Summary


Notes

See the end of the work for notes

- Inspired by Nunquam Securus by talekayler
Chapter 1

The pure and simple truth is that the truth is rarely pure and never simple.

~Oscar Wilde

19 June, 2003

“Hey Malfoy,” Harry said, snagging Malfoy as they exited the lift on the ground floor of the Ministry. “About tonight.”

“We don’t have to,” Malfoy said quickly.

Harry frowned. “We don’t have to what?”

“Nothing. What were you going to say?”

Harry hesitated. “I . . . sort of mentioned to Hermione how we’ve been going to the pub. She said she wonders how you are, and—well, the short of it is, she’d like to come.”

“Granger wonders how I am.” Malfoy had a long aristocratic face that was not very good at all at masking his expressions, and a rather lyrical tenor that made absolutely no effort to hide his current scepticism.

Harry had started going to the pub with Malfoy after work because Malfoy had asked him, the way co-workers sometimes suggested such things, and Harry was trying to give Malfoy a second chance. That was what you did, with people who made mistakes, and Harry had never got a chance to do it for Snape. They’d started out shaky, but lately it had been okay—just drinks at the pub, every other week or so.

When Hermione asked to come along, Harry figured if Malfoy said no, it would be because Hermione was Muggle-born. That would mean Malfoy really hadn’t changed much after all, and wasn’t worth it anyway.

Harry had this strange hope that Malfoy would say yes.

Harry pushed his glasses up. “She just thought it’d be nice,” he said.

Malfoy looked at him for a while. His eyes weren’t blue. Harry thought they should have been blue. He hadn’t really noticed before, but they weren’t; they were grey. “All right,” Malfoy said. “Invite her along.”

Harry frowned. “Are you going to . . .”

Malfoy raised a brow. “Am I going to what?”

Grey wasn’t a colour at all, really, but it looked like a colour, on Malfoy. “Nothing,” said Harry. “I’ll just owl her, shall I?”

Malfoy looked startled. “Tonight?”

“Yes, tonight.” Harry paused. “Is that a problem?”

“I thought we . . .” Malfoy stood straighter, which was a bit of a trick, because he always stood
straight, as it was. “It’s not. Invite her tonight. Tell her . . .”

Harry raised his brow this time. “Tell her what?”

Malfoy chewed the inside of his cheek. “She’s welcome.”

* 

“Draco,” said Hermione, when she met them at the pub.

Harry and Malfoy were already sitting at their regular booth. Malfoy jumped up. Harry looked at him curiously, and Malfoy looked chagrined. “Granger,” he said, almost grudgingly, and made a strange aborted gesture toward Hermione’s coat.

“I can get it,” Hermione said, hanging it on the hook beside the table.

Blokes in BBC specials—the ones Petunia watched that had a lot of girls in dresses—stood when ladies entered a room. Blokes who wore cravats and, Harry didn’t know, watch fobs. Malfoy was trying to be polite.

It was kind of hilarious, actually.

Malfoy sat down and Hermione slid into the booth beside Harry. They were both across from Malfoy. She started unwinding her scarf. “Long time no see,” she said. “How are you liking being a hit wizard?”

“It’s . . . grand.” It was not at all the sort of thing that Malfoy said when they were alone and having it out about Robards and Shacklebolt, and all the numerous bureaucratic details and lay-about co-workers, and bad coffee in the lounge.

Harry wondered whether Malfoy was being deliberately obtuse, or whether this was his way of trying to be polite again.

“And how are you liking,” Malfoy paused, and Harry waited for the dig, “advocacy?”

“Love it,” said Hermione, cheerfully. “I’ve been working with Rackham—you know Rutger Rackham?”

Malfoy sniffed. “That old rotter.”

Harry didn’t know who Rutger Rackham was, but he was ready to defend him down to every fibre of his being, if Hermione—

“He is quite senile, isn’t he?” Hermione laughed. “But I’ve been convincing him to find a special place in his heart for my cause.”

“For house-elves?” Malfoy’s interest seemed roused, and Harry was ready to defend house-elves down to every fibre of his being (despite never having been a fan of S.P.E.W., really) if Malfoy—“How in Merlin’s name did you manage that?”

