvati scowled. "I don't have to know how a broomstick works to use it," she said.

One of the waiters approached Draco and handed him a folded note. He used the opportunity to order frozen grapes for himself and Pansy, and drinks for all three of them.

"What is that?" Pansy asked.
"Just a dinner invitation," Draco said, slipping it into his pocket. "Apparently Zabini's in town."

A young man Pansy faintly recognized joined Parvati in her box. "Did you hear the news?" he asked, with a light accent.

"No," Parvati replied. "Oh, Georg, this is Pansy Parkinson."

Pansy shook the photographer's hand. "Yes, we met at a fundraiser, I believe," she said, and introduced Draco.

"So what's the news?" Parvati asked.

"The goddess crown was stolen," Georg said. "Someone attacked the guards as they left the arena."

"Isn't that interesting," Parvati said, turning to look at Pansy.

"A real shame," Pansy said quickly, not liking Parvati's intense stare. "It'll just end up on the black market, and then in the hands of a private collector, and no one will be able to see it." She blinked, trying to remain calm. "Er, I work in the Ministry," she said to Georg. "I specialize in artifacts and artworks."

"I expect this theft will be on your desk when you get back to London," Parvati replied.

"I expect it will," Pansy said, and turned back to the game.

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London

Padma was at the back of the shop, a bit hidden by a rack of fabric, when Ginny walked in, so she could see the panic in her future sister-in-law's eyes. Asking her to help plan the wedding had been a very good idea on Ron's part, as Ginny had calmed down notably from the spring, when she'd been a bit jumped up and nervous after Draco's New Year's Eve party. The poor girl had been completely overwhelmed, not to mention that the usual cats of young wizarding society—Queenie Greengrass and her whole crowd—had their claws out for Ginny from the moment she walked into the reconstructed ballroom. The annual parties Padma's mother threw weren't nearly as cut-throat, mostly because the older generation tended to maintain at least some decorum. Padma, Parvati and even Pansy had done what they could; Pansy had been particularly effective at scratching back not only because she'd been friends with many of these people but also because she was the one they thought had been wronged by Draco being with Ginny. Also, Pansy was swanning around the party with a statuesque blonde wearing a little slip of a dress, which was a statement in itself. But it had still been enough to upset Ginny very much.

Molly Weasley was a loving and capable woman, a good cook who was showing Padma a great many tricks not only in the kitchen, but the entire business of running a household on limited funds, something Padma had no experience at and about which her own mother was quite useless. Molly was also a bit interfering, but nothing Padma couldn't handle, particularly after three years of dealing with Harry's problems. But she had absolutely no visual sense whatsoever—Padma was learning to sew from Parvati, not from Molly—and the idea of her being involved in any way in the wedding planning had made Padma rather panicky herself.

But Ginny just naturally had excellent taste, the sort that starts trends in boarding schools. Molly was placated that Weasley traditions would be upheld with both Ginny and Ron involved, and Padma had some needed guidance since Parvati was suddenly traveling much more frequently than she had in the past. Which is not to say that Parvati wasn't involved, particularly with the outfits for the
bidesmaids.

Padma caught Ginny's eye and waved her toward the back of the shop, where the fitting rooms and mirrors were located. They'd also been provided with a pot of tea, which in Padma's eyes was the least the shop keeper could do given that they were purchasing eight dresses including her own. "Parvati narrowed this down for us," she said. "And of course it will be made to order. We'll all be there on the day to help you put it on. Here we go," she said as the saleswoman lay a stack of silks on the table and then left them to it.

"How do I try on something that hasn't been made?" she asked.

"Just wrap yourself up in the fabric, like a towel or a sheet." Padma smiled as reassuringly as possible.

"Right," Ginny said, picking up a pale green from the top of the pile. As she got situated in the changing room, she asked Padma, "So how is the planning going?"

"Oh, you know," Padma replied, "the caterer is making a fuss over the pies. I can't imagine why they can make any number of pastries but not a simple pie table." Padma had been to several Weasley weddings over the past few years and the pie table was a standard, especially as Weasley weddings were nearly always self-catered. Aunts and cousins would descend on one another's houses and cook up a storm, including making pies in as many varieties as they could think of. Of course there would be the large white cake, but that was an afterthought. And as the one area Ron was allowed to have a say was the food, he was insisting on the pie table he'd grown up with.

Ginny emerged with the first choice and stepped up onto the platform. "Well, if it will be a problem, I'm sure we can make them. We've done it before."

Padma shook her head. "I don't think that will be necessary, especially as your mother provided all those recipes to the caterer. They're just being tiresome. But I won't back down!"

Ginny smiled. "Fighting for Ron still?" she asked.

"Not this time," Padma replied, shuffling through the pile of silks. "I've come to love those Weasley pie tables, too." She pulled out another color. "Oh Ginny, you should try this silvery blue. It reminds me of that dress you wore to the Solstice Ball, back in school."

Ginny took Padma's choice back to the fitting room. "And the seating?" she asked.

"Your mother and my mother are doing most of it. I don't know who half of those people are! But Ron and I are doing our own friends, together. Which is only about thirty people, four tables, and even then Ron has been moving people every single evening. But it's due in three weeks, and then he will not be able to change it!"

Draped in the silvery blue, Ginny came back out to join Padma. "I think you're right about this color," she said.

"We needn't look any further." Padma came up behind her in the mirror. "I think Draco will like it too," she said with a little smile. "How are you two getting on lately?"

"Oh, we're fine. I mean, getting better, you know." She looked around and saw no one near them, but still lowered her voice. "He takes these trips, he comes back. I think he feels more in control now, with his case moving forward finally." She sighed, and turned to face Padma. "It's a relief to talk about this, actually. That year between when everything blew up at the Euro Cup and the night in August when the case was suddenly on again? He was almost unbearable. He was so sure he'd
made some error, and the whole thing was his fault; that the case had fallen apart and they'd never find out who was really behind it, who was giving Pansy and the others their orders. Of course I couldn't help him at all, and he wouldn't even listen to Pansy. He felt that the only reason Ron and Hermione had been brought in was because he had failed, so he couldn't bear to talk to them either, or to Sirius because he'd brought them in. And Harry—well, now we know why Harry was useless."

Padma sighed and rolled her eyes. "Sorry, it's just—"

"I know," Ginny said, patting Padma on the shoulder. "It affected all of us."

She nodded, and sighed. "Anyway, go on."

"Draco was—is—so driven by this case. I know that everyone thinks that fight at New Year's was about me, but at least part of it was about how he was behaving, and I just couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't be the only one he turned to, you know? I've seen him worse; after his mother died he was barely there. But last winter, he'd go from being depressed and just lying about to so antsy and frustrated I thought he was going to break apart. It was nothing anyone could fix but he felt so guilty for it all in the first place. So much of that fight was that he couldn't find his balance. Only some of the problem was that I didn't know how to be the society lady he wanted—"

"Is that what he wants, Ginny?" Padma asked. "I mean, I could teach you all of the tricks—it's dead easy and you are a clever, charming and pretty girl, which is more than half the battle—but if that's what he wanted, he'd be dating Queenie Greengrass."

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"Draco was—is—so driven by this case. I know that everyone thinks that fight at New Year's was about me, but at least part of it was about how he was behaving, and I just couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't be the only one he turned to, you know? I've seen him worse; after his mother died he was barely there. But last winter, he'd go from being depressed and just lying about to so antsy and frustrated I thought he was going to break apart. It was nothing anyone could fix but he felt so guilty for it all in the first place. So much of that fight was that he couldn't find his balance. Only some of the problem was that I didn't know how to be the society lady he wanted—"

"Is that what he wants, Ginny?" Padma asked. "I mean, I could teach you all of the tricks—it's dead easy and you are a clever, charming and pretty girl, which is more than half the battle—but if that's what he wanted, he'd be dating Queenie Greengrass."

"Well."

"Draco was—is—so driven by this case. I know that everyone thinks that fight at New Year's was about me, but at least part of it was about how he was behaving, and I just couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't be the only one he turned to, you know? I've seen him worse; after his mother died he was barely there. But last winter, he'd go from being depressed and just lying about to so antsy and frustrated I thought he was going to break apart. It was nothing anyone could fix but he felt so guilty for it all in the first place. So much of that fight was that he couldn't find his balance. Only some of the problem was that I didn't know how to be the society lady he wanted—"
goodness. I don't know what I would have done—it all couldn't go on much longer."

"One of the few times that fame helped us," Ginny said. "Well, sort of. Anyway, I'm glad, Padma. I can't imagine what it was like for you, when you were the only one who knew. I remember that some days I'd see you and Harry both and you were so angry and I couldn't think why—I guess I just thought you and Ron were fighting over something."

"We were. And now, we aren't. I don't think—if he had asked me to marry him before Harry went to McCormick I probably would have said no." She smiled. "But now I'm picking out bridesmaid dresses and china patterns. Lucky me!"

"Indeed!" Ginny said, laughing. "What would we do if we weren't worrying about the flowers and the music?" She turned and went back into the changing room. "We would be working," Padma said flatly.

"And how is the writing going?" Ginny asked.

"Well," Padma said, "it's ... odd. That little song I wrote last week for Gilbert's birthday is the best thing I've done in a while. All my ideas seem to be about children. Ron teases me that I'm just ready to have them, but he only says that because he knows it isn't true. I've been reading picture books and I even got some Muggle children's music and a few traditional things that I listened to as a child, but I'm amazed that no one has done for wizarding children all that music for Muggle kids—even in the States."

"And you think you want to do that?" Ginny asked.

"I think I do," Padma said, cautiously.

"So why is that odd?" Ginny asked.

"Well, I mean, I don't have any children yet," she said, "and I didn't grow up with that many cousins around, like you did. I don't know where this is coming from."

Ginny came back out then, in her street clothes, the silver blue fabric in her hand. "But you're going to follow it, right?"

"For now, at least. And you?"

"I'm getting a little bored with entertainment writing, I admit," Ginny said, "but I'm not sure what's next. I've been looking through some Muggle magazines, trying to think about what they have that we don't, and building a proposal around that. But it's early stages yet."

"Well, I'm happy to help in any way I can," Padma said. "Right now I think we should go get a cocktail, even if it is only 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and drink a toast to new beginnings!"

"That sounds lovely," Ginny said. She smiled, looking less the anxious girl who'd walked into the shop, and more like the confident girl she was.

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3 November 2001: London

"But perhaps it's just a coincidence," Dean said. "You were there both times, right? And you didn't steal anything."
"And they were both big events for those society set wizards," Seamus added. "There's like, a place to be for each of those holidays."

Parvati tutted. "Since when does Draco Malfoy run with that crowd? Parkinson, sure, that's all she did while we were fighting a war, but Draco?"

The three friends had finished dinner and were now on the couch with a second bottle of wine. They were in Parvati's new flat, a small, bright one-bedroom. She didn't need much room, really, as she traveled so often, and the only people who came over were Seamus and Dean, or Padma and Ron. Her fashion friends preferred to go out.

Dean shrugged. "I thought it was a reaction to New Year's. You know, if Ginny needs more space, or doesn't like his posh lifestyle, he'll go live it up without her, and then eat curry with her in London. Or something. At least, that is what they do, and really, who has ever been able to understand how that relationship works anyway."

"Well," Parvati replied, "I just don't like that Parkinson's hanging around with Draco again."

"Why not?" Dean asked. "Other than that she's kind of bitchy, I mean."

Parvati grinned. "Well, to put it plainly, she has some funny friends. Terry Boot, Blaise Zabini—people whose loyalties were never exactly clear."

"Are we still worrying about that, though?" Seamus asked. "We fought, we won, things are changing, the bad 'uns are out."

"But what about the Euro Cup?" Parvati asked.

"I just thought that was tacky," Seamus said, "rather than really dangerous."

"And anyway, what's that to do with Pansy Parkinson?" Dean asked.

Parvati paused, sipping her wine and settling back into the cushions. "I guess I should tell you this now. Since Ron said there was nothing in it, there's really no reason not to. So, Euro Cup 2000, England vs. Germany. England wins, and then—"

"And then someone puts up that silly Death Eater sign, just like at the World Cup back in '94, and Harry falls out of the sky before catching himself, yes, yes," Seamus says. "We were all there."

"Then what happened with us?" she asked.

"Well, Hermione ran off to the sidelines to see about Harry, and then Ron went to security to help, and Draco completely vanished and Ginny wasn't even sure where he went, and—what happened to you?" Dean asked. "Because you were gone for a little while."

"I couldn't—the last time I'd seen that skull was over Miss Bridgerton's Academy, when it collapsed."

"Lavender," Dean whispered, reaching a hand out to Parvati. "I'm sorry, darling, I didn't think—"

"It's fine," she said, though she held firm to Dean's hand. "I just needed to get away, have some water. And then I saw Parkinson in the hallway near the bathrooms, and I wasn't sure where she was going or what she was doing, so I got my wand out to follow her. She was scurrying along, and then she ducked into one of the empty meeting rooms, so I ducked down near the door to see what was going on."
"And?" Seamus asked, leaning forward.

"And there was Pansy, with a bunch of people in some copy of the old Death Eater robes—I think there were seven or eight of them—and she was *screaming* at them. Zabini was there, but the others I couldn't quite see."

"Screaming at them?" Dean asked.

"Yeah, about what a rotten job they'd just done, how could they muck up something so simple, what on earth possessed them to just copy something from six years ago, where was their originality, oh yes that's why they need to follow a leader, speaking of that leader he would not be pleased. I had the feeling that the thing hadn't gone off as planned."

"Well, no one was scared anymore," Seamus said. "The Germans thought it was odd and the English thought it was disgusting and most of the rest of the crowd was just confused. And once Harry got up and was okay, everyone calmed down and went back to celebrating."

Parvati nodded. "And then she said, 'What the hell have you done with Malfoy?' and Zabini said that Boot had him someplace and not to worry."

"Good lord," Seamus said.

"And that was it; they started grumbling and she tapped her foot and Zabini said 'fine, I can take you to him,' and she asked if he really thought she was stupid enough to blow her cover like that and he said 'sorry, Pansy' and she said she wouldn't want to be any of them when 'he' finds out, which she was sure 'he' already had. And then she stomped out, so I hid behind the door, and then I went 'round the back way and came back to you."

"Wow," Dean said. "And that's what you told Ron?"

Parvati nodded. "Later that night, back at the bungalow. He said he was glad I told him, and that he'd look into it soon, and then oh, a week later in London he said that there was nothing to it, really, and that I'd misunderstood what was happening. By then Draco had returned anyway, though no one ever said where he was."

Dean looked at Seamus, who cleared his throat. "Yeah, I don't know where he was that first night, but he turned up at ours the next day, not long after most of you left. Dean was still there."

Parvati's eyes flew wide. "What? Why?"

Seamus smiled shyly, an odd look for him. "He said I was the best battle mediwizard he knew. I went to school and got some supplies and patched him up, and he convalesced at the bungalow until he was well enough to leave."

"No wonder Ginny didn't seem worried. I thought she was just numb, but—"

"She was the first person we contacted," Seamus said. "She just couldn't tell anyone—it's not like that bungalow was the most secure place in Greece, and I didn't want Draco dealing with the Ministry and getting debriefed and all that until he was stronger. Not that he agreed; he spent most of that time beating himself up for the entire thing happening in the first place. Sounded like he'd had a mission and it had gone very, very wrong."

"You think?" Padma said. "So why on earth would Ron put me off? And why is Draco still hanging about with her?"
Dean shook his head. "I will say that I never believed for one red second that story that he stopped working for the Ministry after the Euro Cup. Too dangerous? Back to normal life? Did those people see how driven he was during the war, and after, going after those last few Death Eaters?"

"So what if he didn't?" Seamus asked.

"Well, clearly he didn't," Dean said.

"No, I mean, if he didn't," Seamus said, "then whatever he's doing with Parkinson, maybe that is the mission. Or the cover for it or what have you. Maybe that's why Ron put you off, Parvati."

She cocked her head. "When I see Draco out and about at these parties," she said, "he seems perfectly at ease, every inch the international playboy."

"Which isn't really like him," Seamus said. "I mean, like Dean said, it isn't the boy that we fought alongside, even if it always was his public image."

"So what are you saying?" Dean asked.

"If this is Draco's mission," he replied, "then either Parkinson is part of it, or she is it. Either she's dangerous enough that he has to keep an eye on her, or she's his partner. Either one would be a reason for Ron to put Parvati off."

Dean turned to her. "Which one, do you reckon?" he asked.

"I don't honestly know," she said after a moment. "She's fine to talk to, and sometimes I can even forget about this whole business and my suspicions, and then something like this happens."

"Forget?" Dean asked. "Oh, don't tell me."

"Dean!" Parvati said.

"You've never met an inappropriate girl you didn't want to sleep with," he said. "And you've always had a thing for Parkinson."

"Excuse me! I have not!"

"Please," Seamus said. "Ever since she came back from France you've been salivating over her. Which means, you probably aren't the best judge of whether she's on our side or not." He raised an eyebrow.

Parvati scowled. "I might not be, but it's not fair of you two to double team me."

"Oh, and you don't double team me?" Seamus asked.

"Or me?" Dean asked.

Parvati swallowed the last of her glass and refilled it. "Well, I can control my lustful urges, thank you very much."

"I just wish you'd channel them to some nice girl," Dean said. "Whether Parkinson is on our side or not, she isn't that."

She couldn't help but glance at the portrait of Lavender on the side table, the burnt-out candle stub next to it. "Not sure I'm really made for nice girls, Dean," she replied with a shrug.
Harry, sitting at the other end of their library table from his housemate, put his quill down. "All right, Hermione, that's the third time in ten minutes you've sighed."

"Is it?" she said, looking up from her writing. "I'm sorry, I hadn't even noticed."

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. I mean, it's just the outline, it's nothing."

"Hermione. I know you don't think I'm interested but I am, and besides, I'm your research assistant—"

"Which is your counselor's idea," Hermione pointed out.

"—so I feel I deserve to know," Harry continued.

"Well." She chewed at the end of her quill, then set it down. "So the central thesis considers how native magical traditions reacted to first contact and colonization, and what differentiated the traditions that managed to survive from those that didn't, and how that did or didn't match the general level of resistance to colonization within the local Muggle population."

"Right."

"And I'm not sure I'm seeing any patterns. There certainly doesn't seem to be a correlation with the Muggles, nothing that's consistent anyway."

"What about whether first contact happened before or after—when was the International Statute of Secrecy?"

"1692."

"Right, so what about contact after that? How international even was that?"

"Exactly. That was when international meant 'as far as Russia.' Even China wasn't included in the original treaty. Granted, wizards were always better traveled than Muggles but still, contact was limited. The Muggle colonizers—oh, wait."

"What?"

"The Muggle colonizers brought the problem with them, with Christianity. And colonization after 1692 was entirely Muggle. So it isn't that the colonized country would be under the Statute, but the country wouldn't need the statute until colonization." She stood up, starting to walk around the room. "The correlation wouldn't be with resistance to colonization, but with resistance to Christianity. That changes everything!"

"Um, including the work we're doing?" Harry asked.

"No, just how we look at it—now we're looking for different things in the same sources. But honestly," she said, looking at a sheaf of notes, "you've been cataloging them so well that I don't think we have to go back over the sources, only over the notes."

Harry smiled. "Good, I'm glad."
Hermione stopped pacing and turned to look at Harry. "Are you really? I mean, I know your love of libraries and research—"

"It's different now," he said. "Frankly, I don't have much else to be doing. And, well, after all the things I did, it's best to be helping someone else now. I'm glad that it's you. And look at you, you still get all fired up when you figure something out! You're just the same, anyway."

"Not just the same as when I was twelve, I hope!"

"No, not in every way," Harry admitted, looking away.

Hermione cocked her head, looking at him, and then after a moment said, "Well, I'll put on the kettle for tea. I think we deserve a break, don't you?"

"Yeah, yeah," Harry said absently as she walked out of the room. It was going to be one of those days, he could just tell, where his ability to keep his feelings at a low simmer would be more difficult. Not that he found being in libraries any more entertaining than he did when he was at Hogwarts, but it felt good to be doing a job and doing it well, and even better to see Hermione so very much in her element, after so many years of her watching him be in his. Some days he thought the entire year would be a test of his ability to not just take whatever he wanted simply because he wanted it, which he'd been doing a great deal of over the last three years, justifying it to himself with his childhood of deprivation and adolescence of service to the wizarding world in general. But it hadn't been the answer, and he hadn't really wanted half those things anyway.

Except the game, and now he couldn't have that ever again. Sure, he was learning how to control his impulses, and next week he was to start flying for small periods of time, which to be honest he was worried about. It was simpler when flying was just something he couldn't do anymore. Having to be moderate about that would be trying. But not flying at all wasn't particularly practical, and it was better to learn how to do it again responsibly.

He was saved from his brooding by the ringing of the telephone. "I'll get it," he called out, and picked up the receiver in the living room.

"Hullo? Hullo? Damn I hate this thing. ARE YOU THERE?" shouted a familiar voice.

"I am here, and you could hear that if you'd let me get a word in, Ron," Harry said.

"I hate this thing," he replied. "Bloody Americans."

Harry chuckled. "Come on, it's not that bad," he said. "And firechat connection across the ocean's a bit wonky anyway."

"Hullo Ron!" Hermione sang out from the extension in the kitchen. "Lovely to hear from you! Is this work or pleasure?"

"Both," he said. "Thank god for these secure lines. Right, so you heard about the theft of the crown of some god or other in Mexico?"

"Mictecacihuatl," Hermione said.

"That's ours, then?" Harry asked.

"Yep," Ron replied. "Pansy put the copy in Gringotts today, with all necessary charms. Damned fine, these copies."
"They have to be," Hermione said. "So what's next?"

"Chile, apparently, for midwinter. Good thing Malfoy has such good Spanish. Should be no problem."

"Chile?" Hermione asked, and Harry could almost hear her thinking. "The native peoples of Tierra del Fuego—the Spanish explorers thought they were giants."

"Were they?" Harry asked.

"Not nearly big enough, even from the tales. Only about the size of Hagrid. Just exaggerated—the natives were likely just rather tall."

"Whoever this is," Harry said, "they're really hitting these holidays, aren't they? Think there's something in that?"

"Could be, or could be they're just using the festivals as a cover for both the thief and Pansy," Ron said. "I reckon we'll know more from the next theft, of whatever."

"Right, well, I look forward to your report, Weasley," Harry teased.

"Hey!" Ron replied. "Even Sirius doesn't say that and he is my superior."

Hermione chuckled. "Anything we can do to help in the meantime?" she asked.

"Well, actually," Ron said, "given the geography—India, Mexico, Chile—there's every reason to suspect that we'll end up in Africa before long. Might need to pull in your contact there. Ministry wasn't good at keeping in touch after the '60s; apparently they don't think much of the Commonwealth."

"Yeah, Remus is always railing about that," Harry said. "Makes things hard for International Cooperation not to have those ties. Short sighted, but then, when has the Ministry not been short-sighted?"

"Ron, you seriously want me to talk to Theodor?" Hermione asked.

"I'm just warning you that we might need him to get us in," Ron said, "and I thought I'd give you some notice. I know he's your ex but you still talk to me."

"Me too," Harry said.

"Yes, well, you two aren't like my later exes," she said.

"Did you say 'exes', plural?" Ron asked. "Are you finally admitting to that professor business in my hearing?"

"Oh god," Hermione said, and Harry could hear her plopping down into one of the chairs at the kitchen table.

"Of course not," Harry said. "Hermione never makes mistakes at all, and certainly not in her love life."

"Look who's talking," Hermione responded. "At least my exes don't number in the hundreds."

"Next topic," she said in her warningest of warning tones.

"Wedding planning?" Harry tried.

"No," Ron said. "Absolutely not. I am tired of talking about that bloody wedding. Even Padma is sick of it. We have a schedule where we only discuss it for thirty minutes a day, directly after dinner."

"Well away from bedtime, that's good," Harry said. "Good for your love life anyway."

"Yeah, well, don't really have to worry about that," Ron said.

"That's the way," Harry said.

"No, er, I meant in the other direction," Ron muttered.

"The other—are you two still having that problem?"

"What problem?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah, and with the stress of the wedding it's just got worse," Ron answered.

"What problem?" she asked again.

"You may as well tell her," Harry said. "She's just going to keep asking until you do."

"Yeah, thanks for mentioning it in front of her, mate," Ron said.

"You did the mentioning, friend," Harry replied.

"WHAT PROBLEM!" Hermione shouted.

Ron sighed. "Right, so Padma and I, well, we're still doing some things, but not, you know, er …"

"Not what, Ron?" Hermione asked.

"You know, the thing," he replied.

"Intercourse?" she asked.

"Er, yeah. That."

"Why ever not?"

"Well, so, you know, me, which was bad enough sometimes but now she's so anxious now with the wedding it's even worse—"

"You what?"

"You know, my er, my size," he said.

"Oh," Hermione said, and they were all silent for a moment. "Ohhh!" she said again.