“House-elves, yes, among other things.” Hermione laughed again. “He’s not such a stodgy codger, once you get to know him.”

“Stodgy codger is putting it nicely.” Malfoy sniffed again. “Look at the trolls.”

Hermione’s smile faded. “What about the trolls?”
Harry was ready to defend trolls down to every fibre of his being if—if he didn’t know what, really. He was sort of lost. Mostly what he knew about trolls was that one had chased him around Hogwarts, and probably would’ve eaten him if it had got the chance.

“The complete lack of regulation surrounding them, of course,” Malfoy said, in his superior way.

Hermione began to frown. “I’m not sure it’s a lack of regulation that’s the problem. Rather, if they were given more freedom to begin with—”

“Oh, tosh,” said Malfoy, and then looked rather stricken. “See here, Granger.” He coughed, sounding stuffed, silly, and polite. “What I mean to say is, I don’t fully disagree, regarding your petition on magical creature rights. I—”

Hermione looked disgruntled. “My petition on magical creature rights?”

“You mentioned it in an interview?” Malfoy said.

Hermione looked really disgruntled. “You read my interview?”

Malfoy’s gruntle was going somewhere in the direction of Hermione’s. “Yes. What? Is it not allowed?”

“No, I just—”

“Think I’m a mindless bigot. I suppose that’s fair enough, considering . . . our shared history, but look, I’ve—”

“No,” said Hermione. “That’s not it at all, Malf—Draco. It’s . . . not even Harry read my interview.”

Malfoy glanced at Harry—and then it was as if he couldn’t help it, his eyes lingered. Just as he began to smile, he turned back to Hermione. “Well,” he said lightly. “I can’t help what Potter does.”

“I was going to,” Harry said.

“Yes,” Hermione soothed. “I’m sure you were. Now Draco, what was it you were saying about trolls?”

“I’ve been giving it a lot of thought,” said Malfoy, “and you know that some of the pure-bloods—like my father, very conservative, you know—”

That wasn’t all his father was, but Hermione was nodding along as though this was a very normal discussion, and Harry frowned down at his pint.

“—they’re just going to want to regulate the hell out of trolls, and that’s not without good reason. Trolls are big—”

Harry snorted, but Malfoy just ignored him.

“—and stupid—”

“Maybe you just don’t understand them,” said Hermione.

“Maybe,” said Malfoy, “but they’re dangerous. You’ve got to admit there’s a reason people don’t want them running amok.”

“Because they’re afraid,” said Hermione. “Maybe if they took time to understand trolls, they could
find a way to—to live peacefully with them. Maybe even educate them. And that could be a useful relationship, and instead these narrow-minded, spineless politicians just want to hammer out all these anti-immigration laws because they’re too speciesist to look past their own noses!”

She was getting sort of flushed, and Harry noticed Malfoy was starting to frown. This really wasn’t going to end well, and Harry wondered what he had been thinking, really, putting these two in a pub together.

“They’re not all just petty fanatics,” was all that Malfoy said.

“I’m sorry,” said Hermione. “I worded that badly.”

“But you think it’s true.”

“Well . . .”

Malfoy leaned in. “I see where you’re coming from, I do. But look, they’re not all that way. I mean . . . I suppose there are some parochial fundamentalists who are going to say things like, ‘all trolls should be rounded up and killed,’ or some such rot, but that’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying it’s just as problematic, in some respects, to insist on treating trolls like humans, because they’re not.”

“That doesn’t mean you treat them like cattle,” said Hermione. “And trolls are treated worse than cattle, in some of the current legislation.”

“That’s what I meant about Rackham.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said suddenly. “But who’s this Rackham?”

They both turned to look at him. Harry was pretty sure Hermione had forgotten he was sitting there. He didn’t know about Malfoy.

“He’s the Creatures Commissioner,” said Hermione.

“It’s like an ombudsman.” Malfoy was looking at him with a faint smile. It was meant to be jeering, Harry supposed, but instead it just looked amused. “You do know what an ombudsman is?”

Harry frowned. “Yes.”

He didn’t like politics. They weren’t very clear-cut or absolute, and it was difficult to get anything done using them. But just because you couldn’t _Expelliarmus_ them, didn’t mean he didn’t understand them.

It just meant that he didn’t follow them as much as he probably should have, and that when he did, they frustrated the hell out of him.

Malfoy was still looking at him with that same smile, the same slight curve of his pink lips.

“Then you think the troll policies are outdated too?” Hermione said.

Malfoy turned his attention back to her. “Yes,” he said, “which was why I was impressed that you got him to budge on house-elves at all. Don’t mistake me, I’m fairly certain that we fundamentally disagree on that matter, but I am fully against the current policies as well. Honestly, they make me sick. They take into account absolutely no understanding of house-elf culture.”

“House-elf culture?” said Hermione, and might as well have put her chin in her hands and fluttered her eyelashes at Malfoy, given just how breathless she sounded.
“I’m going to get another pint,” said Harry.

“What?” Hermione did blink then, turning toward him. “Oh,” she said, realizing she’d have to get out to let Harry from the booth.

“Granger, would you like anything?” Malfoy said, as Harry got out.

“Hermione,” said Hermione. “Oh, fetch me anything, Harry. A Butterbeer. You really think the house-elf policies are abusive?”

“I didn’t say that,” Malfoy said, and Harry moved off.

He was right.

This had been an absolute disaster.

* * *

7 August, 2003

“Hermione’s not coming to the pub tonight,” said Harry.

“Oh.”

Harry tried not to notice that Malfoy looked disappointed. And anyway, it was understandable if Malfoy looked disappointed, because Malfoy liked talking politics with Hermione, which was okay, and Harry didn’t talk politics, so naturally, Malfoy would be disappointed.

Before Hermione started coming along, Harry and Malfoy used to go out to the pub and complain about Robards and paperwork, and—Harry didn’t get to do that, with many of his fellow Aurors. Most of the Aurors and hit wizards were a lot older, or in awe of the fact that he was the Boy Who Lived, or both. And Ron was still helping George in the shop, and might not become an Auror at all.

It wasn’t like Harry was best mates with Malfoy, or anything like that; it was just that—having established a working friendly acquaintance with Malfoy, after all they had been through—it was just sort of disappointing that Malfoy was disappointed.

“All right,” said Malfoy. “I was thinking . . .”

“We don’t have to go,” Harry said quickly. They were lingering beside the lift in the Atrium.

“That wasn’t what I was going to say.” Malfoy’s eyes widened slightly. “Unless you don’t want to go.”

“No,” said Harry, “let’s go. I could use a pint.” They headed in the direction of the Floo. “What were you . . . what were you going to say?”

Malfoy didn’t look at him. “It’s Pansy. She heard . . . well, she heard that I’ve been—about talking to Granger,” he said. “She wants to—I thought, since Granger . . .”

“Spit it out, why don’t you?”

Malfoy glared at him.

Harry smiled.
Sighing, Malfoy said, “Pansy would like to join us for a pint. Is that all right by you?”

“Pansy,” Harry said.

“Parkinson.” Malfoy frowned at him. “Potter, you do remember—”

“Of course I remember Pansy Parkinson,” said Harry. “She wanted to give me up to Lord Voldemort. How could I forget someone with such a special place for me in her heart?”

Malfoy’s mouth went tight. “If you don’t want to—”

Harry sighed. “Sure, I want to. At least we’ll have interesting things to talk about.”

“You never know,” Malfoy pointed out. “You might.”

Shrugging, Harry said, “Why don’t you ask her tonight?”

“You never know,” Malfoy pointed out. “You might.”

Shrugging again. “Hermione isn’t coming. I don’t think those two get along, so why not?”

“I thought—” Malfoy bit his lip and looked away. “All right.”

* 

Pansy Parkinson was already at the pub when Harry and Malfoy got there. She was sitting at a table, legs crossed, a red drink in front of her. She had grown up pale and angular, with a narrow face and narrow chin, and a heap of shining black hair. Her nose was as puggish as ever.