"Now she's got it," Harry said, chuckling.

"Not funny, Harry," Ron replied. "And can I just say, it's pretty sodding unfair that I have what many men would love to have, a gorgeous girlfriend—"
"Fiancée," Hermione said.

"—fiancée, and a large er, member—"

"But your gorgeous fiancée is afraid of your large member," Harry interrupted.

"Yeah, and who has that problem but ol' Ron Weasley," Ron said.

"So it's a tight fit?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah," Ron replied.

"She's on top?"

"Always."

"Have you tried getting her to relax?" she asked.

"Yeah, yeah, everything," Ron said.

"What about—I mean, have you got her off first?"

"Er," Ron said.

"You haven't tried that?" Hermione asked. "Isn't that an obvious thing to try?"

"Well," Ron replied. "You were always ready to go."

"I was fifteen, we weren't having intercourse, and not all girls are like me."

"She's telling the truth there, Ron," Harry said.

"You can do that, right? Her orgasm isn't a problem?" Hermione asked.

Ron cleared his throat. "No, no, that's no problem."

"Not anymore," Harry muttered.

"Oi!" Ron protested.

"Oh dear, was it?" Hermione said. "I mean, you were a bit clumsy, but we were young, and I have to say, you were always surprisingly gentle."

"Well!" Ron said. "Thank you, Hermione. Yeah, it just isn't a very high priority for her. She could go a lot longer without sex than I could. Or either of you could." He paused. "Though I reckon you're going without now."

"Thanks for reminding me, Ron," Harry said.

"Best friends with that right hand, are you, mate?" Ron asked.

"Nice, in front of Hermione!" Harry said.

"Please," she replied, "I've heard you."

"Well I've heard you, too."
"All right then."

"All right."

"Glad we've established that," Ron said.

"Look, we are exes, and we have very complicated lives right now, and I don't think that bringing convenience sex into that mix is a good idea," she said.

"So you've talked about it?" Ron asked. "I should have known."

"No," Harry said, "we haven't, though I agree. I mean, that seems logical."

"She always is," Ron said.

"Is that a compliment?" Hermione asked.

"You know it is, and stop being touchy," Ron replied. "Right, I have to go, but thank you for the advice."

"Let us know how it goes," Harry said.

"Oh, and I know we aren't talking about this," Hermione said, "but tell Padma I put my sari choice in the post to her today."

"I will. Wait, how do I turn this thing off?" he asked.

"You put the handset back in the cradle so it pushes the little buttons down," Hermione said.

"Okay, right. Well, good bye!" There was some scratching on the other end of the line and some muffled words from Ron before the line finally clicked off.

Harry hung up and went into the kitchen, where Hermione was pouring out tea from the pot. She'd already laid out a few sweets on a plate. "That was good advice you gave Ron," he said as he sat down.

"Thanks."

"I, er, I'm sorry you can hear me."

She shrugged. "Small house. I could hear Seamus, too, when we were living together."

"Seamus was always loud," Harry said. "And you're right, of course, about the sex. I mean, with us."

"I think convenience sex is just never a good idea," she said. "So often it's not really just convenience for one person, and then that's messy and horrible. Seamus got into trouble a couple of times in Greece about that, boys thinking that he felt more than he did even though he was always upfront and honest about Dean. Anyway, I don't think I'm a casual sex kind of person."

"Yeah, I don't think I am either, now I've done it," Harry replied. "And it can be part of the whole, you know, thing."

"Words," Hermione said.

Harry scowled, and wished that she hadn't had those meetings at McCormick and in Salem with his
counselors. "Addiction, impulse control, whatever, part of that," he said.

"So no sex until it means something. Well, I'll drink to that," she said, smiling, and clinked cups with Harry.

"Yeah, no sex until it means something." He drank his tea, looking at her, and wondered when it would.
Yule

Chapter Summary

Two discussions are postponed, one is planned, and one is resolved.

21 December 2001: Punta Arenas, Tierra del Fuego, Chile

Draco didn't actually mind cold weather. People often assumed that of him, for some odd reason, but he thought he looked rather good in a sweater. This, though, this was not just cold weather—this was harsh, wet weather, particularly as it was the longest day of the year. But then, the southern hemisphere had never made much sense to him.

One would think the festival crowd would like the longest night of the year, given their penchant for living almost nocturnally (yet another way they resembled a pack of vampires), but they were nothing if not perverse, so the appointed location for Yule was at the furthest point south that was still suitable for wizard decadence. Sacrificed for convenience was the Midnight Sun, which one had to travel to Antarctica to experience, but one could not easily ship large quantities of firewhiskey to Antarctica, and anyway, one could easily see the Midnight Sun in established cities like St Petersburg—no need to go trekking to the ends of the earth. Patagonia was starkly beautiful, but he wasn't sure it stood up to literary myth.

Not to mention, there were no giants here.

He and Pansy had marked time until the party that evening by browsing through some curio shops and little museums, looking for artifacts of the sort Hermione had mentioned. Pansy was better at this part of the mission than he was—he was much better at ingratiating them among the Wizards Who Mattered and maintaining their cover. Now she was taking a pre-party nap and he was reading one of the books Ginny had slipped into his bag, though it just made him think about Ginny, and the upcoming holiday, and the disaster that had been last year's New Year's Eve party.

It had started out so well—the construction on Malfoy Manor was finally finished and the Patils had decided to winter in India so they weren't having their annual party. Besides, he needed a distraction after the Euro Cup fiasco, not only from how the case had fallen apart, but also from Ginny's worry over his disappearance. No matter how many times Sirius and Pansy reassured him that the mere fact that he'd escaped so quickly meant that he'd done nothing to jeopardize the case, he couldn't sleep for going over every second of it, every move he'd made. Given her mood, Ginny hadn't been overly enthusiastic about the party, but Draco didn't worry, as he was happy to plan the thing himself, meeting with caterers and florists and decorators and even ordering Ginny a dress, something he hadn't done since that year at Hogwarts. It was fun, in a way; he'd built his castle and now he was bringing his princess to it.

Of course, he could have stopped and thought about the myriad ways that Ginny in no way resembled a story-book princess. And because he hadn't, Ginny reminded him of all of them in no uncertain terms at about 4am on New Year's Day, once the party had wound down and most of the guests had left or gone to bed. What made him think, she demanded, that she either wanted to or was capable of replacing Narcissa Black as the mistress of Malfoy Manor? Was that the way their life together was going to be, that he'd let her play at a career but that ultimately her role was to run
that house while he wandered around having adventures and chasing evil and disappearing for weeks at a time? He'd almost been too stunned to fight back, though once he perceived an insult to his mother the gloves were off, and any and all issues they'd had over the past five years came spilling out, until he began to wonder if they really did belong together after all. Then Ginny asked for some time to think, grabbed her things, and returned to The Burrow. He didn't think he'd ever been as unhappy or as alone as when he'd climbed the staircase that night, and sleep, when it finally came, was restless and full of dreams.

And then slowly, miraculously, they'd made their way back. Draco did his part, throwing himself into his other cases with all due professional dedication. He wasn't quite as dependent on Ginny as he had been, especially with Pansy around, and Harry—well, he knew now that Harry had been spiraling out of control, but at the time he'd just seemed frustratingly unavailable. He wasn't sure how much he and Ginny had solved, but somehow the battle had left them on firmer footing—nothing unsaid, no biting of tongues, everything out in the open. Harsher but better, surely. He was cautiously optimistic.

Pansy came out of her room into the sitting room, stretching. "Aren't you going to get ready?" she asked.

"Hmm?" he asked, looking up at the clock. "Oh, yes." There was a knock at the door, which Pansy answered to find room service.

"Oh Draco, how civilized, you ordered tea," she said, signing the charge.

"Did I?" he asked, waiting until the waiter had left before opening the envelope that had been tucked under the tea tray. "Oh bloody hell," he said.

"What is it?" Pansy asked, as she munched on a piece of toast.

He showed her the note. "How, exactly, are we supposed to smuggle body armor out of the country?"

Pansy smirked. "Good thing you're a chronic overpacker," she said.

Draco scowled, but that only made Pansy laugh harder.

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London

The wine and cheese were better at a professional opening than at the student shows, Seamus thought, but it was still bland wine and boring cheese, and he wondered how he would be able to get through these evenings, over and over into the future, on nothing but wine and cheese and not-quite-stale biscuits. Though come to think of it, the idea that he would have to was an excellent one on at least two levels: that Dean would be a successful enough artist to have gallery openings over and over into the future, and that Seamus would be attending them. He'd find a way to deal with the wine and cheese.

It was still a group show, but this time Dean wasn't in a guaranteed slot with his fellow classmates, but had managed three pieces in a professional show themed around the portrait. Dean painted (and drew, and took pictures of) things other than people, of course, but he liked people best, liked finding a way to show their insides through their outsides—often Seamus, and Seamus had long since got used to Dean staring at him with something other than sex on his mind. One of the pieces in the show was of Seamus, and even though Seamus's own uncle (on the Muggle side) was an artist
himself, and so others looking at a picture of him wasn't a new thing, the idea that he might be
hanging in some stranger's house was more than a little weird.

Parvati couldn't attend the opening, as she was in South America someplace on a modeling
assignment, so Seamus was left completely to his own devices. He mostly knew how to behave,
letting Dean alone as he talked to his fellow artists, press, and the specially invited buyers that
circulated around the two rooms of the small gallery. The wizarding art world wasn't particularly
large, so Dean was showing in a SoHo gallery; the difference was, only wizards would be able to
see the charms on the paintings, and if a Muggle bought one, Dean was required by law to remove
the charm. It was a tricky thing, because it meant that the charm couldn't be crucial to the painting,
and as Dean had moved through art school he'd become less and less interested in the sort of simple
charms often found on wizarding photographs and more enamored with a kind of double image, as
though two paintings were superimposed on the canvas.

But when they arrived home, Seamus felt unsettled and jumpy. Yes, the opening had been
successful—buyers seemed at least as interested in Dean's pieces as any of the others—but
something about the evening at the gallery didn't sit right with him, and it was all he could do when
they went for drinks after with some of the art crowd not to sulk in a corner. Seamus didn't
particularly like sulking, and Dean hated it when he sulked in public, but still, it happened. At least
he hadn't drunk anymore after they left the gallery. Surely semi-sober trying-not-to-sulk was better
than open, drunken sulking?

Or not. "What the hell is wrong with you?" Dean asked as soon as they were inside their flat. "You
haven't said one word since we left the gallery."

He actually had said very few words when they were at the gallery, but that didn't seem like the right
answer. "Does something have to be wrong for me to be silent?" he asked. "Can't I just not feel like
talking?"

Dean cocked his head. "Do you really want me to answer that?"

Seamus sighed. "I don't know what it matters whether I spoke or not. Tonight wasn't about me,
anyway."

"Is that was this is about? Seriously? Because I don't know how you can support me all this time
and then as soon as I'm successful be jealous."

"That's not it," Seamus replied, and walked into the kitchen.

Dean followed. "Sure about that, mate, that you didn't want to be the center of attention, as usual?"

"I'm not fifteen, Dean," Seamus said, tapping the kettle with his wand. "And anyway, that was my
pretty face up on the wall, wasn't it?"

"Fine," Dean said, seeming to believe him, which was a relief. "Then what?"

"I dunno," Seamus said, hopping onto the counter, a move that brought him up to eye level with his
taller boyfriend. "Since when did you start calling everyone 'darling'?"

"What? When did I do that?"

"That old hack hasn't had a good painting in years, darling," Seamus mimicked with a toss of his
head.

Dean pulled a face. "I don't sound like that," he said.
"Well, no, not now, not with me or around normal people—and don't you dare say that—but tonight at the pub, after the opening? Really, when did you start being so gay?"

"I reckon around the time I was born, same as you, Seamus."

"That's—you know what I mean, Dean."

"Actually, no, I don't," he replied, pouring the hot water into the teapot. "When you get like this? I have no idea what you're talking about."

Seamus sighed. "I mean you were one scarf short of high camp, is what I mean, and that's not like you."

"Oh come on. This, from a man who went to a Halloween party in drag?"

"Angel and Tom Collins are the most perfect costume for us, ever, and don't change the subject."

"I was a long way from flaming."

"Well, you're always a long way from flaming, only tonight you were a bit closer."

"What I don't understand is why this is a problem," Dean said, handing Seamus a cup. "So I camped it up a little for the fun of it. Do we need the drama?"

Seamus cocked his head. "It isn't drama, Dean."

Dean had been about to drink, but stopped, and looked at Seamus for a bit. Then his shoulders relaxed. "Of course not," he said, his tone gentler. "Look, this week, you have Christmas Eve off, yeah?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Let's hit the clubs the day before," he suggested.

"I told you it wasn't about the attention."

"I know, not what I meant. But with all those real queens around …"

"Fine."

"Well, don't just agree to be neighborly."

"I'm not," Seamus quickly replied; then, softer, "I'm not."

"Good," Dean said, kissing him. "Because tonight, can we just be happy about the show?"

Seamus smiled. Here was one advantage they'd gained from their three years of living apart: how to cut short and postpone a fight. Their times for chats had been too precious; fighting was for in-person. Even now that they were living together, the ability to temporarily set aside a disagreement, knowing they'd get back to it later, was dead useful, and Seamus was happy to do that now. After all, his sulk had been a bit selfish. "I'm sorry, Dean; of course we can. I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks." They kissed again, and Dean leaned his forehead against Seamus's. "I'm going to take a shower," he said. "Come with?"

"Yeah, I'll be right behind you."
Dean set his cup down and walked out of the kitchen, shedding clothes as he went. Seamus drained his own tea and hopped down from the counter. Dean was right; this night was about Dean's triumph and not Seamus's confusion. Besides, triumphant Dean meant great sex. Plenty of time for arguing later.

26 December 2001: Chip Head Island, Maine

Harry stood at his kitchen table, picking clean the turkey carcass they'd dined on the day before. Christmas had actually been not that bad, particularly for the first one since he'd left rehab at the McCormack Centre. Just he and Hermione and Sirius and Remus, which wasn't so different from before all the battles started. Only, so much had happened since that sixth year Christmas it was hard to believe it had only been five years, that he was only twenty-one and already having to rebuild his life. Tom and Margaret Hughes, the young couple who worked as caretakers and gardeners for the cottage when it was unoccupied, had invited Harry and his guests to their home for a potluck brunch with some of the other neighbors, a very American affair of pancakes and waffles and sausages and streaky bacon and gallons of maple syrup and a basin of scrambled eggs and french toast and smoked salmon and bagels someone had brought up from New York and any number of sliced vegetables and salads and fruits and good lord. Harry brought some beans he'd baked himself, having noticed the dish was very popular among the locals, though apparently not for breakfast. The potluck was nothing like the Boxing Day Buffet at The Burrow, but it did have almost as much food.

The neighbors made quite a fuss over Sirius, more than they'd ever made over Harry, for which he was grateful. Apparently there hadn't been any Blacks at the cottage in some time, since Sirius and his cousins and brother had spent a summer when they were children, before Bellatrix started at Hogwarts. The old folks in particular delighted in comparing Sirius to the little boy they'd last seen, and Remus was amused by the stories. One youngish neighbor, on her holiday from school at Salem, had slipped Harry the autobiography of an American actress who'd been in rehab at thirteen; Hermione had spotted it and raised her eyebrows but said only, "You know her, Harry; that's the girl from ET."

Now Remus and Hermione were in her office-library, talking about her dissertation and the general state of Ministry relations with other countries, since the war was a good three years behind them. She had a position waiting for her in International Magical Cooperation whenever she wanted it as far as Remus was concerned, and given that they would need her meager contacts in Africa as it was, Harry was sure she could make a big impact there. But Hermione didn't seem quite ready to take on a diplomatic career.

Padfoot came in through the dog door; he'd been out for a run around the island. Harry leaned over to look through the kitchen door into the mudroom and said, "You shake that snow off right there, or you'll answer to Hermione."

The dog cocked his head, but did as he was told, and even wiped his feet on the mat before coming into the kitchen and sitting near Harry, looking up at him with friendly grey eyes.

Harry shook his head. "No people food for dogs," he said, and returned to the turkey. The dog stood and walked forlornly back into the mudroom.

"Aww Harry," said Sirius. "You're no fun."

"Of course I am," Harry said, "but it's clean fun now."

Sirius came back into the kitchen, boots and coat shed, looking a little sheepish. "I'm sorry—"
"No," Harry replied, holding up a turkey grease-covered hand. "Have to joke about it, right? Otherwise it's like one of those melodramas Molly Weasley's always reading." He paused, then added, "And Fred, actually. Sobs like a baby over them."

"Really? Doesn't seem the type." Sirius grabbed a drumstick and sat down backwards on one of the chairs at the kitchen table. "Why aren't you doing that with magic?"

"Haven't found a spell that works as well as my hands. But here, you can dry this," he said, freeing the wishbone and handing it to Sirius.

"What are you making?" Sirius asked.

"One of the neighbors gave me a recipe that seems easy enough: pile salsa and shredded cheese and broken up tortilla chips and the turkey in a dish and bake it. I've found that most American food contains a melted cheese element."

"You really do all the cooking then?"

"Hermione's a disaster in the kitchen. We wouldn't eat if I didn't cook."

"So you're a sort of house husband and all-around assistant?"

"No, she cleans and—I mean, no, in what way am I a house husband? We're not married."

"True."

"And God knows she spent seven years helping me."

"True again."

"Well, then what are you implying?" Harry asked. Sirius smirked. "I wasn't implying anything," he said. "Why, what did you think I was implying?"

Harry sighed. "Nothing," he said, and tossed the picked-clean carcass into a pot, then turned to the sink to wash his hands. "Nevermind."

Sirius hopped up and looked through the kitchen doorway before closing the door to the rest of the house. "Harry. Harry, turn around."

"What?" he said, leaning back against the sink.

"You're still—"

"I don't want to talk about it," he said quickly.

"But how—how is it living here?"

"It isn't about me," Harry replied. "And they don't recommend getting into a relationship anyway."

"So you've talked to them about that? That's good, right?"

"Yeah. Yeah, now that you mention it, yeah, that is good."

Sirius had dried the wishbone, and was now idly flipping it over his fingers. "So, how is that going?" he asked casually, not looking up.
"Oh, fine," Harry said. "They say I'm making progress. I can't feel it, but apparently that's typical. I've been riding a broomstick a little bit more each day, just in the quad at Salem."

"Oh? And that is?"


"God, Harry," Sirius said, standing up, "I'm so sorry—"

"You have to STOP saying that!" Harry said. "You have nothing to be sorry for so stop apologizing. If anyone should be sorry, it's me. I pushed you away."

Sirius walked to the other side of the table, where Harry was. "I didn't help you—"

"You couldn't have helped me. Don't you see? I had to do it myself."

"You've had to do a lot by yourself. Too much."

"Yeah, I have," Harry said. "Maybe that's just how my life has gone, I don't know, but I can change that now. So, help me with that."

Sirius leaned against the counter, next to Harry, and they stood in silence. After some time Sirius said, "So, Hermione?"

"Not. One. Word."

"Turned out pretty well last time, when I helped," he said, crossing his arms.

Harry rolled his eyes. "If I need your help, I promise I'll ask for it. All right?"

"All right," Sirius agreed.

There were voices in the hall, and then Hermione pushed the door open, Remus just behind her. "I didn't realize you were back, Sirius," she said. "Are we interrupting?"

"Of course not," Sirius said. "In fact, I'd say it's time for pie."

"You always think it's time for pie," Remus said.

"Did it ever occur to you, Remus Lupin, that perhaps it is always time for pie?"

"No," he replied, and put the kettle on.

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31 December 2001: Cambridge

Padma Patil truly didn't know how her mother did it, year after year after year. The New Year's Gala at Patil House was almost as big a party as her wedding was going to be, and she was exhausted; throwing it every year was a no-go. She hoped one of the cousins would pick it up once her mother gave it up, because if not Parvati would corner her into "helping" and that was simply not going to happen.

The ballroom was gorgeous as usual, subtle and tasteful in amber and gold. One of the twists of the Patil's gala was the requirement for Muggle formal dress, which was uniform enough that even the
most Muggle-avoidant of wizards was able to rise to the occasion, and the ballroom was full of black jackets and silk gowns. Ron was handsome in his tuxedo, and Padma, who was wearing a blue sari, was glad that they'd decided to dress at their own flat instead of at Patil House, even if they did end up crashing in her old room after the party. They were standing in a hidden corner that Padma had discovered some years ago, a spot perfect for watching almost the entire ballroom while one remained unnoticed behind some decorations. "Where's your sister?" he asked.

"She likes to make an entrance. But there's your sister." She nodded toward the other side of the room, where Ginny, in spaghetti-strapped teal silk, stood sipping a cocktail. A young man approached her.

"Ooh, she's been cornered."

"I think that's some cousin of Queenie Greengrass who wants to be a writer."

"Good lord, he's giving her his card," Ron said, making a face. "Isn't he still at school? Where did he get cards?"

Padma shrugged. "There were always blokes who had them made up. Oh look, she's so gracious; he's even smiling as he walks away."

"She was always good at handling people. Dunno why she gets so nervous about these things."

"What things?"

"Oh you know, these posh sort of gatherings. She keeps thinking she's a poor relation." He rolled his eyes.

Padma thought of pointing out Ron's own occasional moments of shame over his background, but decided against it, as it hadn't come up in ages, even with the lavish wedding her parents were insisting on. Instead she said, "Why Ron, that's very insightful."

"Well," Ron said, smiling a little bashfully, "you have to be observant, to be an Auror. Anyway, Ginny's just being silly, really. Look at her! She's smooth as anything, and the second-prettiest girl in the room."

"Who's the prettiest?"

"Parvati. You know, being a model and all."

"She's not in the room."

"No? Well, you'll do in the meantime."

"I'd better. Well, there's Draco."

"Lord I hope there's not an argument this year."

"Listen to you! Who would have thought, five years ago, that you'd ever say something in support of your sister being with Draco Malfoy?"

"He's less of a handful when she's around," Ron replied.

Padma shook her head. "Well, something tells me there won't be one."

"Something like my sister, you mean? Honestly, you girls and your gossiping."
"No one is worse for gossip than you lads, particularly when Harry Potter is about. But, yes, it was she."

"Do you girls talk about me, too? No, don't answer that; I don't want to know."

"Oh Ron, of course we do."

"Is that Parkinson? Really, doesn't that girl own a dress? Your sister isn't like that, and she's a lesbian."

Padma answered only with a glance. "I think that tux is custom made, actually." She cocked her head. "They do make an … unexpected threesome. Not entirely awkward, but odd."

"I think Ginny's trying," Ron said loyally.

"Of course she is," Padma replied. "But let's go help her."

Ron groaned. "You mean we have to talk to other people? Can't I just stay here and talk to you?"

"Do you really want Mother to come looking for us?"

Ron swallowed hard, then squared his shoulders. "Right, let's go talk to Parkinson."

"I thought so," Padma said.

On their way, Ron grabbed two champagne cocktails from one of the passed trays and handed one to Padma while downing the other in one swallow, exchanging it on the next tray for another full glass. He looked down at Padma, who was shaking her head. "What?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"They're tiny!"

"I didn't say anything!" Reaching the others, she held out her arms to Ginny. "Happy New Year, Ginny! What a gorgeous dress!"

"Oh, Draco bought it for me as a Christmas present." She smiled and put a hand on his shoulder.

Padma and Ron exchanged a look—Draco buying Ginny a dress had been at the heart of their fight last year after all—but said nothing. Even so, Draco noticed.

"Well," Draco said, "Pansy selected it, actually. She's a very good shopper."

"Er, thanks?" Pansy replied.

"I meant, you have good taste."

"You are very stylish," Padma added.

Pansy smiled, a tiny almost girlish smile that looked out of place with her severe wardrobe and haircut. "I want everything around me to be as beautiful as possible."

"Speaking of which," Ginny said, and they all followed her glance to the entrance to the ballroom.

Parvati had just arrived, and was making her way down the staircase to the main floor. She was wearing sari fabric in deep violet, but the fabric had been folded into a different shape, one that
emphasized her long, lean body. It reminded Padma of some of the more fashion-forward evening gowns Parvati had shown her while they were shopping for the bridesmaids' dresses, yet the dress retained the spirit of a sari.

Padma looked at Pansy out of the corner of her eye, and she was sure the effect was not lost on her. Pansy was clearly struggling to keep her face neutral, but Padma could see the admiration for her sister. The two of them had been circling each other for ages, and even though Padma was sure that a relationship between the two would be a disaster, it couldn't be worse than the other affairs Parvati had had, and at least they'd have got it out of their system so the rest of them could go on with their lives already.

"Hello darling," Parvati said, kissing Padma on the cheek. "Am I late? I lost track of time!"

"Save the innocent act for someone who doesn't know you, Parvati," Padma said.

"That obvious, am I? Hello, brother," she said, hugging Ron, then greeting Ginny and Draco. She turned to Pansy. "Hullo Pansy. I must say, that tuxedo suits you."