“Draco, you look flushed,” was the first thing she said. Turning to Harry, she said, “And Harry Potter, fancy meeting you here.”

“You,” Harry began, and then realized she was being a git, rather. Frowning, he sat down.

“You can sit,” she said, and turned to him, blocking Draco out. “I’m sorry I said that thing about giving you up to Snakeface.”

“Er,” said Harry, “that’s okay.”

“Just so there are no hard feelings. You do realize it was a perfectly rational response?”

“Pansy,” Malfoy said.

Frowning, Parkinson sat back. “You don’t disagree,” she told Malfoy.

Malfoy looked at Harry, then back at Parkinson. “I think Lord—the Dark Lord was insane, and you and I have a lot to make up for.”

“Don’t waste time feeling sorry about it,” said Parkinson. “Life’s too short. Well, Potter, now that that’s over with, I suppose I should say something mundane and polite.” She turned with a lazy sort of grace to look back at Harry. “How have you been?”

Harry just stared at her, and then at Malfoy, who looked rather nervous. “Fine,” Harry said eventually, turning back to Parkinson. “Yourself?”

“Of course. How have you been?”

“Fine,” Malfoy said. “At least we’ll have interesting things to talk about.”

“Sure,” Parkinson said. “I don’t think those two get along, so why not?”

“I thought—” Malfoy bit his lip and looked away. “All right.”
don’t you think so, Draco?”

Inexplicably, Malfoy’s eyes flicked toward Harry, then back to Parkinson. “Not everything is dull.”

“He’s only saying that because you’re here,” Parkinson said. “He desperately wants to make a good impression.”

Harry suddenly felt interested. “Why?”

Parkinson waved a languorous hand. “Who knows? Draco always likes to make an impression.”

Malfoy snorted. “As if you don’t.”

“Of course I do. What else is there to do, besides pretend to be interested in things that don’t matter at all? Potter,” finally, Parkinson sipped her drink, “are you enjoying your job as an Auror?”

“Yes?”

“You sound uncertain.”

“Because you said it didn’t matter at all,” Harry said.

“I didn’t mean you,” said Parkinson. “You were always rather interesting in school. Isn’t that right, Draco?”

“Pansy,” Malfoy said.

Parkinson turned to Harry again. “He doesn’t like to talk about school,” she said. “He was always making a fool of himself, and I moped around, hating the world. We thought we were so cool.”

Startled, Harry laughed.

“Is that funny?” said Parkinson.

“Yes.” Harry surprised himself into another chuckle. “It’s kind of hilarious, actually.”

“Do you remember when I dressed only in black, and positively caked my eyes in black?”

Harry stopped laughing. “Er.” Mostly what he remembered of Parkinson, besides all the instances of her being horrible and mean, was that she liked unicorns. If he had been told to guess which colour she preferred, he probably would’ve said pink. “No?”

Parkinson turned to Malfoy. “I told you he wasn’t really paying attention to us.”

Malfoy frowned. “I was confused back then. Misled. I don’t really think you have a right to make fun of—”

Parkinson turned back to Harry. “Draco had a difficult childhood.”

Harry smirked at Malfoy. “Oh really?” he asked Parkinson.

Parkinson didn’t crack a smile. In fact, she barely changed expressions at all. Harry thought she might have two, if you claimed there was really a difference between ‘bored’ and ‘blank’. “Yes,” she said, in her flat, succinct way. “Daddy issues, you know.” She sipped her drink. “What about you?”

Harry blinked. “What about me?”
“Did you have a difficult childhood?”

“Er.” Harry glanced at Malfoy. “Yes?”

“You sound uncertain again.”

“That’s because everybody read about my childhood in the papers.”

Parkinson waved a hand. “The papers are all lies. You knew that Draco wrote half those articles in fourth year, didn’t you?”

Harry frowned. “No.”

“I’ve already said I’ve done bad things,” said Malfoy. “I’m trying to make up for them. I’m doing the best I can!”

“There there,” said Parkinson. “You just go on doing them. You’re very earnest when you’re trying to do things you believe in.”

“I’m not earnest,” Malfoy said earnestly.

“I can see why you like talking to Potter,” Parkinson told him. “He brings out the best in you.”

“I’ve barely said anything,” said Harry.

“I know,” said Parkinson. “You’ve let me talk. Most people don’t. The word ‘caustic’ gets bandied about quite a bit.”

Harry decided, then and there, that he was going to try and see if he could make Pansy Parkinson form a third expression. “I had a terrible childhood,” said Harry. “My aunt and uncle locked me in a cupboard.”

“You were a very Victorian orphan, then,” Parkinson said. “Draco was raised very Victorian also. I suppose we all were.”

“Malfoy stands up when girls come to the table,” Harry said.

“That’s what you’re supposed to do.” Malfoy glowered. “And anyway, it’s not like I’d do it for Pansy.” He put his nose in the air. “She’s not a lady.”

“I hope not.” Parkinson turned back to Harry. “I had a terrible childhood too. I suppose I could tell you my story, about how I was lonely and spoiled and rich, but you would never understand, having been raised in a cupboard. It’s just like every other spoiled rich girl’s story. I suppose Draco has already told you his.”

Harry shook his head. “Malfoy almost never talks about being a spoiled rich girl.”

Malfoy made an odd coughing sound. Harry was pretty sure it had started out as a laugh.

“Doesn’t he.” Parkinson stirred her drink.

“Pansy,” Malfoy said, in a warning tone.

“We used to play together as children,” Parkinson said, and there it was, a third expression—she was smiling, slightly, at Malfoy. “Remind me to tell you about his dungarees.”
“Pansy.” Malfoy put his head in his hands.

“Dungarees?” Harry said, laughing.

Parkinson turned her slight, twisted smile onto Harry, and he thought that she was rather pretty, then. “No,” she said, “this one is better. Let me tell you about the time I saved him from the giant squid.”

“You didn’t save me from the giant squid,” Malfoy said, from between his hands. “I’d have got away.”

“No, you wouldn’t have. You see, Potter, Draco can’t swim.”

“You can call me Harry,” Harry said.

Malfoy took his hands off his face and looked at him.

“I can swim, of course,” Parkinson went on. “I’ve taken swimming lessons. I also know how to use gillyweed, and can do back-flips. I was on a synchronized team.”

“There’s synchronized swimming in the wizarding world?”

“If it’s pointless and ridiculous, the wizarding world has got it,” Malfoy said. It sounded a bit like a moan. “It’s got Pansy, hasn’t it?”

“I’m not ridiculous,” Parkinson said. “And we’re all a little bit pointless.”

“The lake,” said Harry. “And the giant squid?”

“Yes. It was early spring, and Draco was trying to impress me. He looks very fit in a bathing costume, you see.”

“Does he?” Harry asked, smirking at Malfoy.

Malfoy was red in the face. “Wouldn’t you like to know,” he mumbled, and didn’t look at him.

“Well, I’m sure he does now,” Parkinson said. “Draco is very fit in general. But then, you know, he was fourteen, and you had only recently dazzled all of us by saving Weasley for the second task in your very flattering shorts—”

“Er,” said Harry, “I’m supposed to remind you about Malfoy’s dungarees.”

“You did rather awe everyone,” said Parkinson. “Or at least Draco. He had stars in his eyes for weeks.”

“Lies,” Malfoy said. “It’s all lies. You know, she edited my articles for the paper, that year.”

“Anyway,” said Parkinson, “when I look back on it, Draco was rather pasty and skinny in a bathing costume, with a completely hairless chest—”

“I was fourteen!”

“But Potter had hair on his chest, didn’t he? I remember, you talked about it.”

“I never knew you were so observant, Malfoy,” Harry said, and smiled at Malfoy again.

“I didn’t have to be observant.” Malfoy was still red and his frown was furious. “You were the one
prancing around in front of everyone half-dressed, like a magnificent poof.”

“I am a poof,” said Harry. “And I wasn’t half dressed. I had to save Ron.”

“Draco’s a poof,” Parkinson supplied, helpfully, “if you didn’t already know. A rather magnificent one, at that.”