"Thank you," Pansy said, inclining her head slightly. "Who made that gown for you? It's stunning."

"Oh, well, thank you," Parvati said, standing a bit taller. "I made it myself."

"You did?" she asked, surprised.

"Yes, I make most of my clothes, actually," Parvati said. "Sewing is easy to pack and keeps me occupied when I'm in hotel rooms. All I need is fabric and a wand."

"So that dress you wore, when we had lunch at Mooncalf?"

"Mine, yes," she replied, nodding.

"May I" Pansy asked, touching the fabric of her gown.

"Of course," Parvati said. "I'm a model, I'm used to it." She made a face of confusion over Pansy's shoulder to Ginny, who just shrugged. Pansy turned her around, lifting the hem of the garment as she did, and when Parvati was facing her friends again … they were gone. Her sister and future brother-in-law were nowhere to be seen, but Draco and Ginny were walking toward the veranda. "Oh."

"What?" Pansy said, looking up. "Oh. Well, I guess we were being rather boring." They stood silently for a moment, awkwardly, and then Pansy said, "Care for a drink?"

"Why not?" Parvati replied, and they walked over to the bar. "That's quite a nice suit," she said as she slipped up onto one of the bar stools, bringing her head down closer to Pansy's. "Who makes them for you?"

Pansy turned from where she'd been ordering cocktails from the bartender. "Oh, various tailors. Why, are you making suits as well?"

"I've never tried making anything so tailored," Parvati said. "So much construction in a blazer. Menswear is so complicated. Not—I don't mean to say you're wearing menswear."

"Oh, I am," Pansy replied. "But challenges are important, don't you think?"

Parvati sat back. "Are you asking me to make you a suit?"
"Don't you think you could?"

"If you're willing to be my experiment, perhaps, but something tells me you're a very exacting client."

"I try to be," Pansy said, sipping from her drink.

"We'd have to schedule a lot of fittings," Parvati said.

Pansy smiled. "Why would that be a problem?"

Parvati felt herself flush just a bit, and looked away. "It would take some time, what with travel and all."

"I'm sure it would be worth it," Pansy said.

"Well, I can work up a sketch—"

"No," Pansy interrupted. "I leave that up to you."

Parvati turned back to Pansy. "Are you sure? What about fabric?"

"I want to see what you can do, when left to your own devices. You see me often enough to know how I dress. Maybe I need something new."

Parvati drank, thinking, then put down her glass and held out her hand. "All right. I'll do it."

Pansy shook hands. "Brilliant. I look forward to what you come up to."

Parvati felt suddenly brave. "Would you care to dance?"

"Why not?" Pansy asked, and led her out onto the floor.

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Even though the Patils had put a heating charm on the balcony, it was mostly deserted. Perhaps, Draco thought, it was a little too early in the party for couples to seek fresh air and sanctuary. But then he and Ginny had never been much like other couples.

She leaned against the rail, looking out over the back garden, and the light breeze stirred her red-gold curls. He let himself stare.

"What?" she asked.

"You're very beautiful," he said.

"Ah," she replied. "You haven't said that in a while."

He shrugged. "It isn't a compliment you're fond of."

"And you say it now because?"

"It seemed appropriate."

She smiled and nodded, still not looking at him, and they fell silent again. Draco fidgeted, and after a bit said, "Ginny, I—"
"Five years ago when I came to this party the first time," Ginny said, as though Draco hadn't spoken, "I was scared to death. I'd been to two balls, both at school, and that was it. I'd never been to a house as large as this one, never mind Malfoy Manor."

"Ginny—"

She silenced him with a look and went on. "But Ron was here, and Padma and Parvati, and Mrs. Patil put me at ease, and I could just concentrate on you."

"Me?" he asked.

She turned then. "You mean you don't remember? Every other person giving their condolences at the loss of your mother—and I think many of them were just trying to find out more lurid details. You'd smile and nod and say all the appropriate things and when your grip on my hand got too tight we'd come out here and you'd smoke a cigarette and calm down, and then we'd go back in again."

"So much of that year is a blur," Draco said, running a hand through his hair. "I was all over the place. Which hasn't really changed much, actually."

Ginny smiled, a little sadly. "The thing is, I don't really belong in all this. Oh, I can play at it for an evening, but not for a lifetime. So I've been thinking about it, about the Manor, and you, and I think I could do it, but only in my own way."

"Of course."

"I'm still Molly's daughter. I mend clothing rather than discarding it. I put vegetables in my garden, not just flowers. I bake pies."

"I love your pies."

"If we do this, people might talk."

"People will talk anyway no matter what we do."

"It won't be much like your childhood."

He shrugged. "I don't know many men who want to marry their mothers. And I certainly don't want to become Lucius."

She cocked her head. "You'll remember that the next time we argue over this?"

"If I don't," he said, "I'm sure you'll remind me."

"Oi!" said a voice from the doorway, and they turned to see Ron walking toward them, a champagne flute in each hand. "Less than a minute to go." He handed the glasses to Ginny and Draco, then took his own from Padma, who was just behind him. "Quite a year," he added.

Draco nodded. "Next year will be better," he said firmly.

"It already will be," Padma said. "Harry, and your work, and the wedding ..."
"And we're not starting the year with an argument," Ginny added.

"Here you are," Parvati said, walking over to them with Pansy. She looked around. "Why isn't anyone else out here? Awful crush in there."

"People are sheep," Pansy replied. The crowd started to countdown. "See?"

Draco shook his head at her, smiling, and held up his glass. "Happy New Year, everyone."
Pansy stood in the bathroom regarding her naked body in the mirror and thanked those responsible for sunscreen charms. She adored the sun, loved the beach, but it wasn't part of her personal style to be tan—she'd have to rethink her entire makeup palette. Besides, she didn't actually tan but freckled and that she could not have. As a girl she'd been a frequent user of Frecks-B-Gone, which worked very well though it left a distinctly lemony smell which she then covered with lemon verbena perfume, claiming she liked the old fashioned scent. Judicious use of sunblock charms made the potion unnecessary now, but she still favored citrus-based colognes. Draco didn't believe in returning from beach holidays looking like a bronze statue any more than Pansy did, and their very English paleness had stood out on a beach full of suntanned, blond Aussies.

Before their beach afternoon, they had toured the art galleries in Sydney. Hermione had had a hunch that the object might be hidden among the aboriginal art so popular of late, and their invitation to an opening at a gallery that evening confirmed it. The transfer was almost certain to happen then, followed by the usual speedy exit back to London. But at the moment her mind wasn't on the case.

Pansy and Draco had had an unexpected run in with Parvati Patil on the beach that afternoon. Well, not exactly unexpected. Parvati had been turning up so consistently wherever Pansy and Draco went on their missions that if she didn't know better Pansy would worry that Parvati was keeping an eye on them. But she did know better—Parvati had turned Pansy in, after all, during that Euro Cup mess. Still, as soon as Parvati had appeared on the beach she realized that she'd been half looking for the woman since they'd arrived in Sydney.

Pansy had seen Parvati in a bikini before, of course, but real life and the air brushed perfection of a magazine were two very different things. Her skin glowed in the warm sunlight and the pigment was slightly uneven—lighter on her stomach and darkest just between her upper thighs. A few scars stood out here and there on her arms and Pansy wondered if they were childhood incidents or something more recent. She'd worn a simple two-piece suit in terra cotta—skimpy, to be sure, but a suit she could swim in. Pansy had suddenly felt self-conscious in her own simple black two-piece, though there was no reason to be. The nerves had made her irritable and she'd been bitchier than was strictly necessary, but for all that Parvati had only seemed amused.

Pansy scowled into the mirror. She'd always set high standards for the people around her, and she was unapologetic about this. They should be beautiful, or interesting, or amusing; preferably all three. Intelligence and accomplishment were also benefits, so long as one didn't make a fetish of them. Working hard was one thing, but to talk of nothing but one's work, quite another. She herself was not beautiful, but showed every sign of growing into dignified handsomeness come middle age. Besides, she was stylish, which made up for a great deal.

Parvati, though, had become all of this and more at some point when Pansy hadn't been paying
attention. She'd been quite an emotional little thing as a girl, heart right out on her sleeve, which made Pansy want to knock her about just on principle. And such a do-gooder, which clearly hadn't changed. Gryffindors were so very tedious. Yet when Pansy was particularly catty Parvati just smiled, and she seemed to be thriving in the notoriously shallow and bitchy fashion world.

Pansy spritzed herself with perfume and began to dress. She was fairly sure that she'd never thought about a girl as often or for as long as she did Parvati. Girls were fairly interchangeable in Pansy's experience; she grew bored with most people after so much concentrated contact, and sex only made it worse. Not that she'd really been sleeping with women, or anyone else, for all that long. But all the people she knew in her parents' generation had found their spouse by the age of sixteen, and her own school chums were following suit. It was the wizarding way.

Pansy checked the mirror a last time—linen trousers, cotton dress shirt, both in soft cream, a red silk necktie as a belt to give some color, simple brown leather sandals. She walked into the sitting room, where Draco was sitting in a chair reading a book.

"Done primping?" he asked.

"Primping? What is this, 1930?"

There was a soft knock at the door, and Pansy answered. A pretty blonde in a bell hop uniform stood in the hall, holding a small silver charger with an envelope. "Ms. Parkinson?" she asked.

"I am she."

The girl moved the plate closer and Pansy took the note, then reached into her pocket to tip the girl. She gave her the tiniest of leers as she thanked her, and the girl blushed prettily and stammered out her own thanks before walking away.

"I don't know how you do that," Draco said as she closed the door. He was standing now, and had apparently watched the encounter.

"Do what?" Pansy asked, opening the envelope.

"Attract every lesbian in the general vicinity."

She shrugged, glancing at the note. "At least we're on the right track. 'We suggest you bid on item fourteen.'" She handed the note to Draco.

"Well, you were right about that shield we saw yesterday," he said. "Very clever, switching the real thing for the copy up for auction. It'll probably be a few weeks before anyone notices."

Pansy nodded. "Plenty of time for Lupin and I to smooth things over." She reached for her bag.

"I just want to note, regarding Ms. Patil," Draco said, opening the door for her, "that I never made you watch me flirt with Ginny."

She turned and glared. "What, on the beach? That wasn't flirting."

"If that's the way you want it."

"Come on," Pansy said, rolling her eyes at him. "Time to earn our keep."
Now that he was finally no longer in school or training, Seamus appreciated his holidays that much more. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed Hermione until he saw her face at the Portkey area in Salem. Harry too, but while Harry was a strange absence from London, Seamus hadn't shared a house with him these past three years. Not that Dean wasn't an excellent housemate, but lately he'd missed Hermione even more because of Dean and the strange way they'd been settling—or not—into this living together thing.

He'd been giving it a lot of thought on this holiday, the first one he and Dean had had together that wasn't merely traveling to see one another. Harry and Hermione weren't on holiday, of course, so while they slaved away in libraries, Seamus and Dean had gone down to New York for two days to tour museums and shop, and were even able to watch Parvati walk the runway in one of the smaller New York fashion shows. The four of them were all going back down at the weekend to a club that Dean knew about. One thing Seamus could say for being a wizard, your day trip travel radius was much further.

The morning was full of presents, including flowers for Hermione and chocolate for Harry. In the afternoon they'd gone into Portland to skate on a pond in the middle of town. February was very much still winter here, snowy and cold, but even though the ocean was so dark it was almost purple the little island reminded Seamus of Greece, and he reckoned that seaside places were more alike than different, really.

Harry and Dean were in the kitchen making dinner, Hermione and Seamus having been exiled supposedly due to their lack of ability (Hermione) or occasional bossiness (both) but Seamus suspected it was just to let he and Hermione have a nice long chat. So they sat before the fire, talking over mulled wine and warm spiced nuts.

"All right, Finnigan," Hermione said. "Spill."

"What?" Seamus asked.

Hermione cocked her head and waited.

"Fine," Seamus replied. "So it's great, of course. Fantastic. Loads of sex, that's brilliant, and being in London with everyone else and going out. We both work a lot, but I think we've found a good balance. It's great."

"And?"

Seamus fidgeted and turned in his chair, pulling his leg off the arm and facing the fire, rather than Hermione. "I can't work it out, quite. It's not that he's really different than he was—more confident, maybe. But still, you know, shy and reticent most of the time—"

"So this is with other people, not you alone?"

"Yes, yes, he—well, around his art school friends, he's a bit bitchy."

"Seamus, Dean's always been a bit bitchy."

"Well, not in public!"

Hermione smiled her little smile of understanding, and Seamus fidgeted more, feeling suddenly self-
conscious, transparent to her but still opaque to himself. "What?" he asked.

"When we were in Greece, and your friends from training would come over, you'd all sit out on the porch and talk about this potion or that technique. You were so serious—"

"You'd seen me like that before," Seamus objected.

"Yes, but only around me, or Dean, or the like. Get you boys together, even after the war, and you were your usual raucous self."

"And your point?" he asked, nervously pulling at the fringe trimming his chair.

"My point is, perhaps Dean also found a few more people to be himself around."

Seamus shook his head. "Dean is always himself. That's the brilliant thing about him."

Hermione shrugged. "I could be wrong."

Seamus looked up at her, raising an eyebrow. "Miss Granger, surely you're not admitting a flaw in your powers of perception."

"Shut it!" Hermione replied, smacking him in the shoulder.

"Ow!" he said, rubbing where she'd hit him, though he couldn't help snickering.

"All right, new topic."

"Work, that's safe enough. How's the paper going?"

"Actually quite well," she replied. "Back in the fall, I thought it wasn't going to work, and I talked it out with Harry one day and he helped me flip the entire thing on its end, and now all the pieces are coming together quite nicely. My advisor has been pleased with the chapter drafts, and the research is nearly done, so it's mostly just writing from here forward."

"Harry is actually helping? Because when we were in school …"

"I know, I'm surprised too. But he's really—I don't know, he's taking it so seriously. I think he's really trying to get it together."

"Oh? How is it, really?"

Hermione took a swallow of wine. "I know it hasn't been a year yet, but he's so different than he was in June, even than he was at the Euro Cup. There are good days and bad days, of course. Sometimes he's very angry, and he'll go for a run or mess about in the shed or the kitchen. Or he'll get morose and sit staring at the sea. And then there are those days he seems like himself, but I dunno, lighter, somehow? Anyway, there are more good days and fewer bad ones all the time. So."

"So that's good."

Hermione nodded. "It is."

Seamus cocked his head. "So why don't you sound very sure of that?"

"I don't know what you mean," she said primly.

"Hermione."
She sighed. "It's just—when he was more ill, it was easier to, well, stay aware that he's ill, you know."

"No, I don't know."

Hermione looked at the closed kitchen door, then leaned in closer. "The last thing he needs right now is an entanglement."

He snickered. "You sound like Jane Austen."

"Seamus, I'm serious."

"So am I! He's a grown man; he knows what he wants. And may I point out, your thinking you knew better than him what he should be doing is half of what broke you two up in the first place."

"You may not."

"I'm just saying—if he's done quite enough self-sacrifice for the sake of, well, the world, I'd say you've done quite enough for his sake."

Hermione was quiet, staring into the fire. "Do you think he still—"

"Oh, Harry never stopped being in love with you," Seamus said. "Everyone knows that."

The kitchen door opened then. "Dinner's ready," Dean announced.

"Great!" Seamus replied, scrambling out of his chair without giving Hermione another look. He helped Dean carry out the food—platters with a small lamb roast, asparagus and new potatoes with herbs.

Harry came along behind them with a tray of soup bowls. He was wearing an old Quidditch training t-shirt, red and white for England, and he'd put back some of the muscle tone he'd lost while at the McCormick Centre. He flashed Hermione a nervous grin.

"Do you like it, Hermione?" he asked, indicating the prettily set table.


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London

It was more than six weeks after Parvati's offer to make Pansy a suit before their schedules could accommodate any proper measurements being taken. Parvati had already picked out fabrics and poured through piles of patterns and look books before finally poking through an archive of fashion magazines at the British Library. There always had been something about Pansy that didn't seem quite twenty-first century, and she found her inspiration in the menswear looks of the 1930s.

There was never supposed to be time for anything during any fashion week, but Parvati had always found that leaving the parties before everyone got too awfully drunk and going home to bed left one ample time for oneself in the morning, and the others rarely remembered that one had actually left. So she'd asked Pansy to come round the flat in the late afternoon, on a day when she'd only had a morning show.

Pansy was an old hand at being measured, as would be expected of a girl of her social standing. Odd that her fleeing the country during the war hadn't diminished that standing, but then, she hadn't
fought on the opposite side, either, so that was something. What, Parvati wasn't sure. She focused on being a professional, reminding herself that she'd already seen Pansy in a bikini. Measuring her in her bra and panties shouldn't have been more distracting, but then again she was touching her a bit more, and the inseam measurement for the trousers made her glad she didn't have a pale English complexion, because she was sure she was blushing.

"I've bought the fabric, if you want to see it," she said, as she rolled up her measuring tape.

Pansy, who was dressing, paused for just a moment before saying, "No, I'd rather be surprised."

Parvati nodded. She wasn't sure what to do now, but Pansy was here, and Parvati was sick of pushing her feelings for the girl to the side, even if Pansy was probably some kind of neo-Death Eater who would take advantage of Harry's absence from the country to begin a new reign of terror.

Okay, Parvati didn't actually think that, but it was a possibility.

More importantly, Seamus and Dean were still in America, and Parvati was lonely; the series of fashion weeks in February—New York, London, Milan, Paris—was grueling and she was only halfway through the marathon. She deserved a treat.

"So I don't know if you had plans," she said, "but I was going to get some curry takeaway and watch the fashion shows on the Muggle telly."

"No Valentine? No parties?" Pansy asked.

"Skipping one night of parties isn't going to ruin my reputation, I'm sure," Parvati said. "Might make it seem that I have a very glamorous life in London, thank you very much, and have better things to do than go to another fashion mag gala where men I'm not interested in buy me drinks and the other girls are snorting cocaine in the ladies' loo."

"Parvati! There are drugs at those parties?" she asked, and they both laughed.

"So?" Parvati asked. "I know, it's a very attractive offer."

"Actually," Pansy said, "I don't mind if I do."

Dean helped clear the table, but Harry and Hermione insisted on doing the washing up, so he decided to find where Seamus had wandered off to after dinner. Dean poked around the first floor, then looked out the window and saw him sitting outside. He couldn't think of why Seamus might have the sulks, but he didn't want their hosts to have to deal with it, so he grabbed his coat and headed outside.

"Chilly," Dean said, sitting down on the stone bench next to him.

Seamus nodded, still staring out at the sea, his hair blowing in the stiff breeze. "I'm sorry," he said suddenly.

"Okay," Dean replied. "For what?"

"I dunno, for thinking you'd never change, I guess." Seamus turned to him then. "That was our thing, right? I'm a hundred different people and you're always yourself?"

"We've all changed, Shay. You know, after the whole running for your life bit, sometimes you think you might want to live that life a little differently."
Seamus winced. "I shouldn't have left," he said, looking away.

"Hey," Dean said, putting a hand on Seamus's shoulder. He waited for Seamus to turn back to him, then continued, "You didn't leave me. And a lot of people left England. Hermione. Ginny finished school in India. Even I left, really, going to a Muggle art school. Never mind all the people who are just gone."

Seamus nodded and they were silent for a bit, watching the ocean crash against the rocks and thinking of Neville, Lavender and the others.

"I wonder how Ernie and Susan are doing in Australia," Seamus said.

"They're Hufflepuffs," Dean said. "Hufflepuffs endure. It's us Gryffindors who flame out."

"Harry seems better though," Seamus said.

Dean nodded. "Toward the end, I dunno, it was like it wasn't him at all. I'm glad you weren't there to see that."

"I'm glad Hermione wasn't."

"Yeah." Dean turned to look through the picture window, and saw Harry and Hermione sitting on the couch talking. "He looks a lot better, Harry does."

"Did he say anything to you tonight, while you were making dinner?"

"About what?"

Seamus bumped Dean's shoulder. "You know."

Dean scowled. "If you and Sirius are planning anything—"

"No, no," Seamus said. "They're on their own. Though I don't think they'll need any help, actually."

"No," Dean said, smiling a little. "So, we're all right, yeah?"

"Yeah," Seamus said. "I dunno what I was bitching about, come to think. It's all the good parts of a new boyfriend and the steady one!"

"Whatever you say, Seamus," Dean said, rolling his eyes.

Seamus sniffled. "And now we should go inside. I know how seeing me in the cold gets you all excited."

Dean couldn't help but smile a little to see Seamus back to himself. "You're a menace."

"Yeah," Seamus said, "but I'm your menace."

"Lucky me," Dean replied.

Parvati had known, somewhat, that Pansy had changed a great deal since they had been at school together. Not just the sexuality, but she was a little softer. An odd conclusion, but Pansy had been tough as nails at school. Of course, it was entirely possible that it was Parvati that had become harder, through a war that Pansy didn't participate in. Maybe they were meeting in the middle somewhere. Parvati had been out with Pansy—well, not with her, but in her company—but never
had she heard her laugh so much or seen her so relaxed as she had been tonight. Come to think of it, every time she'd run into Pansy in those foreign locales she'd seemed a little nervous, as though she were waiting for something to happen. But now she was just sitting on the sofa eating out of a foil tray and commenting bitchily on the Hamish Morrow show from earlier that day.

"Things I do not want: to be wrapped up like a mummy in turquoise and chartreuse knits." she said.

"Oh?" Parvati asked. "You wouldn't wear that fluffy purple turtleneck that covers your ears?"

"My ears are quite a good feature," Pansy proclaimed. "Wouldn't do to cover them up. I don't have as much to work with as you."

Parvati didn't know what to say to that; Pansy wasn't pretty, to be truthful, but she was compelling, and after four years as a model Parvati wasn't sure being beautiful was actually all that positive an experience. She cleared her throat. "They are nice ears," she said. "I can see why you keep your hair short."

Pansy smiled, pleased. "Thank you," she said. "Ah, Roland Mouret is starting."

Parvati looked at the show without paying full attention; she'd already seen it, in a way. She found herself holding her breath.

"These are very pretty, actually," Pansy said. "Nice trousers."

"Yes," Parvati replied.

"And—oh, there you are," she said, and sounded only a little surprised.

And there Parvati was, in a purple minidress, stockings and shoes.

"You have quite a good walk, Patil," Pansy said.

"Thanks," Parvati said, pleased that Pansy complimented her on one of the few things she actually had some control over.

"It's a good color for you," she continued.

"I was planning on making myself a spring dress in that color, actually," she said. "Next project."

Pansy turned and looked at her. "I look forward to seeing you in it." Parvati noticed that her eyes were very dark, and that she was closer than she had been before.

"There's, um, there's kofti in the kitchen," Parvati said, softly.

"That's nice," Pansy said. "I like milky sweets."

"Me too," Parvati said, only she wasn't sure, suddenly, what they were actually talking about. But it didn't matter, because they were kissing.

Finally, after all that, they were kissing—no, make that snogging—on her couch, and Pansy was pushing her back onto the cushions and crawling on top of her. Lying down, their difference in height didn't seem like much and while Pansy's hands were clutching her head, fingers buried in Parvati's hair and palms caressing her cheeks, Parvati's hands had wandered down to rest on Pansy's lower back. Her breasts were soft against Parvati, like a wonderful secret thing hidden from view but still there to be felt and caressed and perhaps even kissed.
They were still fully clothed—Pansy was wearing wool trousers and a lightweight jumper, Parvati a long full dress with slits up to mid-thigh. Parvati's skirt bunched where it couldn't simply fall open, pushed aside by Pansy's legs and arms. Their legs were jumbled, such that each had a knee between her thighs, and everything was a blur, though how could a blur be slow, really? But it was, a languorous slide, Pansy pressing down and Parvati back up, Parvati's hands on Pansy's behind now that she was feeling a bit braver.

They were moaning, too, little oh's and yes's and the occasional grunt, hissing as air was sucked in between gritted teeth. It was absurd because she shouldn't be doing this with Pansy, for any number of reasons, but then it wasn't the first time she'd been in that position, either, and she was beginning to think that sex was always some kind of bad idea, and therefore, that was no reason not to do it.

They were close now, and Parvati could hear the catches in Pansy's breathing, feel her movements get faster and more erratic. Parvati slowed down just a step, wanting to focus on Pansy, hear her letting go. One thing about fucking super-composed girls like Pansy was that they tended to fall apart completely when they came, and Parvati loved that she could do that to someone, loved the feminine little sound they made. Pansy's voice was low-pitched and so was her last groan, an "ah" that resonated deep in her chest and radiated out to Parvati's. Parvati was still for a moment, savoring that sound.

But Pansy wasn't as sentimental. She slid her hand between Parvati's legs, under the skirt, and rubbed her fingers against the wet fabric she found there, her dark eyes staring into Parvati's. Parvati felt exposed and a little unsettled, but she was cresting, anyway, her orgasm washing over her as Pansy watched.

They kissed again, softly, and Parvati said, "I don't know whether to say that was unexpected, or inevitable."

Pansy smiled. "Both, I think," and kissed her again. "I probably should—"

"Sure, sure," Parvati said quickly, before she could finish the sentence. This part of the dance, she knew as well.

Pansy got up and smoothed her clothing and hair back into place, then slipped back into her boots and coat. "I look forward to seeing the suit," she said. Parvati was standing by then, to walk her to the door. "Thank you for dinner. It was nice."

"It was," Parvati said, and she wasn't sure, suddenly, if they were going to shake hands, but then Pansy turned back, and leaned against Parvati, pulling her in for another quick kiss.

Pansy pulled back, biting her lip. "See you soon, I'm sure," she said, and out the door she went.

Parvati closed the door behind her, and then slid down it and sat on the floor, leaning against it. She couldn't quite tell where she stood with Pansy, or even where she wanted to stand; if this was the start of something, or just clearing it out of the way. Well, in the meantime, there was still kofti in the kitchen.

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19 February 2002

Draco really was a doll for coming to so many family gatherings at The Burrow. Ginny knew it was a bit overwhelming for him, surrounded by so much of her extended family, and really only expected him to come along on major holidays or events for her own immediate family. But here he was, even
though it was her great aunt's birthday and Ginny herself barely knew her. A tent had been put up in
the garden, complete with heating charm, to contain a four-generation celebration that was definitely
too large for the house. Small bodies topped with flaming locks ran this way and that, adding to the
general chaos that Weasleys created no matter their age.

As soon as they arrived Ginny got Draco some beer and a meat pie and settled him near Oliver and
his children, figuring they could at least talk Quidditch while Ginny dutifully made the rounds.
Oliver was only personally in charge of one of their twins boys at the moment, as the other was with
Percy and their older two had joined the pack of cousins, so hopefully Draco wouldn't be too
uncomfortable; he wasn't at ease with children the way Ginny was. There had been various small
children in and out of her house all her life.

Ron was at the snack table when Ginny finally reached it, which meant Padma wasn't far away, and
sure enough there she was with Draco near the edge of the crowd. Ginny rarely came to these
extended family gatherings unless Ron was coming as well, because Padma and Draco made it a lot
easier for each other.

Ron was loading up his plate with little pre-dinner bites, making Ginny feel a little less self-conscious
about doing so as well, and when he saw her he nodded to their partners. "Well, they've found each
other," he said. "Commiserating, no doubt."

"Is it really so painful?" she asked him.

"You have to admit," he said, "it's very loud."

"Funny," Ginny replied, "I never used to notice."

They made their way back to Draco and Padma, who were apparently talking about the other
Weasley spouses and their children. Draco was saying to Padma, "Tell me you're not going to have
children immediately after you get married."

She smiled. "I don't think so, no," she said, "but there isn't this line, you know, between the people
who have children and the people who don't."


Annie Weasley, who was about five and was the only one of Percy and Oliver's four adopted
children to have the Weasley ginger hair, ran up to them. "Hello, Aunt Padma," she said.

"Hello, Annie," Padma said, smiling. "I have a present for you."

"My song?" Annie's eyes widened. "It's done?" she asked.

"Yes, it's all finished," Padma replied.

Annie wriggled, grinning, and clapped her hands. "Will you sing it now?"

"Why don't you go ask your grandmother when would be a good time for music?" Padma said.

Annie nodded and ran back to the crowd. "Her song?" Draco asked.

"I said I'd write her a song for a birthday present, and she got to choose what it was about," Padma
replied. "I did the same for her older brother. I've worked up about ten children's songs now,
actually."
"And they're wonderful," Ginny said. "She played them for me the other day. I'm so glad you pursued this, Padma. Muggle children have loads of music and all we have are the same old songs our parents sang."

"How was writing for children?" Draco asked.

Padma shrugged. "For me, quite easy," she said. "Lots of puns and wordplay, not as much messy introspection. I dunno, I got tired of singing about my life and the lives of people around me. I found that I had a lot more to say about triangles than about my love life."

"Just as well," Ron said. "I got a bit paranoid for a while there, thinking all our fights would be sung about in a coffeehouse someplace!"

Padma laughed. "And what about you, Ginny?" she asked. "Speaking of pursuing things, have you decided?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm going to propose a travel section to Witch's Weekly. Now that we've mostly recovered from the war, I think people are ready to get out and see things again."

"And there's almost no wizarding travel books," Padma said. "It's all word of mouth."

"Yeah," Ginny said. "I just have to put together a pitch. You know, some spec pieces, talk about how it would fit into the magazine."

"Sounds like a lot of work," Ron said. "But it's good to have a new challenge."

"I know! I'm excited, and now—well, soon Draco won't be the only one doing the traveling. I've been so few places—really just India, and France and Spain but everyone goes there."

"I look forward to tagging along," Draco said. "More fringe benefits traveling with you than with Pansy."

Molly felt that some music would be just the thing to calm the children down a bit before dinner. Soon enough the ten or so cousins and second cousins of various ages were sitting on the grass in front of Padma, their parents standing at the back. Draco and Ginny and Ron stood off to the side. Ginny had seen Padma performing several times in various coffeehouses and little clubs around England, but she'd never seen her as relaxed as she was now. Most of the people at the gathering were strangers to her, and yet she was grinning and bouncing as she played her songs about playing with unicorns and getting the flu from the Floo. By the time she ended with "A Portkey Can Be Anything!" the kids were singing along with the chorus.

Oliver was the first to approach Padma when she was finished, hobbled slightly by a two-and-a-half year old toddler wrapped around his leg. Oliver had one hand at the boy's back, letting him ride along as his father walked.

Draco had apparently made friends with him earlier, as he immediately stooped down until he was at eye level with the solemn little boy.

"Hullo again," he said, lowering his voice, and the boy smiled back at him.

"That was fantastic, Padma!" Oliver said. "Annie is beside herself."

"Thank you!" Padma said. "She did give me a big hug for it."

"I was wondering, do you think you might be able to record it for her?" he asked.
Padma cocked her head. "I could. It's the same sort of charm as a Howler, after all, just refined. Funny, I've been making demo tapes for Muggles for so long I didn't even think about it. But of course, I'll send it to you within the week."

Oliver grinned. "Thanks so much!" he said, and went back over to help Percy wrangle their children to the buffet table.

"You know, Padma," Draco said, "you looked a great deal more comfortable just now than I've ever seen you."

"Oh, well," she said. "Kids are easy, I think."

Draco nodded. "And just like Ginny, you have an untapped market just waiting for your abilities, and I venture to guess that between all your future in-laws and their friends you'll reach most of the children in England. The wizards, that is."

"Well!" Ron said. "Something to think about, eh Padma? In the meantime, dinner!"

As they walked over to the buffet, Ginny said to Draco, "Looks like you made friends with my little nephew."

Draco shrugged. "I was just surprised to see a child without ginger hair," he said.

"Right," Ron said. "That must have been it."

"Or the general family atmosphere," he added. "What, you think I scowl at babies?"

Padma smiled at him. "Not lately," she said.
21 March 2002: Arusha, Tanzania

"God I hate these things," Ron said, tugging at the tight collar of his robes.

"Ron, stop fussing," Padma said. "You'll pull it out of shape."

"And now you know why I never became an Auror," Harry said. "It was bad enough right after the war, with the Ministry trotting me out at every opportunity, but Christ, for the rest of my life? To be sent in every time there was some kind of need for a heroic symbol? No thank you."

"That isn't why," Draco replied. "You couldn't hack the training."

Arusha was just large and diverse enough, particularly with all its diplomats from other parts of East Africa, for the wizards of the area to settle without attracting too much notice. It was in easy travel distance to both the Ukerewe Academy, on the shores of that great lake, and the port city of Dar Es Salaam. Wizards from all over East Africa came to the school, as the local wizarding population had always ignored the Muggle—or really, colonial—borders as much as feasible. The Ministry's annual spring fete on Ostara was the party of the diplomatic season.

"Yes, thank you for reminding me, Draco. Ministry training, much more physically stressful than being a professional athlete." Harry rolled his eyes.

"I didn't mean physically," Draco replied.

"Too right," Ron said.

"Boys!" Padma said.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Honestly, just undo your trousers and get it over with."

"Ugh," Pansy said. "Please don't."

"Oh no," Draco said. "I know how you girls talk, and I know that you know full well who would win that particular contest."

"That's right," Ron said.

"Not you, Weasley," Draco said, nodding across the room. "Him."

Pansy followed Draco's glance and saw Parvati Patil and Dean Thomas, walking toward them. "There she is again," Pansy said.

"She has an assignment here," Padma said. "She said she was bringing Dean along but I didn't realize it was this week."
"She has an assignment every time," Pansy said. Between her schedule and Parvati's she'd only seen seen her once, for lunch, since their Valentine's night and she still wasn't entirely sure what she thought about that.

"Fancy seeing you here," Parvati said.

"At this point you can't possibly be surprised," Pansy replied.

Parvati smiled slightly. "I assure you, I do go abroad for modeling assignments and not run into you and your chum."

"And this time you have a chum of your own," Pansy said.

"She got me in on the cheap," Dean said, smiling. "I've been taking pictures all day—a little less noticeable than sketching. Besides, the light is amazing."

"Dean," Hermione said, "you should come with us tomorrow. The Minister of Culture is giving us a private tour of the museum's collections, first thing in the morning before it opens. You too, Parvati, if you're available."

"How'd you rank that?" Dean asked.

"How do you think?" Harry grumbled.

"Oh god," Dean said, then leaned in and whispered, "Is he here?"

"Of course he is," Ron replied. "How do you think we got in?"

Dean's eyes narrowed. "What are you lot doing here, come to think of it?" he asked. "Draco and Pansy have been doing the circuit all year, but I've never known the rest of you—"

"We're here," Hermione said, "to ease the transition of this new era of Magical Cooperation. I have a personal connection as you know, and Ron is here to lay the groundwork for a better relationship between his department and the local Aurors."

"And I'm here because I can't stay home without supervision," Harry added.

"Oh Harry," Hermione sighed.

"What?" Harry asked. "It's the truth, and I'm not bitter over it. I got a trip to Africa out of it, after all."

"At any rate," Pansy said, "would you like to accompany us tomorrow for our museum tour?"

Dean turned to Parvati, who said, "My call time isn't until the afternoon, so yes, I'd love to come along. Thank you."

"Oh there he is," Ron said.

"Coming toward us?" Harry asked.

"Not yet, thank goodness," he replied.

"Be nice," Hermione said. "You know how clannish you two can be."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "You're calling them clannish?" he asked.
"Fine," she said, "all of us, but behave."

Pansy turned and saw a slender man in traditional African robes nodding to Hermione from across the room. "Who is this?" Pansy asked.

"Hermione's ex-boyfriend Theodor," Draco said. "Our official contact. He doesn't like Ron or Harry because he thought they brought Hermione down from the academic heights she should have been scaling, so Ron and Harry very maturely don't like him back."

"Also," Dean muttered, "he has a truly impressive stick up his arse."

As the man approached Hermione was all smiles, unfortunate as she didn't have a particularly charming fake one. "Theodor," she said, extending her hand. "Lovely to see you again."

Theodor shook her hand. "And you, Hermione."

"Thank you so much for all you've done for us," she said.

"Of course. Anything in the name of international magical cooperation," he said, entirely unconvincingly. "So what are you doing these days?"

Hermione cocked her head. "I'm writing my thesis," she replied.

"Oh really?" he asked. "I thought that might have been abandoned in the wake of, well, recent events." He glanced at Harry.

"Not at all," Hermione said. "Salem is an excellent place to research my topic—I'm still writing about the effect of first contact on indigenous magical traditions—and Draco's been kind enough to lend us a cottage in Maine."

"I see. And how is that research coming?"

"Very well, thank you," she replied. "I'm writing now. Harry's been a great help. He does know his way around a library."

"It's good to have marketable skills," Harry said. "I should use you as a reference."

"Yes, how are you, Harry?" Theodor said. "Good to see you out and about."

Harry shook his hand. "Good to be out and about, thank you," he replied.

"Will you be joining us on our mountain trek?" Theodor asked.

"I'm afraid I can't," Harry replied. "But thank you for the invitation."

"Why not?" Theodor said, looking Harry up and down. "You certainly look fit enough for it."

"Fitness isn't the issue," Harry replied. "The ... mediwizards feel that it's a bit soon for me to be going into low-oxygen environments."

"Oh of course, of course," Theodor replied, smiling smugly. "Wouldn't want to jeopardize your recovery."

"Thank you for understanding," Harry said dryly.

"Theodor," Hermione said, sounding eager to change the subject, "you remember Ron and Padma,
and Dean, and Draco, and Parvati. This is Draco's friend Pansy Parkinson."

He shook her hand. "Welcome to Tanzania, Ms. Parkinson," he said. "I hope you're enjoying your stay in our country."

She smiled. "It's certainly been entertaining so far," she said.

The museum tour the next morning was fine as far as it went. They all kept a sharp eye out for anything that resembled the Seal of Solomon, but it was Parvati who made a beeline for it, and she hadn't even known to look. The art was beautiful, as well, and after having spent the better part of a year researching Hermione's thesis, Harry felt that he had a little more context for what he was seeing, a little more ability to understand magical traditions not his own.

After lunch Harry was inclined to just go up to his room while the others went to the mountain. They were renting a villa for the week; cheaper than a hotel and apparently the done thing among those who came into the city for the many Ostara parties, and the nice part was that they could move Dean and Parvati into it as soon as they heard they were in town. He had a book and the villa had a fine view of the mountain, and he could have a quiet afternoon to himself; being around all these people after the relative isolation of Maine was making him a bit claustrophobic.

But Hermione said, "I know you, Harry Potter, and it does no good to brood."

"We could go for a walk about the city," Pansy suggested.

"You're not going on the trek?" Harry asked.

"Please," she said. "Parkinsons do not climb mountains."

"Neither do Malfoys," Draco said.

"Which is precisely why you're doing it," Pansy replied.

"Point," Draco admitted, nodding.

"You could come to the shoot, if you like," Parvati suggested. "Lots of the models have entourages, and you both know how to stay out of the way."

Pansy turned to Harry. "Would that interest you?" she asked.

Harry cocked his head. "Yes, I'll definitely turn down an opportunity to watch a group of beautiful women getting their picture taken."

"Oh Harry," Hermione said. "Honestly, Parvati isn't an object to be ogled."

"I am when I'm on the clock," Parvati replied. "So is that a yes?"

"Absolutely," Harry replied.

Harry was in pretty good spirits when Theodor came to the villa to pick up the others; though he tried to get snotty again, Harry just smiled and nodded and was the bigger man. Well, figuratively. But at least Hermione wasn't scowling at him.

A car came to pick them up, and they were whisked off to the base of the mountain where Harry could see that lights and cameras and a few tents were already set up. Parvati arranged for seats for her guests that were out of the way but had a clear view of the shoot, then went off to the makeup
trailer, leaving Harry and Pansy to their own devices. Harry squirmed in the canvas chair as he realized that he’d never actually been with Pansy when Draco wasn’t there, and had no idea what to say to her.

Pansy, as usual, looked entirely in her element, comfy in linen trousers with large sunglasses obscuring most of her face. "I suppose a word of thanks is in order," she said.

Harry blinked. "For what, exactly?"

"For letting Draco bring me in on this," she replied. "I know it was nearly four years ago now, but I never had the opportunity to thank you for going along with him. Having this job," she paused, taking a sip of water from the bottle in her lap. "It's meant a great deal to me."

Harry shrugged. "It was a good idea," he said. "Anyway, my opinion didn't mean that much. You underestimate Draco's influence."

"And you underestimate your own," Pansy replied, "which is typical Gryffindor behavior, I know, but you needn't be so reflexive about it."

"I'm just a boy whose mother loved him."

"A very powerful boy, you mean." Pansy turned to him. "What's it like?"

"What's what like?"

"The power."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Honestly?"

"Yes."

Parvati was standing near the wardrobe tent, her hair in some sort of styling contraption on top of her head. "It's kind of like Parvati," he said. "She doesn't have anything to do with how beautiful she is. That's genes, mostly. But what she does with it, keeping herself in shape and knowing how to work with the camera and with the other people here, that part is her. So the power, that isn't me, but what I do with it is."

"You sound like the old man," Pansy said, shaking her head.

"Dumbledore had his faults," Harry replied, mildly; by now he was used to the dismissive name Slytherins used for his mentor. "But he was right about most things. Besides, he knew what it was like, first-hand."

"So that's it?" she asked. "Great responsibility? No fun?"

"Maybe a little too much fun at one point," Harry said. "And there's the hum, but I've always had that."

"The hum?"

"Yeah, under my skin. It gets stronger around certain objects; I can feel it the power coming off them in waves. I didn't even realize it until I found out no one else felt it. Well, Parvati does sometimes; she did today."

"I heard you two whispering about that," Pansy said. "So she's powerful, too?"
"No," Harry said. "But Snape said she's the most sensitive divination student Trelawney has ever seen."

"Huh," Pansy replied. "You know she's been turning up whenever we've gone out to make a connection."

"Yeah, I was wondering about that," Harry said, "and after being in that museum with her today, I think it's the objects. She went right to the ring, did you notice? I think it attracted her, somehow."

"You mean, she's interested in them?" Pansy asked.

"No," Harry said. "The objects are actually pulling her to these places. Magic does that, sometimes, when one is open to it."

"So for some reason, she needs to be nearby when we get the object."

"I think so," Harry said. "But I don't know why."

"Shouldn't we ask her?"

"I don't think she'd know," Harry said. "Dumbledore always said that divination was unconscious, and that one shouldn't allow anything to get in its way, including the diviner. He never told Trelawney about her own prophecy; Snape did, later. But I don't know. That might be one of the things he got wrong."

"I vote for telling her," Pansy said firmly. "That is, if I do have a vote. Keeping her in the dark sounds old-fashioned and sexist and all sorts of prejudiced. She's a diviner, not a child."

Harry smiled. "I'm sure she'd be pleased to hear you defending her," he said, and resisted the urge to wink.


"You probably should know, if you hadn't guessed, that this is a close-knit group," he said. "Parvati told Dean, Dean told Seamus, Seamus told Hermione, Hermione told me, I told Ron, Ron probably talked to Padma, who I would guess said something to Ginny, who was then likely annoyed with Draco for not telling her, assuming that you told him about it yourself."

"Parvati told you what?" Pansy asked.

"Told us about your evening with her on Valentine's Day," Harry said. "It's like a bush telegraph, only faster."

Pansy scowled. "You're a lot of gossips, is what you're saying, then?"

"Basically," Harry replied. "You'll get used to it. Or not."

"And does everyone know what I'm actually doing out here?" she asked. "Parvati doesn't."

"Neither do Dean or Seamus," he said, "though really, I wonder if we shouldn't tell them. I know it's supposed to be all secrets but, well, not to put too fine a point on it, I used to be much more secretive and I don't think it always led me to the best decisions."

"That's a very enlightened observation," Pansy said, cocking her head.

"Ten months of intensive therapy will do that to a man," Harry replied.
Parvati walked over to them then, having finished with hair and makeup. Her skin was coated with some kind of oil to make it gleam in the sunlight, and her hair was straight and shiny as well, and floated in the breeze like a flag. She wore what looked to Harry like a leotard with a belt and a skirt made of ribbons with shoes that should have been impossible to walk in, but Parvati was striding toward them across the uneven ground as though she were wearing trainers.

"Well, Harry, what do you think?" she asked.

"Is that all of it?"

Parvati looked down. "A top and a skirt isn't enough?"

"I think it's quite nice," Pansy said, "though I dread these shredded skirts hitting the streets in London."

"Really?" Harry asked. "I don't."

"Don't get too excited," Parvati said. "Most women will wear this with tights and boots, not bare legs and four-inch heels."

Harry shrugged. "Sometimes it's what you don't see," he said.

Pansy shook her head. "Say, Parvati, will you have some free nights, when we're back in London?"

"Sure," Parvati said, nodding. "My next travel assignment isn't for a week or so. Why?"

"Oh, I just thought we might get dinner."

Parvati smiled. "I'd like that."

"Great," Pansy replied.

A young man came running up. "Parvati, we're ready for you now," he said.

"Right, well," Parvati said, "I'll talk to you a bit."

They watched her walk away, and after a moment, Pansy said, "We can just announce that at dinner tonight."

"Announce what?" Harry asked.

"You know, that I asked Parvati on another date," she said primly. "I could also send a note to Ginny and Seamus, as they aren't here with us. That way you'll all know at the same time."

Harry started to laugh. "And rob me of the triumph of knowing before everyone else? I don't think so."

"You know, Harry, there is a difference between being a secret agent and being a gossip."

"Not one I've noticed," Harry replied.

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London

Strange how Seamus had been back in London for less than a year and already Dean's being away
for a few days felt wrong. There just weren't that many things that he couldn't do when Dean was around. He already lounged around the flat nude as often as he wanted and the neighbors would become angry if he played music too loud anyway. Really, even though they lived together, they had strange enough schedules that they each had alone time as it was, so now all Seamus felt was the loss of a large, warm, solid body wrapped around him as he went to sleep. Pillows were no substitute.

Cooking for himself was a drag, so he was pleased that Ginny had invited herself over for dinner since Draco was out of town as well. Odd, that; Parvati had been saying that she kept running into Pansy while she was out on her modeling assignments and now Dean would see it first-hand. Ginny brought one of her excellent pies, which Seamus was glad of as he was shit at baking, and they stood in the kitchen talking and drinking wine as Seamus whipped up a simple pasta and salad dinner.

"Things are still good?" Ginny was asking. "With Dean, I mean?"

Seamus grinned. "Yeah. Went to dinner with some friends of his just before he left on his trip and managed not to cringe all night or pout when we got home even though he did use the word 'darling' three times in five minutes. I am inordinately proud of myself."

"As well you should be," she replied.

"And you?" Seamus asked. "Ready to be the mistress of Malfoy Manor now?"

"Well, not right now. But it is a nice house." She ran a finger along the countertop. "I suppose I could bake pies there."

"Draco's Aunt Andromeda talks about pies on the wireless," Seamus pointed out.

"She's a black sheep."

"And Draco isn't?"

Ginny cocked her head. "I suppose with his father not around I don't think about it that way, but you're right."

"Anyway I expect that if you start baking pies at Malfoy Manor it will become fashionable," Seamus said. "That's how it was at school."

"School isn't wizarding society," Ginny said, "and baking pies isn't the same as some silly mania for fish necklaces."

Seamus smiled. "Not so different," he said, noticing that she still wore the necklace that Draco had given her years ago.

"Well, I'm thinking about it," she said, in a tone that meant the subject was closed. She paused, then asked, "St. Mungo's?"

"Still exists, which is a miracle, according to Dean," Seamus said. He pulled out a strand of tagliatelle and broke it in two, handing half to Ginny. "Done?"

"Yeah," Ginny said, nodding.

Seamus drained the pasta into the sink. "So I've been thinking about private practice," he said. "Keeping people well instead of just seeing them when they're sick. I like the idea of having regular patients."
"I'm sure you'd do well," she said. "What sort of practice?"

"Well," he replied, as he stirred the pasta into the simmering sauce, "Adams is getting on in years."

Ginny raised her eyebrows at the name of the mediwizard they'd all gone to when they were young. "Children? Really?"

"Why not?" he asked. "Start good habits early, help out Pomfrey when she needs it, and I'm certain I can give a better sex lecture than Adams did."

"Ugh," she said, rolling her eyes. "That was torture."

"I'm going to ghost him for a few weeks, see how it goes," he said, shrugging. "I've just—with the war and all, I've done enough trauma care to last a lifetime. I need to walk away before I burn out."

"You sound like Harry. Or Padma."

"Padma?"

"Oh, you know, the songs for children."

"Oh, right," Seamus said, nodding. "Well, we'll see. And you? What did your editor say about your proposal?" He dished up pasta for himself and Ginny, and brought them over to the table, Ginny following with the salad.

"I'm to give her some articles, on spec," she replied, "which means travel. Can't write a travel article about Diagon Alley."

"Ooh, where will you go?"

Ginny pushed her shoulders back a bit. "I'm going to ask Draco to take me to the May Day party in Sweden."

"Really?" Seamus said, raising an eyebrow.

"What?" she asked.

"Well, not five minutes ago you were doubting your ability to bake pies in Malfoy Manor, as if it were some crime against the class structure, and now you're going to one of those high society circuit parties? Talk about going into the belly of the beast."

"Huh," Ginny said. "I wasn't actually thinking about it that way; I was thinking oh, I can go away to this party with Draco and get a good article out of it. You know, anthropological."

"Like that time you and Parvati and Padma tried out for that girl group?"

"Exactly!" Ginny said. "And I'm going to ask Parvati to make me a dress."

"Well, a new dress, any excuse for that," Seamus said, winking.

Ginny laughed and they were silent for a bit after that, eating. "This is very good, Seamus," she said.