Malfoy just rolled his eyes. “As if you would know.”

“I wouldn’t,” said Parkinson. “I hated just about everything at fourteen, but I hated Draco much less, despite his being hairless. I would say I barely hated him at all. In fact, I hated him so very little that when I thought the giant squid was going to drown him, I was really very much depressed about it.”

Malfoy glared at her. “And you did a significant amount of eye-rolling before coming to save me.”

Harry raised a brow, still smiling. “So she did come save you.”

Malfoy drew himself up. “If you must know.”

“It’s okay,” Harry said. “Ron had to save me from a freezing lake.”

“Now, then.” Parkinson looked at Malfoy. “I am the Ron Weasley to your Harry Potter. How does that make you feel?”

Malfoy glowered some more. “Miserable.”

Parkinson patted Malfoy’s hand. “You look like a drowned cat.”

“Only with less hair. Hey Malfoy,” Harry said, “are you still—”

“Don’t you dare,” Malfoy said.

Harry shrugged. “You’re not so bad, Parkinson.”

“Thanks be to Merlin; he approves.” Parkinson smiled her little smile. “Call me Pansy.”

* * *

2 October, 2003

“Pansy said she might come around to the pub again tonight,” Malfoy said, as they walked out of the lift at the Ministry. “Just so you know.”

Harry stopped in his tracks. “Hermione’s coming tonight.”

Pansy had been joining them at the pub every other week or so, just never the weeks when Hermione was there.

“Oh.” Malfoy bit his lip. “That’s not . . . Pansy can be polite, you know.”

“Can she?” Harry asked.

Malfoy shook his hair out of his eyes. He wore it loose now, and the way he combed it, there was this golden lock that swept across his forehead. Sometimes a bit of it fell down in his eyes. Harry had to resist telling him sometimes to move it. “She can,” Malfoy said. “She doesn’t like to.”

“Pansy doesn’t really make small talk,” Harry said.
“It’s her parents. They always made her act like—she should have been with people who realized she had a brain.”

Harry really wanted him to move the bit of hair right now. In fact, he could easily just reach out and do it. But he didn’t.

Malfoy stood there indecisively, chewing on his lip. He had a bag on his shoulder, his files on contraband potions from the office; his hand was wrapped around the strap. “I’ll tell her not to come,” he said.

His knuckles, Harry noticed, were white. “No,” he heard himself say. It was a surprise to him as well. “She should come. I—Pansy’s all right.”

“Do you . . .” Malfoy didn’t finish whatever he was going to ask. “She’s trying to be better. I mean, a better person.”

“It’ll be okay.”

“Do you think Hermione will forgive her? I mean . . .” Malfoy looked at the ground. “Pansy was a right git to her at Hogwarts.”

Harry was surprised into laughing. “Malfoy, you were a right git to me at Hogwarts.”

“Right.” Malfoy just kept looking at the ground.

“Hey,” Harry said, suddenly feeling far less certain himself. “I can owl Hermione. She can stay behind.”

“No,” Malfoy said quickly. “I—Granger’s . . . not bad.”

Harry laughed again. “Not bad?”

“I think she’s quite brilliant actually,” Malfoy said.

He was still looking at the ground, hand still wrapped tightly around the strap. Harry couldn’t stop looking at the bit of hair, the way it caught the light.

Bringing his head up finally, Malfoy shook his hair back. “Let’s go, shall we? Pansy will be waiting.”

“I thought you said Pansy just might pop in?”

Malfoy smiled. He had a faint, distant smile for being polite, which he usually used on Harry. “That means she’s camped out a table.” He walked forward a bit, then turned back.

Harry was rooted to the spot, for some reason.

“Not frightened of a couple of girls, are you, Potter?”

“Not on your life,” said Harry, and followed him.

* *

When Hermione came up to the table and saw Pansy there, what she said was, “Oh.”

“Look at that.” Pansy looked up at Malfoy, who had got to his feet. “He does stand up for ladies.”
“I didn’t know.” Hermione looked from Pansy back to Harry to Pansy again.

Pansy rolled her eyes. “He’s not getting on his knees.”