"Thanks," he replied. "It's the pasta water in the sauce that does it."

"You know," she said thoughtfully, "Harry killed the basilisk by shoving the sword of Gryffindor down its throat."
Seamus blinked at the non sequitur, then tracked their conversation back in his head and realized she was talking about the May Day party. "Are you the sword in this scenario?" he asked.

"No, I'm Harry," she said. "But maybe the dress is the sword."

Padma sat out on the patio of the villa, staring up at the mountain she'd been at the top of only that afternoon. It was the first time so many of them had been in the same place at the same time and it was less awkward than she'd feared. When she found out Harry would be in Africa she insisted Ron bring her along, as he and Harry hadn't been together much at all since Harry had been in recovery and while Ron trusted him (and always had), Padma didn't, quite.

Harry, though, was open and honest and self-deprecating, almost the opposite of the way he'd been just after the war. Hermione had said he was back to who he'd been at school, but Padma couldn't imagine that, since he'd been so driven by revenge and destiny. She was glad she'd come and seen for herself that he'd made himself into something else, maybe something closer to the boy he might have been had he not been so busy being the Boy Who Lived.

And then, as if summoned by her thoughts, Harry sat down next to her and said, "You really should tell him, you know." He, too, had his eyes on the mountain.

"Tell him what?" Padma asked, though she knew full well what he was talking about.

"About our lunch," Harry said. "It's going to come out, and sooner rather than later."

"What makes you say that?"

"Ginny," Harry said. "Apparently some accolyte of Rita Skeeter is working on an unauthorized bio. Shouldn't take too much investigation to find out that you were the mysterious woman I was having lunch with a few days before I was carted off to McCormack last spring. You know, when I threw the chair into the koi pond."

"Ah, yes," Padma said.

"I behaved badly," Harry said. "You were entirely right, of course. I'm sorry."

"You've already apologized for the things you did."

"Not for that day, because we haven't been alone, and no one else knows." Harry turned then, as did Padma, and she saw that old determined look in his eye.

"All right," she said. "I will."

"Good," Harry said.

Padma smiled at him. "It's good to have you back, Harry."

"Thanks," he replied. "It's good to be back."

She took his hand and they sat there together, looking up at the mountain.

A bit later—Padma wasn't sure how long—Ron came out onto the patio, Hermione with him. "There you two are," he said. "Trying to steal my girl, are you?"

"Always," Harry said. "Never."
Before Padma knew it, the words were spilling out of her mouth. "I need to tell you something, Ron."

She could see Harry staring at her, surprised, out of the corner of her eye. Ron looked unfazed. "You aren't pregnant, are you?" he asked. "Not that you'd be showing much on the wedding day but your mother—"

"I'm not pregnant," she said.

"Right, well," Ron said, sitting down opposite her. "What is it, then?"

"Well," she said, and paused, not sure how to start.

Harry squeezed her hand, and she turned to him and he smiled, just a little, and nodded.

"You know that ruckus Harry raised at the restaurant, just before the intervention?"

"I remember," Ron said. "You pushed a table into a lake or something?"

"Chair into a koi pond," Harry said. "It was a sushi restaurant."

"Ah. Right, so what of it?"

"He was at lunch with me," she said.

"Really? Why? I mean, not that you couldn't have lunch with Harry if you wanted to, but you weren't exactly his biggest fan at that time."

"No," she said. "I wasn't. That's why I asked him to have lunch."

"What do you mean?"

Padma sat up a bit straighter. "I told him to stay away from you."

"You did what?" Ron asked, standing up.

"After the incident with the airplane—really, having to obliviate over a hundred passengers, you thought you could keep his name out of that entirely?"

"I did a good job of it!" Ron insisted.

"Yes, but at what cost to you?"

"I was getting along just fine, thank you."

"No you weren't," Padma said, and stood up, letting go of Harry's hand. "You were distracted, only half there most of the time."

"And you couldn't come to me with this?"

"I did!" Padma shouted. "I did, and you said there was nothing to worry about. And I knew that I couldn't ask you to stop helping him. He's your friend. So I asked him to be a friend to you, and stop asking you to cover up his mistakes."

"You didn't think I could have done that?"

"You could have," Padma said, "but you never would have."
Ron started pacing. Padma glanced at the doorway and saw all their other friends had made their way onto the patio, probably had come out once the shouting had started. Well, it wasn't as though she had secrets from any of them, anyway.

"What did you say to him?" Ron asked.

"I told him that I'd played Quidditch at one time, too, and I knew what he was doing," she said. "And that if he wanted to be your friend, he needed to keep it away from you, and stop taking advantage."

"And you, Harry?"

"Oh, I denied it," Harry said. "And then I got defensive. And then I tried to convince her that I hadn't been doing anything at all. But she just sat there, implacable, and told me to stay away from you. So I got angry and threw the chair into the pond and stormed out. Not my … best moment, I confess."

"Implacable, eh?" Ron asked.

"I was fighting for you," Padma said. "I had to be. But it was all for nothing, anyway."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Harry said. "After I calmed down, I realized you were right and resolved to keep Ron out of it. Not sure that would have lasted long—not many of my resolutions did, those days—but it did have an effect on me."

"You didn't think about quitting?" Ron asked.

"I had tried before, for someone else," Harry said, "and it didn't stick. So no. I didn't think I was capable of that." He paused, then went on, "Besides, that little episode led to the Witch Weekly piece which led to Ginny sounding the alarm and Draco organizing the intervention and my being sent to McCormack and getting myself together. So you could say that Padma asking me to lunch that day led me to quit, after all."

Ron nodded, then turned to Padma. "I wish you'd told me."

"I know. I'm sorry," she said. "I just—it seemed like it was all for naught, and it was only a week later that he was in hospital anyway. But I should have told you, at least after he went in. Or after you started your meetings. I just didn't know how."

"So why now?"

"Harry thought I should, and I agreed."

"I'm not as interested in keeping secrets as I used to be," Harry said. "I think I got a little too used to being secretive. I'm better about that now."

Ron let out a long breath, then looked up at Padma. "Come here," he said, and pulled her into his arms. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," she said, and lay her head on his shoulder.

"All right?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said. "Yeah, I'm all right."

"Good," Ron said, pulling back slightly. "Because my comedy program starts on the wireless in, oh,
twenty minutes? And I think we could all use a laugh."

Padma giggled, wiping her eyes. "I think so, too," she said, and she and the others followed Ron back inside the villa.

Hermione touched Harry's arm before he went through the door. "Yes?" he asked.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "It's been a stressful day."

"I'm okay, thanks," Harry said. "Well, I'm actually a little shaky, but I'll be fine. Looking forward to my visit to the local rehab center tomorrow a little bit more now, I'll admit. I was supposed to encourage them but I'm pretty sure they'll end up helping me more."

"Good, I'm glad you're going," Hermione said, smiling. "So, can I ask you a question?"

Harry cocked his head. "When did I try to quit, before?"

"Yeah."

"After the Euro Cup," Harry said. "I had this lovely afternoon with an old friend, and I thought maybe if I quit, I could convince her to have some more of those lovely afternoons. But I couldn't do it, even for her. And after that I stopped trying." He put his hand over hers. "Is that what you wanted to know?"

"It's the truth," Hermione said. "I always want to know the truth."
May Day

Chapter Summary

Harry makes good on his promises.

*1 May 2002: Korallgrottan, Sweden*

"She's really managed to keep the dress a secret from you?" Pansy asked.

"We don't live together, and Ginny can keep her mouth shut when she wants to," Draco replied. "I presume you've seen it."

Pansy nodded. "Parvati was working on it when I went in for my final fitting," she said.

"I do like this new suit she made you," Draco said. "Brown is a good color for you."

"Thank you," Pansy replied.

"So, formal date," Draco said, raising his eyebrows.

"I don't know how I feel about her!" Pansy said. "Stop asking."

"I didn't say anything," he replied, smirking.

"No, but you're thinking it."

"I've just never seen you go out on this many dates with anyone."

"We've only been out four times since Africa," Pansy said.

"Which was only six weeks ago!" Draco said.

"She's different," Pansy said. She cocked her head. "You're not going to become one of those tiresome people who reacts to his own settling down by urging all of his friends to settle down, are you?"

"Have I ever done anything as tiresome as urge you to settle down?" Draco asked. "Would I?"

"Well, no, but—"

"But nothing. You just seem happy, is all."

"Well," Pansy said, "she doesn't bore me."

"Good. Keeps you out of trouble."

Pansy crossed her arms. "Nice."

"I'm serious," he replied. "A bored Pansy is a dangerous Pansy, and you've been that way since you were four."
Draco braced himself for whatever Pansy was about to throw back at him, but that was the moment that Parvati and Ginny appeared at the top of the stairs. He could see Parvati holding Ginny back just a touch, getting her to pause and pose on the landing before moving slowly down the stairs. Model know-how, to be sure, but also something Draco had noticed at society parties where witches would make sure that everyone had seen them in their new formal robes. Parvati had done a lovely job with Ginny's, of course—a deeply plunging bit of silk in antique brass that echoed the masses of freckles on Ginny's arms and chest and complimented her red-gold hair.

"You look incredible," Draco said. "You're going to make every last one of them jealous."

Ginny smiled. "Thank you," she said. "I hope so."

Draco laughed, pleased at how much more relaxed Ginny was than she'd been at his own party. He'd gone to Pansy immediately after, wondering if she could help Ginny with her anxiety about wizarding society, but Pansy pointed out that neither of them really could; they were too immersed in it to see what Ginny saw. The Patil girls, though, seemed to have done the trick. Parvati was a Gryffindor, and had had a Muggleborn best friend, so she'd been building that bridge since she was eleven, and Padma was seeing it all from the other side as she settled into her life with Ron. When Ginny asked Draco to bring her on this trip she'd been her old, confident, determined self.

But Pansy would be helpful tonight; after all, she'd been surrounded by the upper echelons of wizardry during her time in exile, and these holiday parties were the white-hot center of international wizarding society. Draco was glad that she'd asked Parvati to the party as her date, so Parvati could help out without being any the wiser about why they were there. Not to mention that Pansy was always just a little calmer when Parvati was around.

This year the May Day party was in a marble cavern covered in flowers that seemed to grow right out of the fissures, with balls of glowing light floating near the ceiling. They made quite a figure walking in together, even if Draco did say so himself, and he could see the others taking note. Even if Ginny hadn't looked top-notch in her gown she would have created a sensation, as Draco had been going to these parties for almost a year now, and the rarely-mentioned girl at home was a mystery. Oh, the facts about Ginny could be easily obtained, of course—Gryffindor, entertainment journalist, of impoverished background, fought with valor in the Second War—but they wanted to know none of that.

"Just pretend it's another Patil New Year," Parvati was saying. "The conversation is much the same, just gossip and a very small amount of business. Don't answer any questions you don't want to—you're so good at that anyway—and laugh when someone is inappropriate. Let Draco cut them, if he wants to."

"And I won't leave you alone," Draco said.

Ginny took a deep breath, and exhaled; only someone who knew her well would be able to see any trace of nerves. "Well," she said. "Let's plunge in."

"No," Pansy said, holding her back with just a touch to her elbow. "Let them come to you."

Ginny smiled slowly, that devious little grin that was Draco's favorite. "All right," she said. "Shall we stand near that little table in the corner?"

Pansy was right; they did come to her, slowly at first but then in waves, as if choreographed. Most of them were perfectly nice, especially when they heard that Ginny was moving into travel writing, and she took away many names as references for other locales should she choose to write about them "correctly." To them Ginny was her usual warm self, laughing and asking questions and taking an
interest generally, so much so that many of them didn't realize that they'd gained very little new information about Ginny, only a general sense of liking her. Some, of course, were less kind; to them she responded with an icy politeness Draco had seen from her only on very rare occasions, and they fled from her presence so quickly it was as if she'd personally dismissed them.

And then there was Queenie Greengrass. When they were younger only Pansy could reliably put Queenie back into her place, and he was very glad indeed that Pansy was still with them, Parvati at her side. Pansy had had a lot of practice; back when it was assumed that he and Pansy would eventually marry, Queenie and her mother had done a good amount of maneuvering to get Draco for Queenie, and Pansy had insisted on being the one to push her back. Draco had been mostly amused; he knew that he was a prize on the wizarding marriage market but to campaign so openly was a bit much.

Draco had at least been prepared for her presence, as Queenie was Pansy's contact for the May Day mission; the Draupnir was safely stowed away in Pansy's belongings. Odd, their secret adversary choosing Queenie; his other choices had been, like Pansy, people who had managed to never quite take sides. But Queenie's loyalties had been very clearly on the side of You-Know-Who during the war, though unlike some of her classmates (poor Millicent for one) Queenie had got other people to do her fighting, such that when the smoke cleared there were no crimes they could actually charge her with. She was a slick one, Draco would give her that much.

"My goodness," Queenie said as she approached them, "is it Old Student Days and no one told me? Hullo, Parks, don't you look … fashionable. And you've brought your pretty mannequin with you, how nice. You always did have an eye for balance."

"Thank you, Greenie," Pansy said. "Not sure you have the same eye; you're looking a bit lopsided there."

Queenie's long blonde hair was piled atop her head into some sort of odd shape that had to be deliberate, but did look as though it was listing dangerously to starboard. "That's the desired effect, darling," she replied. "Charmed to stay up, of course."

"Of course," Pansy replied. "And you know Parvati."

"Been seeing you in the fashion mags," Queenie said, shaking her hand in the approved society manner of a light squeeze of the fingertips. "Which one of those designers you work with lent you that fabulous gown?"

"Oh, I made it myself," Parvati said. "Along with Ginny's, and Pansy's suit that you were just admiring."

"Well, she sews, too!" Queenie said. "The complete package. I might have expected that of Weasley, but not a Miss Bridgerton girl. But Weasley's skills run more to darning socks and replacing buttons, I should think. Good thing you have a boyfriend to buy clothes for you."

Draco scowled, but Ginny was smiling. "Actually, Queenie, I make my own money, and bought this dress myself. You seem to think that just because I have something you want, that I want it for the same reasons. But I don't want Draco for his money." She turned to him. "I want him for his body."

Draco tried not to laugh, but failed. "I should hope so," he said.

"I would expect a Weasley to be vulgar, but not you, Draco," Queenie said with a sniff. "I'm not sure your mother would be proud of your current associations."
"Really?" Draco asked. "I think she would."

"So do I," Pansy said. "She always did like a girl with claws."

"And your father?" Queenie asked.

"Given that my father was buried under three tons of Miss Bridgerton's Academy when it collapsed, I'm quite all right with dismissing any feelings he might have had on the matter," Draco said.

Ginny extended her hand. "Cousin, let's shake hands and call a truce. We're going to see a lot of each other at these sorts of functions, and it would be childish to keep sniping at each other like this."

Queenie widened her eyes and stared at Ginny. "Cousin?"

"Your mother was a Prewett and so was mine," Ginny said. "And with the war and all, the blood traitor business seems a bit silly now, doesn't it?"

"It's gone right out of style," Parvati said.

Queenie looked around to the group she'd brought with her and, finding no one was about to speak up for her, took Ginny's hand. "Very well," she said, "but I don't have to like you."

"No," Ginny replied, "let's not rush into anything."

Queenie sniffed again, and then walked away, her head held high, though the effect was somewhat mitigated by the sideways sway of her hair.

"Well," Ginny said, "that wasn't so bad, actually."

"I'd say very well done," Pansy said.

Parvati grinned. "I'd say we have a new May Queen."

Draco wrapped an arm around Ginny's waist. "So would I," he said, "and I'm her lucky escort."

7 May: London

"You're sure you want to do this?" Ron asked.

"Very," Harry replied.

"It's a bit late to back out now, anyway," Hermione said. "You've already asked them to come here."

"And with no details," Draco said. "Can't imagine what they might be thinking."

"They must know it's about all of this," Ginny said.

"I certainly hope they do," Pansy said, "or my presence in a meeting room at the Ministry would be a great surprise."

Harry had requested—and been granted, as he was, well, Harry Potter—a small room adjacent to the large Ministry dining hall. He'd told Ron that he was done with all the secret-keeping, back in Africa, and as Hermione had handed in her thesis, the two of them could come to London and be part of telling their other friends what all the traveling had been about. Ron was dubious, but he wasn't the
lead on the case. That role went to Draco, who quite agreed with Harry.

And anyway, they'd got to a place where some additional hands, battle-hardened if not Auror-trained, would be welcome.

Padma walked in then, with her sister, Seamus, and Dean in tow. Padma knew, of course; she'd known since shortly after Ron had taken the case, which was good for Ginny because it gave her a friend with whom she could speak freely, what with Hermione in the States tending to Harry. Ron thought it was rather nice how close his sister and his fiancée had become in the last year or so. They certainly seemed to calm each other's anxieties, something Ron had never been particularly good at for either of them.

Once everyone was seated, Ron sat up a bit straighter in his chair. "Right," he said, trying to look business-like. "Harry, would you like to start, since you called this meeting?"

Harry nodded. "A few months after the war ended, someone started contacting witches and wizards who, well, let's say had managed to avoid choosing a side in the war itself, hinting at the opportunity to be part of something bigger and better than the Death Eaters had ever been. You know, without the disadvantage of being led by a psychopath seeking immortality."

"We started hearing rumors about this as we were picking up the last of the resistance," Draco said. "So I sent a message to the one person I knew in that position who I hoped I could trust."

"I wanted to come home and make amends," Pansy said, "Seemed to me that Millie died for absolutely nothing, and I was angry. I told Draco I was happy to help in any way I could."

Seamus cocked his head. "So that's why you two started going around together," he said.

"Yes," Draco replied. "Ginny knew the broad outlines—such as why I was spending so much time with Pansy—but none of the details."

Pansy said, "A few weeks later, I got my first letter. They were never signed, but they gave clear instructions and rewards. I knew some of the others who'd received letters, but not all. We didn't do much; mostly looked up information and sent it to our mysterious leader."

"Wherever this leader was hiding, there weren't many libraries, apparently," Draco said.

"At any rate," Harry said, "that first bit of activity led to the events at the Euro Cup—the Dark Mark projection, capturing Draco, all of that."

Parvati looked at Pansy. "That's why I saw you with those people at the stadium," she said. "You were working with the Aurors even then?"

"I was," Pansy said. "But the whole thing had been mucked up—a complete farce. I managed to get Draco out in the chaos and still keep my cover."

"Up until then, it had been my case," Draco said. "And Harry's, unofficially. But with everything that happened, Sirius decided we'd better bring some more people on the case."

"Since Parvati had already come to me with her suspicions about Pansy, and I had started asking questions," Ron said, "it was easiest to bring me in."

"Did you know about this, Hermione?" Seamus asked.

"Not until much later," she replied. "After Harry went to rehab at McCormick, Ron finally told me."
"That was one of our first mistakes, not asking for Hermione's help," Harry said. "But Sirius was always in favor of secrecy, especially that he was retaining me as a kind of unofficial consultant while I was playing Quidditch."

"Of course once I was brought in," Ron said, "the whole case went dead."

"That's why you were so angry that autumn," Dean said to Draco.

"To have the whole thing slip through my hands," Draco said, "and on top of that, have Weasley brought in to help me? It was a disaster."

"Their disaster," Ginny said. "Not yours."

"Well, I know that now," Draco said. "I took other cases, and after a while I thought that we'd never find out who had been behind it all."

Pansy said, "And I took a job in the Ministry, working for Remus Lupin in International Magical Cooperation."

"But if you've called us here," Seamus said, "it must have picked up again."

"I finally got another letter this past September," Pansy said.

Parvati looked up sharply. "Lammas?" she asked.

"I think it was, yes," Pansy replied. "Why?"

"It was Lammas, wasn't it," Dean said, "when you were in our flat and you fainted."

"But why is this important?" Ron asked. "Mightn't it be a coincidence?"

Parvati shook her head. "I didn't just faint—it was as though all my magical energy left me in a rush, and then came back. I spoke to Trelawney soon after that and she agreed that it meant that someone had set the first half of my prophecy into action, which meant that I'd get the second half soon."

"Second half?" Hermione asked.

"See," Dean said, shaking his finger, "the things you don't learn when you drop Divination? Prophecies come in two halves. The second half is revealed when someone begins to put the first half into effect. They don't always come to the same person, the way that Trelawney's did about Harry; that happened because Voldemort acted on her prophecy immediately. But they can sit for decades, even centuries, until someone finds them and starts to follow them. Trelawney always thought Parvati would get one of these leftover second halves, and she was right."

"It makes sense, that the secret adversary found a prophecy," Pansy said. "We have been very clearly directed since then."

"Directed to do what, exactly?" Seamus asked.

Hermione opened her notebook. "Before each holiday since Lammas, a letter has come directing Pansy to the local of the wizarding society parties. There, an artifact important to the local magical tradition is stolen by one of the secret adversary's other contacts and given to Pansy, who's charged with smuggling the artifact into England using her Ministry credentials. A facsimile is created with all appropriate charms, and placed into the vault at Gringotts. The artifact itself is kept here at the Ministry, and Remus works to smooth over relations with the home country."
"The cuff in India," Parvati said. "And the crown in Mexico. And the armor in Chile. And more I probably don't even know about."

"Solomon's Ring in Tanzania," Draco said, "an Aboriginal shield in Australia, and Odin's Draupnir last week."

"No wonder you were always there, Parvati." Pansy said. "It was your prophecy we all were acting out. Or rather, the one connected to you."

"Well, given that, it shouldn't be difficult to find out what it says," Harry said. "And the Ministry is a good place to start."

Parvati shook her head. "I came here first thing, last fall, trying to find it myself, and it's not here." she said. "I'd know; I'd feel it."

"Only the prophecies made here in Britain are at the Ministry, though," Dean said. "Maybe we've come to the time to go through the international records in the library at Hogwarts, since we know better what we're looking for."

Hermione said, "Harry and I are headed up there tomorrow anyway, so we can start poking around for it. I don't know how much help Trelawney can be, but—"

"Oh really, Hermione," Parvati said. "It's all an act, didn't you know that?"

"How do you think Snape could have been fucking her all this time if it wasn't?" Draco asked.

"Snape and Trelawney?" Hermione asked. She turned to Harry.

He shrugged. "I thought you knew! Anyway we should bring Parvati, since she'll know it when she sees it."

"I'm coming, too," Dean said. "I'm actually familiar with reading these things."

9 May 2002: Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Dean hadn't been back to Hogwarts since the war; he didn't think any of them had other than Harry. It was always a little unsettling how quickly magical buildings recovered from destruction; London certainly hadn't been so fortunate after the Second World War. But here, very little seemed to have changed, save some additional names on a memorial plaque somewhere. And it really hadn't been that long, even if many things had occurred in the interim. The students looked younger, but that happened every year.

Trelawney's tower room, at least, didn't seem much different, nor the library, where he'd spent most of the day searching through various recorded prophecies for ones that mentioned, or could be interpreted to refer to, either the solar holidays when the transfers took place, or the artifacts themselves. It was mind-numbing work, reading carefully enough to catch anything relevant but not waste time on dead ends. Hermione, of course, was in her element, and provided some needed structure to their research, so they weren't just searching through everything blindly. Dean had never been one for research, at least in books, though he could look through photo and art archives all day long. So this wasn't exactly playing to his strengths.

Now Dean and Harry were bedding down again at the Hogsmeade Inn, room 204 for sentiment's sake; the girls were down the hall. The decor had changed but the view from the window had not, and Dean sat in the window seat lazily sketching while Harry was in the shower.
"I thought you hated drawing buildings," Harry said, as he emerged from the washroom.

"That's why I'm doing it now," he replied. "And I thought you hated the library, yet you might be the best researcher of all of us. Except Hermione, of course."

Harry just shrugged. "I had to get a job; it's part of recovery," he said. "Preferably one that isn't all about me, the way Quidditch was. And once you're doing it—I just like to do a thing well, if I'm really going to do it." He started running a comb through his wet hair.

"Why do you even bother with the comb?" Dean asked.

"Looks even worse if I don't."

"Product is your friend," Dean said, putting away his pencil and paper. "Or so Seamus would tell you."

"Many have tried, none have succeeded," Harry replied. "Oh, speaking of my good looks, the Ministry is all over me for an official portrait."

"Not surprising," Dean said. "Want me to recommend someone?"

"Well, they gave me a list," said Harry. "But I want you to do it."

Dean, who'd been pulling off his shirt, stopped short. "Me?"

"I don't want some stuffy formal picture," Harry said. "You make people look pretty much like themselves. And if I have to sit still while someone stares at me I reckon it may as well be someone I know. Besides, I trust you."

"Wow," Dean said. "I don't know what to say."

Harry got into his bed. "Say you'll do it. Is there a reason not to?"

"I suppose not. Huh." Dean paused, thinking, and suddenly a vision of Harry, sitting alone on the front steps of Hogwarts, came into his mind. "Right, I'll do it."

"Brilliant!" Harry said, grinning.

"Is that what McGonagall pulled you and Hermione aside to talk about at lunch today?" Dean asked, getting into bed himself.

"No. She, well, she was offering us jobs, actually. She and Hooch want a sabbatical and have asked us to take over their classes for a year."

"And who would take over as Headmaster?"

"Snape."

"Yikes."

"Well, he wouldn't be able to interfere in our teaching. Interim and all that."

"Think you'll take it?"

"I'd like to," he replied. "Be nice to teach something other than curses. Learn how to fly all over again."
"And that wouldn't be, you know, dangerous for you?"

"What, teaching flying? Oh, Hooch said she'd talked to the McCormack Centre people specifically about it before she offered, but it actually might be therapeutic. All relatively low altitude. Wouldn't play pro Quidditch right now, of course. Haven't fully discussed it with Hermione yet, though."

"And you come as a pair?"

"Well, not like that, no, but—"

"You still haven't done anything?"

"When could I?" Harry asked. "She's been writing, flat-out, since we got back from Africa. She only just handed the thing in last week—that's how we could make this trip."

"Before?"

"No," Harry said. "Has to be when we're not just in the house, working. So she can get away from me if she needs to."

Dean cocked his head. "You really think she'll need that, Harry? Come on."

"Maybe?" he asked. "I don't know. I hope not."

The next day the very first thing Dean read gave him a chill he couldn't explain. "I think I found it," he said, sliding the book to Parvati. She read the page, her eyes widening with each line.

"Well, dear?" Trelawney asked.

Parvati nodded. She steadied her breathing, then began to read aloud.

_The potential of the ancient peoples lays hidden, high and low, north and south, east and west. If brought together under the sun's path, they can withstand all attacks. If brought together under starlight, they bring only destruction._

"Why does that sound familiar?" Harry asked.

"Because it's the epigram on my dissertation," Hermione said. "I ran across it a few years ago when I was researching the French colonization of Africa. The diviner was a witch from the Ivory Coast who taught Divination at Beauxbatons at the turn of the last century."

"Marguerite Diabaté," Trelawney said. "A great woman. My own teacher was taught by her."

"You had us read her book," Parvati said. "No wonder I've always felt such a connection to her."

"So our adversary must have found it where I did, in that library in the south of France. But I didn't think that prophecy was about power," Hermione said.

Snape grimaced. "If power is what you seek," he said, "then everything is about power. Or the Deathly Hallows would be merely a children's tale."

"Twisted, you mean?" she asked.

Trelawney shrugged. "All things are and are not. Prophecy can only predict an outcome after choices are made."
"That's why they're so vague?"

"I prefer open to interpretation," Trelawney said, sighing.

Snape turned to Harry. "I'm sure Mr. Potter here can understand the power interpretation."

Harry nodded somewhat reluctantly. "The ability to bring all of those different systems of magic together—I can see how tempting that would be, to a certain kind of person."

Parvati turned to Trelawney. "What now, Professor?"

"We wait," she replied. "Don't leave her alone. You in particular, Dean. I have a sense that you will need to be present. I always could feel your deep connection, even back in your schooldays."

"Um, we're not—" Dean began.

"Oh I know," Trelawney replied. "But there are connections other than romantic. Important ones."

Parvati smiled. "Then we wait."

15 May 2002: Chip's Head Island

Harry saw the envelope first, in the middle of the kitchen table where Tom Hughes must have left it for them. Hermione was just behind him, hanging up her jacket in the mud room.

"I think it's going to rain," she said.

"It is raining," Harry replied, and handed her the envelope.

"Salem," she said, seeing the college design in the wax sealing the envelope. She tapped it against her hand. "Quiet in here, isn't it?" She walked into the living room and turned on the wireless.

A Led Zeppelin song started to play, and Hermione hoped it was a good omen. Outside the living room windows the sun was low in the sky, hanging at an angle through the light rain. Long days were coming, and the grass in the small garden beyond the French doors was green and bright and probably needed cutting.

Hermione took a deep breath and ripped the envelope open. She only needed to read the first line—"It is our pleasure to inform you"—to know that her thesis had been accepted, her oral exam passed. She threw the note down; she needed to move. So she turned up the radio, kicked off her shoes, and went out into the garden.

Soft warm rain fell on her shoulders as she moved to the music: you know it's all right, I said it's all right, you know it's all in my heart, you'll be my only, my one and only, is that the way it should start?

She remembered that first time she'd danced for Harry—that was to Zeppelin, too. As her body moved she realized this was hers, he was hers, and there was nothing selfish about accepting that. She'd never let fear keep her from anything else she wanted in life; the letter sitting on the living room floor proved it. The war, his problems, her wanting him to follow a certain path—they were all excuses, ways to avoid making a life with Harry, lest their life together really be about his life. But if anything, this year had shown her that Harry didn't want that.

Looking out on the ocean she realized that wasn't Calypso, as she'd thought for so long. She'd always been Penelope—not the one he left, but the one he came back to.
Hermione turned and saw Harry walking out of the house toward her, with the same hopeful expression he'd had for the last few months.

"I'm so proud of you, Hermione," he said.

She stopped dancing and put her hands on his hips. "I'm proud of you too, Harry," she said. "You can't know how much."

"Thanks," he said, and put his own hands on her waist.

She could see that he wasn't going to make a move now, and somehow she not only loved him all the more for it but took from it the strength to do it herself. She slipped her hands behind his neck and leaned forward, kissing him because she wanted to, and the man was willing. The kiss was unhurried, full of echoes from the past and all the better for it.

He looked at her and she could see the apology in his eyes. But they'd done all that, in private and in front of therapists; that part was over.

"It's all right," she said. "Really."

"It is," he said, looking relieved, and kissed her again.

"Let's go inside," she said.

He grinned broadly. "Get out of these wet clothes?" he asked.

"And into a dry bed, yes, Harry," she replied, rolling her eyes more at his words than the sentiment behind them, because she actually couldn't wait to get her hands on him again.

They walked back into the house, into the past and the present and the future all mixed up together, same as it ever was.

25 May 2002: London

The two weeks since their visit to Hogwarts had been odd, to put it mildly. Dean demanded that Parvati bunk down in their guest bedroom. During the day she sat in Dean's studio with him and sketched dress after dress, took things on and off her little mood board, and watched Dean work on the early stages of his official portrait of Harry. She saw Padma for lunch nearly every day; the upcoming wedding was providing a welcome distraction, with so many final details to nail down. And Pansy dropped by most evenings after working her cover job at the Ministry, either taking Parvati out to dinner or staying in with Dean and Seamus. Sometimes Parvati felt that she should be putting up more of a protest—she really could take care of herself, and had been for some years now—but she was actually rather glad for the support, because inside she felt so unsettled.

She knew it was coming, could feel it, but it was taking its time. She was taking, not quite a potion but more a simple tisane of herbs that Trelawney suggested to make her both more receptive to the prophecy and more resilient after it came; apparently looking into the future took a lot out of a person. It made all of her senses a little too open and slightly out of her control, everything blurry and sharp at the same time. She and Pansy hadn't spent a night together yet, but they'd fooled around plenty on Pansy's couch, and Parvati was even more easily orgasmic than usual, not to mention more aware of and responsive to what Pansy was feeling. She tried to warn Pansy not to get too used to it, but the other girl just smiled and said they may as well enjoy it while it lasted.

Then one night they all went to a gallery, as Georg's photography book—the assignment that had
sent Parvati to India, those many months ago—had finally been released. They congratulated him, saw friends from the art and fashion worlds, then went back to Seamus and Dean's flat for dinner.

"It wasn't a successful show, I don't think," Pansy said.

"Of course not," Seamus declared. "It contained no pictures of me."

"Oi!" Parvati said, though she was grinning. "There were two snaps of me!"

"Very well, a qualified success," Seamus allowed.

"Oh God," Dean said, rolling his eyes. "I've created a monster."

"I just wish he'd chosen to display the simpler photos in the book," Seamus said, "rather than the ones with all the bells and whistles."

Pansy nodded. "I agree; those were the photos I preferred. He did himself no favors there. I could have curated a much better show."

Parvati cocked her head. "Why don't you?"

"Why don't I what?"

"Curate. In a gallery, or a museum."

"Oh, I don't know," Pansy said. "I've never studied formally."

Dean said, "You've been in arts and artifacts at the Ministry for almost four years now. I'm sure that makes you as qualified as any Muggle with an art degree."

"Unless you want to be an Auror, when all of this is over," Seamus said.

"No," Pansy replied. "Not for me."

"I can't imagine you'd just stay at the Ministry," Parvati said.

"I honestly hadn't thought about much beyond this case," Pansy admitted. "It's been going on so long."

Parvati put a hand on Pansy's shoulder, and Pansy covered it with her own.

"It's all right," Pansy said. "I knew what I was getting into. After all, I didn't fight a war, like you lot, so I have to make up for it by doing my part."

Seamus shook his head. "If I'd been on the other side from Hermione, or, god forbid, Dean? I don't know that I could have fought, either."

"Well," Pansy said, and the table fell silent.

"On that note," Seamus said after a bit, "I'm off to bed, as I have to be at St. Mungo's early tomorrow." He stood and started to clear the table.

"I should go," Pansy said.

"No, no, stay," Dean said.

Pansy raised an eyebrow. "You trust me in your house?"
Dean shrugged. "You've been in and out of here almost every day since we got back from Hogwarts."

"Oh," Pansy said. "I suppose that's true."

Seamus said, "Since I started trusting Harry's judgment of people he hasn't steered me wrong. Harry and Draco and Sirius and Ron? Not worried."

"Besides," Dean added, with just a hint of steel in his voice, "you betray us and you'll have more than me and Shay after you. Not that we wouldn't be enough."

"Point taken," Pansy said. "Well, at least let me help you with the washing up."

"Sure," Seamus said, and the two went into the kitchen, dishes following them.

Dean turned to Parvati. "Sorry if that was too much," he said.

"No, it was fine," Parvati said. After all, she was still trying to absorb the new revelations about Pansy, herself. "She's fitting in well, I think," she said. "Or trying to."

"She is," Dean agreed. "Seamus seems to like her. She makes him laugh."

"And you?"

"More than the other ladies of yours that I've met," Dean said, "though you didn't exactly set a high bar there."

She giggled. "I suppose not."

"But the important thing is if you still like her."

"You mean, now that she's no longer forbidden?" she asked.

"Something like that, yeah."

Parvati thought for a minute, and smiled. "I do."

"Good," Dean said. "That's what matters."

Dean went off to bed when Seamus did, and Pansy and Parvati retired to the guest room not long after. It was nice, fooling around and not thinking about needing to leave; she couldn't remember the last time she'd been with a girl when they weren't rushed in some way. She found herself looking forward to falling asleep next to Pansy, and to waking up next to her as well. She actually hadn't been sleeping very well of late, and figured it was a side effect of the tisane or just her own anxiety. But lying next to Pansy it was easy to close her eyes and slip under.

Parvati had been having vivid dreams for weeks now, so she wasn't surprised to find herself in the middle of another one, this time somewhere in a low-lit room, like an art gallery or a museum, with glass cases here and there under its own spotlight. What was surprising was seeing Lavender; she hadn't dreamed of her friend in over a year.

She was yellow-haired and smiling, as always. "Oh, you look so pretty, Parvati!" she said.

Parvati shook her head. "You've always been the prettiest girl, Lavender," she replied. "You always will be." She didn't say, "because you'll never age," but then, they both knew that.
"You're so sweet," Lavender replied. "Come, see all the pretty things I have to show you."

Parvati realized that the cases all had precious objects. "How did you get them?" she asked.

"Oh a boy brought them to me; you know how that goes." She paused. "Or maybe it was a girl! I can't remember." She led Parvati to the first case.

"The cuff," Parvati said, watching as Lavender reached into the case and pulled out the Durga cuff. Lavender slipped it onto her arm. "Yes, but I think it looked better on you," she replied.

"Thank you."

They walked to the next case. "This is nice, though." She placed Mictecacihuatl's crown atop her head.

Parvati followed as Lavender went from case to case, putting Solomon's ring on one finger, Odin's draupnir on another. She affixed the breastplate of Elemgasem's armor to her chest, and picked up the Spineflex shield. "How do I look?" she asked.

Parvati raised one eyebrow. "Overdressed," she said, "and ridiculous."

Lavender looked down at herself. "They don't all go, do they?" she asked.

"No," Parvati said. "The metals are too different. There's nothing pleasing or harmonious. It's all just discord."

"I suppose," Lavender said. "A look only a mother would love! Or is that father? Oh, it's so confusing here, Parvati!"

"I know," Parvati said. "I wish you were here with us."

"Me too, but I've accepted it." She cocked her head. "And I think you have, too."

Parvati bit her lip. "Do you like her?" she asked.

"I like her because she likes you," Lavender said. "So many of them didn't."

"You're right," Parvati said. "And you're okay?"

"I am," Lavender said, nodding. "And anyway Neville's here, so we're having a nice time. Oh, and your Pansy's friend Millicent. I never realized she was so funny!"

"I'm sorry I didn't get to know her."

"She's sorry too." Lavender set the shield down. "I have to go now, but if I tell you something, will you remember it?"

"Of course!" Parvati said.

"The daughter of the mother, the son of the father, must be together in the strongest sun, in order to realize the ancient potential. Can you remember that?"

"I can remember that," Parvati said.

"Good," Lavender said. She took off the armor, the rings, the cuff and the crown, placing them on a
"I love you so much. I wish you didn't have to go," Parvati said.

"I know," she replied, stepping back. She shook a finger as she said, "But you take your time getting here, okay?"

Parvati smiled in spite of herself, but then, she always did when Lavender was around. "Okay," she said.

Lavender turned and walked away, into the darkness of the room.

Parvati awoke, full of good feelings, and reached out for Pansy, next to her. She expected to touch a shoulder, perhaps an arm, but instead her arm came up against Pansy's thigh.

"What?" she said, waking up more fully. She opened her eyes and saw that Pansy was sitting up in bed, next to her, but had her robe on. Dean sat at the foot of the bed, parchment and quill in his hands, and Seamus was leaning up against the door jamb, a glass in his hand.

"Are you all right?" Pansy asked. She was stroking through Parvati's hair, as she often did, but there was a stiffness to her movements.

"What?" Parvati asked, sitting up herself. "Did it happen?"

"Here, have this," Seamus said, walking into the room and handing her the glass, which contained some sort of potion. "It's from Trelawney's recipe."

She meant only to sip it, as it smelled odd, but once she started she felt compelled to drink it all down in one go. Gasping a bit, she handed the glass back to Seamus.

"Good," Seamus said. "It will help you remember."

"Do you remember any of it?" Dean asked.

"Lavender was there, talking to me," Parvati said.

"We know," Pansy said, her voice a bit sharp.

Parvati looked at her, confused, then said, "There was something she wanted me to remember."

Dean read from his parchment. "'The daughter of the mother … the son of the father … must be together in the strongest sun … to realize the ancient potential.' Was that it?"

"Yes," Parvati said. She felt the potion kicking in then, and it was like a veil had been lifted. "Yes, that's it precisely. We were in a room and she put on all the objects that you've been gathering, Pansy, and then we talked about how they didn't look right together, and then she said what you just read."

"So that would be the prophecy, then?" Seamus asked.

"I think so, yes," Dean replied.

Pansy stood up. "I'll let the others know," she said, and walked out of the room.

Parvati watched her go, and had a strange feeling that Pansy was leaving her, or maybe had already
left. Which wouldn't make her that different than any of the others, and they hadn't had to watch her get a vision. "Well," she said, more to herself than anyone else, "that's that, I suppose."
Chapter Summary

The secret adversary is revealed.

27 June 2002: London

Ginny and Draco didn't go to Grimmauld Place that often, despite it belonging as much to his family as to Harry's, and despite Sirius and Remus very explicitly saying he should feel free to use it as his city home, since they usually stayed up at Remus's house in the countryside.

"Bad memories," Remus had said.

But Ginny had a flat, and Malfoy Manor wasn't *that* far away, so they only came to the occasional family gathering masterminded by Draco's Aunt Andromeda. And looking around at the house unadorned by Aunt An's homely, but thorough, decorating methods, Ginny could see what Remus had meant. Malfoy Manor had had its faults; it was cold and mostly for show, but to Draco it was full of things his mother loved, and therefore full of love itself. But Grimmauld Place was airless and oppressive—not the absence of love, but the active denial of it. She shuddered, and clung more tightly to Draco's hand.

Ginny was startled out of her thoughts by Harry popping out of the dining room.

"Ah, you're here," he said.

"You know," Draco said, "we really should clear out this house. You and me and Tonks."

"Me?" Harry asked.

Draco shrugged. "You know you're as connected to this place as any of us."

"Well," Harry said, pausing. "Sure, let's do that, sometime before school starts."

"So you accepted the position at Hogwarts," Ginny said, as they followed Harry into the dining room. She looked at the table, which was expanded and had many extra chairs around it. "How many are you expecting?"

"Oh, everyone," Harry said vaguely. "Mind your head."

Ginny turned and ducked just as several trays of food floated into the room.

Sirius walked in after them and reached for a sandwich.

Remus was just behind him. "Stop that!" he said. "A carrot stick if you *must*."

"People will be here shortly—"

"And they should see pretty platters, not something half-eaten by the dog."
"You spend too much time with Andromeda."

"I merely want to be a good host." The doorbell rang then, and Remus continued, "Would you?"

"Of course," Sirius said, palming a tea sandwich as he walked out.

And so they were reassembled, this time in very unofficial surroundings at the suggestion of Sirius, who felt the meeting would be seen as little more than a gathering of friends, particularly as nearly all of them were connected to Ron’s upcoming wedding. Sirius stood at the head of the table, and Ginny could finally see the man that commanded so much loyalty and respect from Draco—the strategist who could usually see a few moves further than anyone else.

"Right," he said, standing in front of an erasable parchboard, a wide-nibbed Quick Quotes Quill hanging at the ready. "Parvati received the prophecy two nights ago. What have we learned about our secret adversary since then?"

Harry spoke up. "Hermione and I have matched the objects with the original prophecy, and we think the holidays are a red herring."

"The wizarding society parties occur in those cities on those holidays because of tradition," Hermione said. "Each of the cities is an ancient center of magic for that region, and the holiday is a prominent one for that particular tradition. How much you think the even distribution of them around the globe is planned rather than a coincidence depends on your belief in a unifying force—though the Sydney party, at least, was imposed and isn't particularly significant to the local tradition."

Ginny had to smile at hearing another of Hermione's soliloquies, stuffed full of information that badly needed sorting. Harry was smiling at her, and sure, as her researcher he understood—or he was in love with her, one of the two.

At least among Ron's strengths was a willingness to admit that he had no idea what someone else was talking about. "Which means what, exactly?" he asked.

"Which means that the secret adversary didn't have to get these magical objects on these holidays, other than the parties providing a good cover for the operatives," Hermione answered. "But since the original prophecy was discovered on Lammas—"

"Which we know because?" Sirius asked.

"Because Parvati felt it," Harry replied.

"So we're still on Hermione's theory?" Draco asked. "That the original prophecy was about world peace or something?"

"You can't actually use all the objects at the same time," Harry said. "Each one requires an entirely different way of doing magic."

"That doesn't surprise me," Pansy said.

"Why not?" Sirius asked.

"Well, they don't look as though they go together," she replied.

"They're not fashion accessories," Hermione said.

"No," Pansy replied, "but in the years I've been working with Remus on various kinds of
international artifacts, I've found that ones that are meant to work together do actually share the same aesthetic. Perhaps it's because they're from the same region, and so the artisans had access to a limited set of raw materials. But these artifacts were made for wizards and witches in positions of power so to a certain extent yes, they should look as though they belong together if they're to work together. But these don't really go."

Hermione conceded. "That makes a great deal of sense, actually," she said.

"Thank you," said Pansy.

"But six different people could use them at once, surely," Padma said.

"With the proper training, I suppose," Hermione said.

Pansy shook her head "All of the witches and wizards involved have been Hogwarts-trained and none have spent significant time overseas. They were in and out, just for the operation."

"And if someone was offering training here," Ron said, 'we'd have at least heard rumors about it by now."

"Let's go back to the holidays," Sirius said. "Our secret adversary has moved on each of the solar holidays." The Quick Quotes Quill wrote each holiday and the object secured; next to Lammas it wrote, "prophecy." Sirius continued, "And according to the prophecy Odin's Draupnir was the final object."

"In my dream," Parvati said, "or my vision, I suppose I should say, I only saw the six objects we have, nothing new. And there was no sense that anything was missing."

Ginny turned to Pansy, who sat stony-faced, even for her, and also decidedly not looking at Parvati. She hadn't sat next to Parvati at the table, either; instead she was beside Draco. Pansy hadn’t mentioned any sort of trouble with Parvati, at least not that Ginny had heard or Draco had hinted, but there seemed to be some. Ginny felt a bit disappointed for Pansy, who seemed to really care for Parvati. It was damn shitty timing as well, but she didn't think she'd mention that, what with having had a fight with her own boyfriend at his own party not so long ago.

Sirius was talking. "Now, if we go along with Hermione's theory that the holidays aren't significant, but merely coincidental, the fact remains that our secret adversary has made a move on each day, leaving only Midsummer." He poked at the parchboard.

Seamus cocked his head. "You just said the holidays weren't significant."

Draco, who up until then had been a bit slumped in his seat, suddenly pushed forward in his chair, a glimmer of hope in his eyes. "But the secret adversary doesn't know that," he said. "If they've thought the other days were important, then it only makes sense to try to unite the objects at Midsummer."

"And that gives us the when," Sirius said, which the Quick Quotes Quill dutifully wrote on the board in large letters. "And the why, I reckon, but the where is more difficult."

"Why, where is the Midsummer party?" Hermione asked.

"There isn't one," Pansy said. "It's spent at home. Or at one's summer home. Much as Lammas is a local village harvest feast, Midsummer is a home-and-family day."

Dean looked up from where he was sketching on a bit of parchment. "Parvati's prophecy talks about
family,” he said. "Mother and daughter, father and son."

Ginny asked, "If one is the secret adversary, is that the parent, or the child?"

"My hunch is parent," Sirius said. "Given the age of the people recruited into this scheme, it looks more like a parent reaching out to a child than the reverse."

"Then the child is one of us?" Seamus asked.

"Not quite," Harry said. "Only three people have been present at each transfer—Draco, Pansy and Parvati."

"I'd broaden that a little," Ron said, "to those of us involved each time. The team, I mean."

"Well, my father is dead," Sirius said, "and I doubt he'd be looking for me in any case. Same for Remus and Harry and Draco. Hermione's mum's a Muggle, of course. That leaves us with Pansy, Parvati, and Ron."

Out of the corner of her eye, Ginny could see Pansy stiffening slightly. Draco did too, and put his hand on hers. From across the table Parvati looked on with a kind of loving concern that made Ginny suspect that whatever Pansy was upset about, she hadn't told Parvati about it.

Then Draco said, "I find it hard to believe that Arthur Weasley is behind such a complicated and indirect scheme. He's a straightforward fellow. Plus he's had plenty of opportunities during the war and since to acquire a great deal of legitimate power, and he's refused them all."

Ginny smiled at him; she could see what he was trying to do, and it was sweet, really, but unnecessary. "Then it will be easy to clear him," she said, flatly.

"Right, tactics," Sirius said, his Quick Quotes Quill writing three headers on the parchboard: Patil House, Cambridge; The Burrow, Ottery-St. Catchpole; and Parkinson Place, Wiltshire. "Cozy family holiday makes for a good cover," he continued, and the quill duly assigned Ron, Ginny, Pansy, Parvati and Padma to their respective family homes.

"Mrs. Patil promised me a lesson in sari wrapping," Hermione said.

"And I'll go with Pansy," Draco said.

"Seamus, you'll stay with Remus and me," Sirius said. "If something happens we'll need you to be able to get there quickly to give assistance."

"Right, got it," Seamus replied.

"So, Dean," Harry said, "your choice."

"Er, no offense," Dean said, "but I already know the Weasleys."

"None taken," Pansy said. "It'll be fun to see what my parents make of Harry Potter."

"I'd love to be a fly on that wall," Ginny said. She kind of liked the bitchier side of her boyfriend that Pansy brought out, and with Harry thrown into the mix, it was bound to be an interesting afternoon to say the least.

"So, we're to just have a nice day with our parents?" Padma asked.

Sirius nodded. "Don't say anything; let them approach you."
"And if they do?" Parvati asked.

"You'll have one of these," Sirius said, taking a small object out of his pocket and tossing it to Parvati.

She flipped the small grey stone in her hand. "A Portkey?" she asked.

"Something like the reverse," Ron said. "A Locator. After it's been charmed, all you need do is run your finger across that smooth bit, three times, and we'll all come to you. Easier and more reliable than a Patronus, and much better for undercover situations."

"Exit strategy?" Harry asked. "That is, if nothing happens?"

"We'll give it until after dinner, I think," Sirius said. "Then make moves to leave—talk about meeting friends. That might push them to act."

"Malfoy Manor has a lovely view of the sunset over the valley," Draco suggested.

"Good, good," Sirius said. "What say, seven o'clock? If we all arrive there, then we can discuss what to do next. But I have a sense that we won't have to." He turned and looked at the parchboard. "No, this is a very good plan, indeed. Now, eat up those sandwiches, or Remus will be upset, and we can't have that."

21 July 2002

And after all that, nothing happened.

Well, not nothing. Draco used the intervening three-and-a-half weeks to look in on some other cases, prepare and then testify at a Wizengamot prosecution of an illegal Quidditch betting operation that he'd helped Ron with. He took some refresher courses on dueling and hand-to-hand, and read a few books on solar-based magic that one of the researchers at the Ministry recommended. He tried to be as prepared as possible for anything that might happen.

On the day, Ginny was off to The Burrow to help with more wedding preparations, as the ceremony was less than two weeks away, and promised she'd return bearing a gooseberry pie, which had become a particular favorite of Draco's. She was oddly calm about the entire operation, focused and a bit ruthless in that particularly Gryffindor way that Draco always found a bit unnerving. She was sure it wasn't Arthur, and if it turned out to be, then it must be dealt with. He hadn't been so clear-eyed about his own father, but then, he'd only been sixteen and mourning his mother. When Lucius died a year later, he found himself grieving the man he'd thought his father was, rather than the man he revealed himself to be.

The Parkinsons were happy to take in two orphaned boys for the day, which they spent sitting out in the garden grazing on platters of cold hors d'oeuvres and drinking a punch of Paul Parkinson's own creation. With both the war and Quidditch tactfully avoided as topics, the conversation turned to travel. Paul and Pippa had just returned from two weeks in South America and were eager to compare notes with Draco and Pansy, who'd been to Chile and Mexico, as well as ask Harry for as much information about the States as he was able to provide.

They also asked after Ginny, whom they'd met some years back at one of the Patil New Year's parties, and invited Draco to bring her over for dinner. Draco hadn't really thought about how he didn't have parents to bring Ginny home to. That she couldn't meet Narcissa, he thought of often, but that he himself was missing out on that particular ritual hadn't crossed his mind, and he promised to
bring her to Parkinson Place sometime soon. Paul then started to tease Pansy about not ever bringing home her own girlfriends, either. Draco tried to warn him off that topic, as he’d noticed that Pansy had been mum about Parvati for some weeks now, and hadn’t spoken to her at that meeting at Grimmauld Place.

"I do like one girl," Pansy admitted, "but I'm not sure she feels the same."

"Well," Paul said, with all due fatherly pride, "no lady is too good for my Pansy." But thankfully he let the subject drop there.

They also talked gardening, of course, as it was that interest that had bonded Pippa's friendship with Narcissa. Pansy had seen to the Parkinson garden while her parents were away, and that got them talking about the gardens at Malfoy Manor. Draco's grief for his mother, usually a dull ache at the back of his mind, flashed up hot and sharp, but it felt good to know that six years on he still missed her, and always would. Pippa sent him home with a bouquet of soft pink gladiolus, a secret favorite of his mother's, who thought them too showy for the formal gardens at the Manor. But Draco remembered seeing them sometimes on Narcissa's dressing table, and realized they must have been a gift from Pippa.

They arrived at Malfoy Manor and Draco could see that the others had already arrived and were sitting out on the stone terrace. Pansy took the flowers from him, heading into the pantry to find a vase, and Ginny came in to greet him.

"I'm so sorry, Draco," she said.

It wasn't until that moment that he realized that Sirius's plan hadn't worked; that nothing had happened. He was relieved to know that it was neither Pippa Parkinson nor Arthur Weasley nor Nandana Patil, but he couldn't help feeling disappointed that they'd been wrong, and the secret adversary had slipped out of his hands again. He sighed, his shoulders slumping.

"Let's make some cocktails," she said. "We'll watch the sunset, and figure out the next move tomorrow."

Draco nodded, not much wanting to say anything, and led the way to the study, where they kept the liquor cabinet. He wasn't thinking of much of anything, just running on auto pilot, but he stopped short inside the door when he realized a man who looked very much like his own dead father was sitting behind the desk.

"Careful, Draco," Ginny said, stepping around him. "I nearly ran into you."

"Son," said the Lucius-like thing, "I can't tell you how terribly disappointed I am to see that you're still keeping company with this Weasley girl."

"Father?" Draco said, though it was barely a whisper. "I thought you were dead."

"Hoped is the word you're looking for, I believe," Lucius replied, smiling slightly. He turned and opened the curtains behind him, revealing the bay window and its view of the setting sun.

On the desk before him were all the objects they had gone around the world for—the two rings, the crown, the bracelet, the breastplate and the shield. Draco felt that little hum of magical energy which meant these weren't the replicas that Pansy had placed in the vault at Gringotts; they were the real artifacts. He realized that all these years he'd been chasing his own father, and he drew on all his training to keep himself calm.

"I wouldn't put it that way," he said in a soothing voice. He'd need to stall for time, just enough for
someone to come looking for them. "How did you survive the collapse at Miss Bridgerton's?"

"Oh I left that battle rather early," Lucius said with a wave of the hand. "I could see where it was heading. I hadn't anticipated that anyone would think I'd died, but when they did, I used it to my advantage."

Draco thought of all the people who'd died in that battle, on both sides, and anger washed over him. "How very brave of you," he said.

"You meant to say how clever, of course," Lucius replied. He shook his head. "Shame about Lord Voldemort, but such is the way of the world."

"And who's buried in your grave?" Draco asked.

"You know I really couldn't say. I'm sure once the fire swept through the building anyone left wasn't much more than a pile of bones, and broken ones at that. Someone unmissed, apparently."

Lucius's lack of concern chilled Draco. He was relieved to hear footsteps coming down the hall, because he was fairly sure he couldn't continue to handle his father on his own without becoming emotional. In a moment the others came through the door, Harry and Sirius in the lead.

"Oh look, the gang's all here," Lucius said.

Harry glanced down at the desk. "He's got the real ones," he said.

"Of course I do. Really, cousin, you were always too clever for your own good," Lucius said, looking at Sirius. "As if any good forger of magical artifacts doesn't have a price."

"You had my man make the switch," Remus said.

"Much easier that way," Lucius replied. "Oh do put that wand down, Black; it won't work in any case."

"He's right," Hermione said, sliding hers back into her sleeve. "Interference."

"Points to Granger," Lucius said, inclining his head like a teacher.

"But I used the Locator to summon you," Ginny said.

"We didn't get it," Sirius replied. "We came when we saw Lucius through the window."

"If our wands don't work in the presence of these objects," Draco asked, "then how exactly do you expect to get them all to work together?"

Lucius chuckled. "You aren't the only ones adept at research," he replied. "There are a few ancient spells—very simple, to be sure—that are all but the same in all of these traditions. Cradle of civilization sort of thing, I expect, Mesopotamia and all that."

"Actually," Hermione said, "there were much older wizarding civilizations in Africa—"

"Can't you keep her quiet, Potter?" Lucius asked, and Draco heard the warning tone in his voice, that tone that Draco had been afraid of when he was a child.

"I wouldn't even try," Harry replied.

Ginny crossed her arms. "So why are you here?" she asked.
"I could ask the same of you," Lucius replied. "After all I've done this year, to remind my son what an eminently suitable match Miss Parkinson is, how can you still be here?"

"Are you saying," Draco said, walking closer to the desk, "that you sent us around the world on some scavenger hunt of evil because you were *matchmaking*?"

"Two birds, one stone," Lucius said. "The Dark Lord always did admire my efficiency."

Draco placed his hands on the desk and leaned on them, his head down. "Of all the—she's in love with someone else, you know."

"Are you really?" he asked, turning to Pansy.

Pansy looked over at Parvati. "I am," she replied, "for all the good it's done me."

Lucius followed her glance. "Ah, the mannequin," he said, and looked Parvati up and down. "You always did like pretty things, Pansy. And while I certainly can't disagree with your taste, I think that sort of thing is best kept private, don't you?"

"Not any more," Pansy said.

"And no reason to give her up," Lucius said, ignoring Pansy even as he was looking at her. "I don't really care if Pansy keeps her lady friend, or if Draco has the Weasley girl as his bit on the side; I simply don't want him to marry her."

"Our sisters are no one's bits on the side," Ron said.

"Your loyalty is charming," Lucius said, "but I really don't see that it's any business of yours."

Ginny said, "And I don't see that it's any business of yours."

"Oh but it is," Lucius replied. "It is very much my business, my duty if you will, to see that my only child is suitably wed."

"It was also your duty to pass the estate to me, intact," Draco pointed out, "and you did a very poor job at that."

"Yes, I am sorry about that," Lucius said. "I was distracted. But you've done a very good job putting it back together. Your mother would have been so proud."

Something in his mind flashed white-hot, and he leaned forward on the desk. "You don't get to talk about her," he said through gritted teeth. "You gave up that right when you killed her."

Silence fell across the room as they stared each other down across the desk topped with artifacts. Lucius's glare, much as his sharp tongue, had kept Draco in check for sixteen years, and might have done even longer had circumstances been different. But now he looked at Lucius and saw little to admire other than the man's instinct for self-preservation. The ridiculous Dark Mark at the Euro Cup, the search for magical short cuts to power, were both cheap copies of something that hadn't been that compelling to begin with. He still had an inch or two on his son, but Lucius suddenly seemed smaller and older, like an athlete past his prime trying to hold on to old glory. Moments ago Draco had felt ashamed of his father for what he had done, but now he felt strangely embarrassed that Lucius hadn't come up with a more original plan.

After a long minute Draco heard Harry, stage-whispering in the back of the study.
"So, why aren't we just taking the things away from him?" he asked.

"Dunno," Ron replied. "More of us than there are of him."

Draco broke eye contact with Lucius then, pushing up off the desk and turning to the others. "And that would be the real reason he's here at the Manor. Not to comment on my marriage prospects, or to celebrate the family holiday, but because he knows that if the objects are here I'm the only one who can take any of them away from him."

"A protective charm," Hermione said.

"Yes, while others use blood charms to protect their children," Draco said, glancing at Harry, "we Malfoys have traditionally used them to protect our things. You could walk in here and kill me in cold blood, but put a silver fork in your pocket without my permission and see how far you get."

Draco smiled a little, thinking of how differently his mother had felt, how she'd literally died to keep him from joining the cause. His eyes met Ginny's and he remembered that night as if it was yesterday, and how Arthur had whisked him away and brought him to the Burrow, to Ginny. She must have been thinking of it, too, as she pulled her old fish pendant out from under her clothes. Of course it wasn't moving; the old charm was wearing off and besides, with all these powerful objects so close at hand it couldn't work anyway. But the sight of it made Draco stand up a bit straighter; he was made of stronger stuff, these days. They all were.

"Yes, as entertaining as it has been to hear all about your exciting love lives," Lucius said, "I do have to get started to make the sunset. But that isn't the only reason I'm here."

"No?" Draco asked, turning back toward him.

Lucius held out his hand. "I would like you to join me, son."

Suddenly all the thoughts and feelings that had flooded Draco since Parkinson Place fell away, all the grief for his mother and shame of his father, the lingering fear from his boyhood and the present worry that Lucius might actually pull off this ridiculous scheme, and he saw the situation with perfect clarity. "No," he said without hesitation. "You killed my mother, and you don't get to come back from that with a 'sorry, but I love what you've done with the place.' And the last time you asked me to join you was to follow an egomaniacal psychopath, which Mother didn't think was a good idea, and she turned out to be absolutely correct in that judgment. Besides, I'm fairly sure that your overly complicated scheme isn't going to work. At best, nothing will happen at all, and you'll simply be arrested for murder and assorted war crimes. At worst, you'll manage to destroy the artifacts and we'll all have to answer to all these countries whose heritage you've stolen. So, no, I will not be joining you under any circumstances."

Lucius shook his head; he never was the type to ask twice. "You've let emotion lead you to the wrong decision," he said, "but I can't save you from yourself."

"And I can't save you from yourself," Draco replied, "but I wish I could." He stood closer to Ginny and took her hand, and Ginny squeezed back. He willed himself not to cry—this was the showdown he'd always wanted with his father, after all, when he'd asked Harry to "leave Lucius to me" all those years ago, and he certainly wasn't going to cry in front of the man. But he felt hopeless and impotent in the face of Lucius's desire for power, and realized this must have been how his mother felt, the night she died.

Lucius wasn't looking at Draco any more, anyway; he'd turned to open the French doors behind the desk. A light breeze came in and stirred his hair as he donned the various artifacts: the two rings, the
cuff, the breastplate and the crown. He grasped the shield and stepped out onto the terrace.

The sun beyond him was low in the sky, the bottom touching the horizon. He tilted his head down slightly, looking into the sun, and then, so softly that Draco could scarcely hear him, said, "Nox."

The low hum of magical energy suddenly crested into a large wave, and Draco could feel the blood rushing in her ears. Lucius's body shook with it, and for a moment Draco wondered if they'd been terribly, terribly mistaken and he had actually succeeded. But as soon as it came, it was gone, and Lucius collapsed to the ground.

He'd landed on his back, and his hand was still gripping tight around the handle of the shield. His face was misshapen, somehow lopsided, and his eyes stared up at them, vacant.

Seamus ran from the back of the room, leaping over the desk. Some of the others warned him but he paid them no mind, sitting down on the veranda next to Lucius's still form and pulling out his tiny mediwizard wand. "Can someone help me take these things off him?" he asked, loosening the cravat at Lucius's throat.

Ginny knelt down, slipping off the crown and then the rings and cuff. "They've burned him," she said, and Draco saw angry black marks on Lucius's fingers and wrist.

"I'm not surprised," Seamus replied.

Draco helped her unbuckle the breastplate, but Lucius's grip on the shield was so strong he had to bend each finger to release it. Lucius's skin was cold and clammy, and Draco had to grit his teeth to do what needed doing.

Seamus turned to Sirius. "We need to get him to St. Mungo's straight away," he said.

Remus took the objects from Ginny. "Here, all of you, scatter these around the house," he said. "That should disperse them enough that we can Apparate him out of here."

"What happened?" Draco asked.

"I can't be entirely sure," Seamus replied, "but I think he's had what Muggles call a stroke. That wave of magical energy overloaded his nervous system."

"And what could that mean?" Draco asked.

"A lot of things," Seamus said. "Paralysis, brain damage. He might not be a wizard anymore."

"My god," Draco said, sitting back against the desk in his shock. "Not a wizard?"

When the others returned to the study, Sirius stood up. "Right, let's see. Lumos," he said, and the lights came on in the study. "Better have Harry help you," he continued. "If anyone can cut through whatever interference is left, it's him."

Harry nodded and knelt next to Lucius. "Where are we headed?" he asked.

Seamus put one hand under Lucius's shoulders and the other under one knee. "Just the main lobby," he replied. "Others can take it from there."

Harry held on to Lucius as well. "One, two, three …" he said, and they were gone.

Ginny sat down next to Draco, their backs against the edge of the desk, and looked out over the garden down into the valley.
"Not a wizard," Draco said. "I can't even imagine."

Ginny took his hand as the sun sank down below the horizon. Draco wasn't really thinking or feeling anymore, and he wondered if he'd been overloaded, too.

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Five hours later and they still didn't know much more, save that Seamus's diagnosis had been correct. Sirius had come back at some point to report that the magical objects themselves were none the worse for wear, which was a great relief to Pansy as they didn't need some international incident on top of everything else. Seamus was working on Lucius now, and while they had the comfort of knowing there was no one better, now they could only wait.

Draco had tried to send them home, but none of them would even think of leaving their friend. They sat in a little group of couches, dozing on and off, as Hermione read to them from an old battered copy of the *Tales of Beadle the Bard* that she'd found on one of the tables. It was soothing, somehow, hearing those old tales again, even in Hermione's middle-class schoolgirl voice.

She finished reading "The Fountain of Fair Fortune" and then said, "I think I need a little break. Shall we make more tea? Perhaps there's food somewhere?"

Ginny turned to Draco. "Would you like a snack?"

"Er," Draco said, blinking. "Chocolate frogs, if there's any left," he said.

She nodded, kissing him on the forehead, and walked away. Only Pansy was still seated, right next to him on the couch.

"I can't believe it was him we were after, that whole time," Draco said. "Ron always said I took this case too personally but I suppose now I'm glad I did."

He put his hand on her knee and she covered it with her own, but said nothing; sometimes Draco just needed to talk, without interruption.

"And now there's going to be a trial, and I'll have to testify, and all that publicity. That's sure to be dreadful. Promise you'll stick around? Ginny shouldn't have to deal with me all by herself."

"Of course," Pansy said, smiling a little. "But I'm sure you won't be so much to deal with."

"You say that now," Draco said.

"Can I do anything?" she asked.

Draco cocked his head. "Distract me?"

"Sure," she replied, turning in her seat to face him more fully.

"What happened between you and Parvati?"

Pansy rolled her eyes. "Really? That's what you want to discuss?"

"Come on, Pansy. You told Father you loved her, in front of everyone."

She shrugged. "It's true."

"But you haven't said one word to her tonight, or at Grimmauld Place at the planning meeting a few weeks ago."
"Well, I realized she's in love with someone else."

Draco cocked his head. "Really?" he asked. "And how did you come to this conclusion?"

"She was dreaming about her. Calling out her name in her sleep. That sort of thing."

"Interesting. Because what I saw was Parvati mooning over you whenever she thought you weren't looking."

"Have you ever been awoken by the sound of the girl you're in bed with shouting out some other girl's name?" Pansy asked. "Perhaps you haven't. It's a singular experience. However I don't recommend it."

"Is that why you won't speak to me?" asked a voice behind her.

Pansy closed her eyes and hung her head for a moment, as she'd recognize that voice anywhere. She looked at Draco, and he merely raised his eyebrows, because of course he'd seen her walking toward them. Pansy sighed, and turned to face Parvati, who was standing behind the couch with Dean.

"If you mean, your dreaming about Lavender and calling out to her not to leave you, then yes," Pansy said.

"Lavender's dead—"

"I know that."

"And she brought me the prophecy," Parvati finished. "It often happens that way; they're beyond time, and so can see all of it."

Pansy blinked; she felt suddenly deflated, and a bit foolish. "Oh," she said. "I see. But then, why weren't you talking to me?"

"I thought you were put off by the whole trance business," she said. "I know we're witches but it's still a bit weird when your girlfriend can see the future sometimes."

"Professor Snape doesn't think it's weird," Pansy said. "Or rather, he might, but he doesn't let that keep him out of Sybill Trelawney's bed."

"I suppose not," Parvati said, smiling a little. "Good thing you're a Slytherin, then."

"Good thing," Pansy said, smiling back.

"Well, what I think," Draco said, "is that everything was moving along smoothly, and you didn't know what to do, so you had to find fault."

"My thoughts exactly," Dean said.

"We really shouldn't let them out without supervision," Draco said.

"All right," Pansy said, and smacked him lightly in the upper arm.

"Why don't you two kiss and make up," Draco said, "and give us a little eye candy to make up for all that silly angst?"

Pansy made a face at Draco before she knelt up on the couch. "I'm sorry," she said.
"Me too," Parvati said, and kissed her.

"There," Pansy said, "that distraction enough for you?"

"Yeah," Draco said, smiling a little. "It was. Now, where's that Hermione?"

The others drifted back, settling back down on the couches with snacks and beverages, and Hermione was part way through "The Warlock's Hairy Heart" when Pansy saw Seamus approaching them. He was taking off an outer robe spattered with potions, but anyone could see from his expression the news he was about to deliver.

"Draco," he said, "I'm so, so sorry. The damage was just too extensive."

Draco stood up and took a deep breath. "I'm sure he didn't help you," Draco said. "Being a Squib wouldn't have been much of a life, for him."

"I suppose not," Seamus said, "but still, I'm very sorry."

"I know you did all you could," Draco said, walking over and embracing him. "Thank you."

Ginny was near him, rubbing his back. "Well, it's almost sunrise," she said. "What say we get breakfast?"

Draco turned to look at Sirius. "Do you think we could all go out to the Tonks's farm?" he asked.

Sirius smiled. "I think that's a lovely idea," he said, "as I'm sure Andromeda would like nothing better than to bustle about making eggs for a crowd."

"Good," Draco said. "I think, right about now, I need all the family and friends I can get."
Chapter Summary

Onward.

I August 2002: Memorial to the War Dead, England

When the decision to build one large memorial for all of those killed in the battle at Miss Bridgerton's Academy for Wee Witches was announced, it was of course controversial. But Harry, always a reluctant public speaker, had given several speeches at rallies and on the WWN in favor of the plan as part of the reconciliation deemed necessary after two wars in twenty years, a reconciliation that hadn't occurred after the first war. And so it went through, and by the time the burial ground was dedicated, most of the wizarding population of Great Britain were in favor of it.

Parvati herself had been reluctant at first, and she realized now how much anger she'd been holding on to from that time. Entirely justified anger, to be sure, but holding on to it had didn't make her life any better. But coming here with Pansy to lay flowers at Lavender's and Millicent's graves, it felt entirely appropriate that they should lay just a few rows apart. Lavender had always been envious that Parvati had gone to school here; it was the utmost in glamour to her, when really all it had ever been was a school for little girls to learn their ABC's plus some rudimentary history and nature studies. Like most things in the upper echelons of wizarding society it was less about the content and more about the connections. Boys' schools came and went, but Miss Bridgerton's had stood for generations.

The large brick schoolhouse, which like so many things in the wizarding world hadn't been updated since the Victorian era, had sat on a small rise looking over grass-covered hills. Now there was a plaque to tell what it had been before it became a Death Eater stronghold, raided to provide cover for Harry's own final battle. Trees had been planted, one for each soul lost in the battle, and individual grave stones were laid out around the building site itself, which had grown over with grass and wildflowers. In this "New Era" (as the Ministry called it), a school had been started for the sons and daughters of witches and wizards of all backgrounds, even those whose names weren't down for Hogwarts. Parvati rather liked that all of her friends' children would be going to the same school.

Though they'd come early in the morning to avoid the heat of the day, the light breeze that stirred her hair still felt refreshing. Parvati stood as Pansy walked up behind her.

"Remember when I pushed Padma off the see-saw and you socked me?" Pansy said.

Parvati chuckled. "I got into so much trouble for that," she said.

"We got punished together," Pansy replied.

"Did we really?"

"Inside at recess," she said. "Cleaning something, I think. Perhaps putting all the toys away?"

"I was insufferable," Parvati said, shaking her head.
Pansy shrugged. "You were looking after your sister," she said. "Mother just told me it was ill-advised to push anyone in front of their family."

"A good lesson learned, then," Parvati said, and took Pansy's hand in hers.

Pansy looked out over the field and saw another couple standing near one of the gravestones. "We're not alone any more."

"Oh?" Parvati asked, turning to see.

"Know who that is?" Pansy asked.

"Susan and Ernie," she said, turning back to Pansy. "They're at Neville's grave, probably coming here next. Do you want to—"

"No, it's fine," Pansy replied, because really, who would make a scene at a memorial site? Particularly one that Pansy had just as much right to be at as anyone else.

Susan and Ernie hesitated, as anyone might in a cemetery, before walking over to where Pansy and Parvati stood, next to Lavender's gravestone.

"Hello," Parvati said.

"That was a beautiful plant you left for Neville," Susan said.

"Quite a little garden over there, actually," Ernie added.

"No one wanted to leave a plant to just die," Parvati said. "We traded off maintaining it, though I think Dean and Ginny took on most of the work."

"Well, it's lovely," Susan said.

An awkward silence fell after that, one that Pansy didn't think it was her place to break, so she squeezed Parvati's hand.

The other girl startled, just slightly, then said, "Ron's so pleased you could come to the wedding, all the way from Brisbane."

"Happy to be invited," Ernie said.

"And how is Australia treating you?" Parvati asked.

"Very well, thank you," Ernie replied. "So much opportunity, the business is growing very quickly. We've been working very hard, but I think soon we'll be able to slow down, have a family." He patted Susan on the shoulder.

"And I've stopped drinking," Susan blurted out.

Pansy blinked, surprised, and felt all eyes on her. "Then I'm glad for you, if that's what you wanted to do."

"What I needed to do," Susan replied. "The stories about Harry made me realize that I needed to change. Hasn't been long, only a few months now."

"You should tell Harry, when you see him," Parvati said. "He'd be happy to know."
"I'll do that." Susan paused, then looked at Pansy. "I wanted to say how sorry I am for what happened at Ron's party."

"It was years ago," Pansy said. "And it was perhaps … thoughtless on my part, to just turn up like that."

"Still," Susan said, "please accept my apology."

"Of course," Pansy said, and held out her hand, which Susan shook.

"Thank you," she said.

"Well, we'll leave you to it," Pansy said.

"By the way," Parvati said, "there's to be a bonfire after the rehearsal dinner tomorrow evening, up on the hill at Ottery-St. Catchpole. You should come."

"Oh, I'm sure it's just family," Ernie said.

"And friends," Parvati replied. "You're our friends."

Susan smiled. "Then we'd be glad to come."

Pansy and Parvati nodded and walked away down the hill. Pansy felt peaceful, somehow cleansed by visiting Millicent at the same time Parvati was visiting Lavender. Not that their grief was exactly the same, but Parvati understood.

"Breakfast?" Parvati asked.

"Yes, please," Pansy said, and let Parvati lead the way.

Hermione didn't have many things to move up to Hogwarts—or actually, one of the little teacher's cottages on the grounds, as they wouldn't be living in the castle proper—as she'd been in furnished accommodations since she left England. Many books, of course, but not much else. Harry, on the other hand, had a great many things in his penthouse flat, all of which had been packed up and stored in the attic at Chez Chien, Remus's house in the country. Harry was looking forward to living with a few more of his things once again, though he didn't have a particularly clear memory of what had been in the flat, given his state of mind when he was living in it. The contents of the boxes might be just as much of a surprise to him as they would be to Hermione. He just hoped they didn't contain anything too awfully embarrassing. He was pretty sure that Ron or Draco would have the presence of mind to stash anything … salacious someplace else.

So when they arrived at Chez Chien, Harry walked right in, but Hermione hesitated in the door.

Harry turned around, confused. "Something wrong?" he asked.

Hermione fidgeted with the hem of her shirt. "I just … I haven't been back since … since I left."

"Right," Harry said, a little annoyed with himself for not remembering that of course the last time she'd been at the house was when she came to get her things after their big fight, the big fight that broke them up the first time, when they said some things that had taken them almost four years to get past. He put their empty bags down and closed the door, then with one hand at the small of her back led her to the porch swing. They were silent for a bit, swinging and staring out at the fields behind the house.
"Remember that birthday party you had here?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah," Harry replied. Sirius had thrown him a sixteenth birthday house party, to which he'd invited his roommates and Hermione's, plus Ginny and Padma. "It was the first time I'd had a party like that, with so many friends."

"But not the last time, at least according to the Quibbler," Hermione said, smirking.

Harry smiled back. "They did get quite large for a while there, but I still never had one with so many friends."

"I see," Hermione replied.

"Do you?" he asked. "I need you to. I did that, the partying and the different girls, and actually it was kind of lonely. So when I say that I'm done with that, and I know what I want, I mean it."

"I believe you," she replied, not quite looking him in the eye.

"Good, because having my twenty-first while in treatment at McCormick definitely cured me of wanting to have a big party for a good long while. So thanks for dinner last night, again."

She smiled. "You cooked dinner for me on my last birthday. I just thought between Lucius and the wedding it might be overlooked."

"Perhaps not the worst thing," he said, shrugging. "Ignored for a bit, then made too much of for a bit. This one was a good balance, I thought."

"I'm glad."

"Also thanks for not actually cooking."

"Hey!" she said and punched him in the arm, though not very hard.

Harry laughed, and thought about how nice it was, to be able to tease her again. They fell into silence once more, this time a bit more comfortable.

"Harry?" she said, softly.

"Yes," he replied, hearing her tone and instantly sobering up.

She turned in the seat, looking him straight on. "We can't have another fight like that one."

"No. But I don't think we will."

"How can you be sure?"

"I can't. But we have things now we didn't have then."

"Such as?"

"Help, for starters. I'll still be seeing someone, probably that woman Marc Samuelson recommended."

Hermione nodded. "You seemed to like her."

"I did like her. And there's a meeting in Hogsmeade every other week, and I'll have a sponsor. So it
won't be just you and Ron and Sirius, like it was before."

"True," said Hermione, though she didn't feel quite sure.

"I bet there's a meeting for you up at Hogsmeade, too," Harry said. "You know, if you wanted to keep going like you did in Salem."

"There is," Hermione said. "I already looked into it."

Harry grinned and shook his head. "Of course you did."

"And I'd imagine if they have groups like that, we can find someone to show us how to fight properly."

"Defense Against the Dark Moods?" Harry quipped.

"Ugh, you are far too young for puns like that," Hermione said.

"Apparently not," Harry said. "But yeah, I'm in."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And I know we've said this, but ... I liked being your assistant."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Look, we both know where I'm ending up eventually," Harry said, meaning of course Headmaster, and it was the first time he'd even referred to it in her hearing. "And we also both know that you're going to take that position that Remus has for you in International Magical Cooperation."

Hermione crossed her arms, but didn't contradict him. She very likely was; she just didn't feel quite ready for it yet.

"So," he continued, "I reckon I could do worse things than be a diplomatic spouse. Maybe learn a few things that will help me with that big job later."

"Might be nice for Hogwarts to have more of an international approach," Hermione said.

"That's what I was thinking," Harry said, nodding.

And suddenly, Hermione could see what Harry had been saying all along about his own future. She'd learned to trust him with his own life, during their year in Maine, concluding that Harry simply wasn't the planner that she was. But now she saw that it wasn't that, but that his life would be more like a ramble, gathering up experiences and expertise before settling in at Hogwarts. And for that, he was content to follow her.

She also knew that when the time came, she'd be able to follow him back to Hogwarts, and find something meaningful to do there. Perhaps by then she'd be ready to write that new edition of *Hogwarts: A History."

"I really do think we'll be all right, Hermione," Harry continued. "We make a good team."

"We do," she said, with more conviction than she'd felt in a long time.

"Okay?"
"Yes," she said, smiling a little. "Let's go through your things. What do you have in the attic?"

"Ron packed up the entire flat and sent it here, when we went to Maine, so basically everything."

"Well," Hermione said, walking into the house, "we're not taking any of that furniture. What on earth possessed you to buy off-white suede sofas and a zebra rug?"

"I promise that I will not be under the influence when making decorating decisions in the future," Harry said.

Seamus had the day off and had declared his intention to putter around in the kitchen, so Dean spent the morning working up more sketches for Harry's portrait from the pictures he'd taken of the front entrance of Hogwarts. Seamus came in at lunchtime with a sandwich and a fresh eye, and immediately seized on one of the tighter shots, declaring that no, Dean didn't need to try to get any of the crest above the door into the painting.

"Everyone will recognize those steps," Seamus said. "You needn't hit us over the head with it."

In mid-afternoon an owl rapped at the window, a flat package in his talons. Dean gave him some bread crusts and sent him on his way, then took the package into the kitchen.

Seamus had created a good amount of chaos. A long list on a bit of parchment was affixed to the front of one of the cabinet doors, and at least a dozen small bags full of what Dean hoped were spices were scattered across the countertop. The mortar and pestle—Dean's, as Seamus's was in his office at St. Mungo's—looked well-used. Seamus was stirring some sort of pasty substance in a pot, to which he added a large quantity of broth.

"What's all this?" Dean asked.

"I'm trying that mole sauce Parvati was talking about when she came back from Mexico," Seamus replied, pointing at a jar on the counter. "It's complicated but I'm reasonably good at potions so I thought I'd give it a go."

"If you can get it in the shop, why make it?"

Seamus scowled. "It wouldn't be the same! I just have this here for a sense of what it should taste like. But you've come to distract me at a good time as this needs to simmer for a while. So who sent that package?"

"Pansy," he replied, setting the package on the counter and tearing off the paper. "Well, look at that."

Inside was a framed black and white photograph of Dean and Parvati, taken at a gallery show. Their heads were close together, as if they were conspiring. As the picture cycled they moved in, then pulled back, laughing.

"That's lovely," Seamus said.

"It is," Dean said. "I don't think I have many pictures of the two of us. No recent ones, at least."

"What does the card say?" Seamus asked.

Dean pulled it out of the wrapping paper:

Dean
I saw you two from across the room at Georg's opening and couldn't resist borrowing a friend's camera. It came out rather well, considering I'm an amateur, and I thought you'd like a copy. Thank you for your hospitality this summer, and hope to see you soon.

Pansy

"How sweet of her," Seamus said. "Huh, never thought I'd use the word 'sweet' to refer to Pansy Parkinson. We should find a place to hang that."

"Wait," Dean said. "Let me get something." He left the photo on the counter and went into his studio. There, he found the envelope of photographs he'd taken during their trip to the States in February, including one that he had kept back from Seamus, and walked back into the kitchen.

"Another picture?" Seamus asked.

"I was going to enlarge this and surprise you with it for Christmas," Dean said. "Well, both of you. Harry must have taken it with my camera; I found it in the pictures when I was developing them." He handed the snap to Seamus.

"Oh wow," Seamus said, looking at the picture of himself and Hermione sitting in front of the fire in that cottage in Maine, chatting and clearly unaware of the camera. He remembered that day—luckily not Valentine's Day, when they’d been talking about Harry, but a bit earlier on in the week when they’d stayed up late, as they so often had in their little bungalow in Greece.

"So I reckon I'll just do that now, get a similar frame, and we can hang them up together." Dean leaned in over Seamus's shoulder. "I could even make this one black and white, actually. It would look quite nice."

"We could put them on that blank wall in the spare room," Seamus said, "as they're both so friendly and welcoming."

"I like that idea," Dean said. He put the snap into the corner of the frame, then wrapped the package back up. "And how is your sauce coming?"

"You can try it," Seamus said, "though it has to cook a bit longer and then sit overnight." He handed Dean a spoon. "And it's quite spicy, but I know you like that."

The mole was thin from the broth that had recently been added, but dark and rich like burnt umber. "Oh wow," he said. "How many ingredients are in this?"

"About twenty-five."

"Yeah, because it doesn't taste like any one thing," Dean replied. "You may have conquered it."

"I hope so," Seamus replied, putting the spice bags away, "because I intend to ask your gran for her jerk recipe eventually."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "And you really think she'll share that with you?" he asked. "It took my auntie three years of marriage before she got it."

"I'm patient," Seamus said. "We might need to butter her up with great-grandchildren but that's all right."

Dean set down his spoon and cleared his throat. "Great-grandchildren?" he asked.
Seamus hopped up on the cleared counter and turned to Dean. "Of course. We've talked about this."

"Yes, but I didn't realize you wanted them in time for her to see them," he replied.

"She's only seventy-seven!"

"She's also a Muggle."

"Oh," Seamus said, squinting his eyes and cocking his head. "You have a point. Then perhaps not; after all, I'll need to start preparing to take over Adams's practice."

"You still want to be a children's mediwizard?" Dean asked. "After that week of innoculations and six-year-old sniffles?"

"I know I was tired and irritable after that—"

"You were actually kind of a bitch," Dean said.

"—but then Lucius Malfoy—"

"Don't quit trauma because you lost him," Dean said. "As Draco told you, he didn't help."

"I'm burning out, Dean. After shadowing Adams I was tired, yes, and I had a hell of a headache, but I felt like I'd done some good. With trauma, I know we do good, I see it, but I can't feel it anymore."

He sighed, and looked down at his hands. "I'd just like to not only see patients and their families on the worst days. I'd like to see them on perfectly ordinary days."

Dean stepped into the V of Seamus's legs, and put his hands on Seamus's hips. "You know I support whatever you want to do, Shay," he said.

Seamus suddenly felt nervous, which he hadn't around Dean in a long while. "So the kids will wait?"

"I don't see any harm in giving it a few years," Dean said, "before we inflict more of your DNA on the world."

"Nice," Seamus replied, but he was grinning. "I love you too."

"Of course you do," Dean said.

Of course Ginny had been in houses where people had died before; relatives had passed at The Burrow, in her very own bedroom. That's just how ancestral homes worked. Narcissa Malfoy had been killed in the dining room of the Manor, so really all this time Ginny had been in a house where there had been a violent death, rather recently, one that had traumatized Draco yet he had rebuilt the house and lived in it for some years now.

And here they were, only a week after Lucius's death, drinking cocktails on the terrace and watching the sunset, as they'd originally planned that day. Draco had been a little quieter than usual, and there had been some official business to deal with: removing Lucius's name from the rolls of those who'd died at Miss Bridgerton's, attempting to track down who was buried in his grave, burying him in the Malfoy family plot in the village because Draco couldn't think of a reason not to. Ginny was a bit distracted with wedding preparations for her brother, but really it had all been remarkably clean. Draco said he'd grieved for his father twice already, once when he'd killed Narcissa and once when he'd been presumed dead, and he was damned if he was going to do it a third time. But Ginny
couldn't help but worry.

Then Draco sat up and said, "What do you think would have happened, if I'd told him I'd go with him? Not meant it, but said it?"

Ginny blinked, less because she was surprised by the question than because she'd been thinking about it herself. "But you never would have," she replied. "It wasn't a choice for you."

"But what if I had?"

"No," Ginny said. "And remember, the other half of Parvati's prophecy was about light. He always would have interpreted the original prophecy as being about power. You always would have rejected him, because of your mother. And he always would have said, 'Nox.'"

"If he'd said 'Lumos'?"

"It wouldn't have worked," Ginny replied, "but perhaps the artifacts wouldn't have killed him, or tried to take away his own magic."

Draco turned to her. "I suppose you're right," he said.

"I know I am," she said, reaching out and taking his hand. "So please, try not to brood over this?"

"Don't have time to, anyway," Draco said. "Got trials to prepare for."

The Lucius Six, the *Daily Prophet* was calling them, not using Malfoy out of deference to Draco since it was his case. Conspiracy charges relating to smuggling was the worst he could really do to them, since it didn't seem they'd known what the outcome of Lucius's scheme would be, but there were also complicated extradition procedures and given the value of the stolen artifacts, all of which had been safely sent back, the countries in question were preparing theft charges, and Draco and Pansy would need to testify in those trials as well.

Well, Ginny needed more excuses to travel. After all, she had an entire special travel section of *Witch Weekly* to fill.

"And you'll be splendid at those trials, of course," Ginny said.

Draco smiled and kissed the back of her hand, clasped in his own.

The sun was just at the horizon, shining red-gold light onto the terrace, and bathing their skin with a warm glow. Ginny's hair was more fiery than usual, and in her simple cotton sundress and sandals, a cocktail in her hand, to Draco she couldn't have looked more at home, more right, more exactly what was needed.

"I think we should get married," Draco said.

"What?" Ginny asked.

He dropped her hand and stood up, needing to pace a bit. "I've been thinking about it for a while, actually," he said. "Once there was an end in sight I figured I'd propose when the case was over. And after seeing Lucius die I thought, life is short and what are we waiting for, really?"

Ginny had pulled her legs up in the chair, curling in on herself as she often did when she wasn't sure what to make of things. But she said nothing, so Draco continued.

"We could have a small ceremony, so your father can afford it as I know he'll want to pay for it."
Certainly I won't have much family there. But we'll have our friends. And I'd like to do it at The Burrow."

"Why there?" she asked, sounding surprised.

"I think Molly would be pleased. And you're the bride; it should be at your home." He looked out over the grounds and added, "Besides, we fell in love there, didn't we?"

"We did at that," Ginny said. "And the ring?"

Draco turned to her. "Like I'd buy you a ring, on my own, without your input?"

Ginny giggled at that. "You really want to do this?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied. "Not right now of course; perhaps Christmas, or next spring. But why not?"

"I have to admit," she said, "this isn't how I thought this conversation would go."

"When have we ever done anything conventionally?" Draco asked.

Ginny stood up and walked over to him, then took his hand. "Draco Malfoy, will you marry me?"

"I don't know," he said. "Will you bake pies, and keep a vegetable garden, and maintain your writing career?"

"Of course," she said, and he could see she was fighting a smile.

"Then I'd be honored," he replied, and pulled her into a kiss.

"Can we wait?" she asked. "To tell people, I mean?"

"Why?" Draco asked.

"Well, I don't want to intrude on Ron and Padma's day," she said.


"We can tell everyone when they return from their honeymoon. That way we can take our time finding a ring." She smiled. "Besides, I always wanted to be secretly engaged. It always sounded romantic, in books."

"I can make it plenty romantic for you in person, too," Draco said.

"Please do," she said, and kissed him again.

Even though she knew it was more than a little self-centered, Padma couldn't help thinking that Lucius's timing was ill-advised. Less than a fortnight before the wedding and they'd all had to stand there and be insulted by a man she'd never much cared for, whose moral center wasn't askew so much as apparently non-existent, and then give evidence to the Aurors. Ron had been working straight out, making sure as much was done before their honeymoon as possible.

Not that she'd been idle herself, though frankly writing songs felt like a welcome break from worrying about the final wedding details. This was the last large affair she was ever planning-- Parvati could have New Year's Eve, and with good luck Ron will have inherited his father's tendency and they'd have nothing but sons.
She returned from one of those welcome musical breaks to find little plates scattered across the kitchen table, and Ron with half his body in the cooling cabinet. "Darling, what are you doing?"

Ron stood up quickly, and just missed hitting his head on the cabinet door. "Don't want to come home from the Seychelles to a lot of spoiled food, do we?"

"Good thinking," Padma agreed, setting her bag and guitar down in the entryway.

"So how did your meeting go?" he asked.

"They liked what I've written so far, and they want more," she said.

"That's brilliant," Ron said, grinning as he sat down at the table with her.

"But that isn't even the most exciting part," she said. "They have ties with a Muggle label and want me to rework some of the lyrics. They think they can actually sell it in the Muggle marketplace!"

Ron set his fork down. "Really? My wife, selling music to Muggles?"

"I know! Can you imagine?" She piled some tomato pickle atop the two slices of ham in her sandwich. "I'll have to do some research, get out my old Muggle Studies texts."

"Or just talk to Dean or Harry or Hermione," Ron said. "They were all Muggles as children. And Dean and Hermione still go back and forth. Plus I bet you wouldn't have to change as much as you think. Muggles see magical things all the time; they just think they're made up."

"That's true," Padma said, thinking. "Dean said when he puts magical references in his paintings Muggles just think they're mystical in some way. New Age, I think he called it?"

"Muggles are always deciding that things they don't understand don't exist," Ron said, shaking his head. "That's why they're an Obliviator's best friend, really."

"Baudelaire said 'the greatest trick the devil ever played was convincing the world that he did not exist,'" Padma replied.

Ron raised an eyebrow. "Muggle?" he asked.

"No, actually; he went to Beauxbatons in the 1830s."

"He's right, anyway," Ron said, standing up and going to the small wine rack.

"Ron, do we need that?" Padma asked. "We're going to be doing so much celebrating over the next few days."

"Yes," Ron said, pulling out the beaujolais Ginny had given them at some point, "but we're going to be surrounded by people. It's our last night alone before all hell breaks loose. Let me be a little sentimental?"

Padma smiled. "Okay."

"And anyhow, we should drink to your success," he said, opening the bottle. He pulled two tumblers from the cupboard and put them on the table.

"And yours," Padma said, "with the case and all."

"Well," Ron said, pouring them each some wine. "Actually, since we're alone, I just wanted to say
thank you."

"For what?" she asked.

"For not making me choose between you and Harry, even at the worst of it."

"Oh, Ron, I—"

Ron held up a hand. "And for making me go to those meetings. Now that Harry's back I can be a better friend to him than I was."

"I thought you hated those meetings," Padma said, smirking.

He sighed and rolled his eyes. "They were difficult at first," he said, "but then I understood what was meant and I have to say, those people knew what they were about."

"Good," she said. "You have seemed more yourself."

"Were you worried?" he asked.

"Not after Africa," she said.

He grinned. "You know, you're as bad as Mum, with the protecting."

"And what's wrong with that?" she asked, sounding unrepentant.

"Nothing I can think of," Ron replied.

"Good," she said. "Oh, and I picked up our swimsuits for the trip today."

"God, you didn't get me anything tiny, did you?" he asked, vaguely horrified.

"Ron, you're an Auror; you've barely an inch of fat on you. You can't blame me for wanting to show you off."

"I also have skin the color of milk where it isn't covered in freckles!"

"Sunscreen charm."

"That will keep me glowing pale and pasty next to you on the beach; won't that look nice!"

"I like your skin," she said. "But no, it isn't tiny."

"Thank you," Ron said. They were silent for a bit, eating, and then he asked, "Nervous?"

Padma cocked her head. "No, actually. I have been, and I'm sure I will be on the day, or even tomorrow, but right now, not at all." She sighed. "I just feel that all's right with the world, you know?"

He smiled; he didn't think he'd seen her quite so relaxed since the planning had started. "I know precisely what you mean," he replied.

Ron maintained that sense of contentment straight through the rehearsal and the dinner afterwards at The Burrow. There had been toasts and a good deal of family teasing on both sides, and Ron felt full of love and good cheer. So what better thing to do, he thought, than to have a bit of continuing celebration after the rehearsal dinner with a bonfire on top of the hill above The Burrow?
There'd been quite a crowd around earlier, and Ron was reminded of that first party he and Padma had at their flat, nearly four years ago now, not long after the war ended. Even Ernie and Susan were there, which Ron was pleased to see. He was nowhere near as sensitive to these sorts of things as his sister-in-law to-be, but he was fairly sure that Neville and Lavender were there too, somehow. He'd certainly been thinking about them both of late.

Now it was after midnight, and the group around the bonfire was down to the same ten of them that together had put an end to the secret adversary case. While Ron loved throwing parties that crowded their flat with people, he knew he also tended to be cliqueish, so that it was just a few of them now, staring into the glowing embers of the fire, was fine by him. By rights it should have been firewhiskey time, but none of them were much up to it. Tomorrow would be a long enough day as it was.

"So," Parvati said, breaking the companionable silence that had fallen over the group, "who's next to go?"

Ron looked up and pointed to his sister, then realized that everyone else was, too.

"Really?" Draco said. "That's what you all think?"

"C'mon," said Seamus. "You know you're practically engaged."

Ginny looked at Draco, a little smile on her face, and said, "We are engaged, actually."

"I thought you wanted to keep it a secret!" Draco said.

"I do!" she replied. "Just, maybe not from any of them?" She turned to Ron. "Don't tell Mum or Dad, all right? I want tomorrow to be your day."

"Actually your dad already knows," Draco said. "I pulled him aside tonight, when everyone else was at the bonfire, to ask his permission."

"Permission?" Ginny said. "We need his permission?"

"No," Draco said, "but it's a nice tradition, and also, when he brought me to The Burrow to stay I'm sure he didn't think I'd end up fucking his only daughter so it seemed polite to thank him again for taking me in and assure him that I intended to make an honest woman out of you."

"Well, when you put it that way," Ginny said. "And he'll keep it from Mum?"

"He promised not to say anything until Ron and Padma were off on their honeymoon," Draco said. "He thought it might perk her up after the inevitable let down."

"Did you do that, Ron?" Pansy said. "Ask Mr. Patil, I mean?"

"Of course I did," Ron said, "and did he give me a going over! What were my long-term career plans, how do I plan to support a family and provide a dowry for my daughters—"

"A dowry, really?" Hermione asked. "In this day and age?"

"I have one," Padma said, shrugging. "We're saving it to help pay for school for the children."

"Father takes these sorts of rituals very seriously," Parvati said. "That's why I don't plan on getting married."

"Don't let Mother hear you say that," Padma replied. "She's starting to like Pansy."
"Would you do that, Harry?" Seamus asked, an impish little grin on his face. "If the time came?"

"Are you trying to get me into trouble, Finnigan?" Harry asked back. "When we've only just started again?"

"Just wondering," Seamus replied, but of course he was trying to start trouble, and Dean was rolling his eyes and shaking his head. Ron sat back to see what Harry would say—Ron knew he'd thought about it; he'd said, after the whole Euro Cup business, that if he didn't end up marrying Hermione he probably wouldn't marry anyone.

"Answer the question, Harry," Hermione said.

"All right," Harry said, sitting forward in his chair but keeping his hand on Hermione's knee. "Knowing your mum, I would go to both of them, but thinking about it now, and knowing you, I reckon we'd both go to them, which seems less like an asking-permission thing than an announcement thing. Though again, knowing your parents, they'd likely take it very seriously and ask us serious questions about whether we were ready and all that, so perhaps it's asking permission after all." He smiled slightly. "Satisfactory?"

"Entirely, yes," Hermione said.

"So what about you, Seamus?" Harry asked.

"I would talk to Dean's gran, of course," he said, "because nothing happens in that family that she doesn't know about. And you should go to Da."

"Not your mum?" Dean asked.

"You'd think," Seamus said, "but she already approves of you. But Brian didn't talk to Da before he and Fiona got married and now he'll never hear the end of it, even though that was five years ago and they'd been living together for ages before that. Sign of respect and all that."

"Point taken," Dean said. "Wow, so does this mean that in fifteen years' time we'll all be old married couples taking our kids to the Hogwarts Express?"

A chorus of moans came out of the group. "Can't I just get married first?" Ron asked.

"Sorry, sorry" Dean said, throwing up his hands in surrender.

Seamus smiled and took Dean's hand. "Dean just likes to plan ahead, is all," he said.

"Ron, it's getting late," Padma said.

"All right," Ron said, "one last toast. Come on, everyone, on your feet, raise your glasses." He'd been thinking of closing the evening with a remembrance toast for Neville and Lavender, but, catching Pansy's eye, he amended that slightly:

"To absent friends."

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