“Don’t listen to her,” Malfoy said. “Please stay.”

Pansy whistled. “And he says please. Granger, what have you done?”

“Nothing,” Hermione said, and sat down.

“I’ve done nothing too,” said Pansy. “There’s nothing to do. Life is such a bore.”

“I meant, I’ve done nothing to Draco.” Hermione articulated her words carefully.

Pansy looked at her, then blinked, quite slowly, like a cat. “I’m sorry for making fun of you all those times. And for turning your hair into snakes.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “That was you?”

“Yes, it was me.” Pansy’s tone still rarely changed, but it was low and rather husky, and Harry had grown to find it a bit charming, really. Though he supposed he shouldn’t find it charming that Pansy had turned Hermione’s hair to snakes. “Clever, wasn’t it?”

“You never told me your hair was turned to snakes,” Harry said.

“I was too embarrassed.” Hermione frowned at Pansy. “I cried for days.”

“Your hair wasn’t snakes for days,” Harry said. “I’m sure I would have noticed that.”

“You are such a tool, Harry,” said Pansy.

“You may not realize it,” Malfoy said, “but Pansy’s trying to make a good impression.”

“No.” Hermione turned to him. “I didn’t realize at all.”

“Pansy’s always been envious of you.” Malfoy nodded at Hermione.

Hermione smirked. “Has she?”

“I have not,” Pansy said, but for the first time, Harry saw a bit of colour in her pale cheeks. “I only said—”

“She said she wished she’d dressed like you for the Yule Ball,” Malfoy said. “Because of the way The Prophet said you looked stunning, but really, she thought you looked stunning, too. That was around when you started to wear black, wasn’t it, Pansy?”

The colour faded from Pansy’s cheeks, but Harry found it intriguing nevertheless. “It was a statement,” Pansy said.

“Against the frilly pink things you wore to the Yule Ball?” Hermione asked sweetly.

“Let’s not dredge up history,” Pansy said, sounding bored again.

“Pansy loves to dredge up history,” Harry said. “Basically that’s all we do.”

“Oh, like the time she had antlers on her head?” said Hermione. “That sort of history?”
“No.” Harry smirked at Malfoy. “Usually it’s about Malfoy. And his dungarees.”

“That’s why you like Parkinson so much?” Hermione asked Harry. “You get the dirt on Draco Malfoy?”

Harry glanced at Pansy, who didn’t seem interested in the least that Harry liked her very much, and then at Malfoy, who looked terribly interested in spite of himself. “No,” said Harry. “I think she’s funny.”

“I’m a riot,” said Pansy, examining her nails. “You’ll soon find that out, Granger.”

“How is the lobby going?” Malfoy asked.

Hermione said, “About the same. Rackham may have budged on some of the issues, but as it turns out, it was just to give himself wiggle room. He doesn’t want anyone accusing him of Death Eater sympathies.”

*Rackham?* Pansy mouthed to herself, and went on looking at her nails.

“Rackham’s an eighth Veela on his mother’s side,” said Malfoy, “which is how he finagled the position. Since he’s passing—”

“Passing.” Hermione snorted. “He looks like a shrivelled goat man. He’s about as far flung from a Veela as Bertram Meagre is from signing the petition on Magical Beast rights.”

*Petition?* Pansy mouthed.

“I know,” said Malfoy, “but he can claim the heritage, which actually makes some people think he knows what he’s on about.”

“He has no idea!”

“Did you frame it the way that I suggested?” Malfoy said. “Especially regarding the werewolf claims. Since you don’t have to be born a werewolf to become one, it’s a slightly different matter. He might be more willing to acknowledge the petition if he comes around to the notion that we could be dealing with more and more pure-bloods being turned to werewolves, with so many still on the loose. It’s not just about bloodlines.”

“No.” Hermione snorted again. “It’s about party lines. Honestly, I think Rackham would listen; it’s Meagre who’s—”

Suddenly Pansy leaned across the table. “Do they always talk this way?”

“Pretty much,” said Harry, and sipped his lager.

Hermione and Malfoy went on talking about Rackham and Meagre and the petition, about prejudice and loyalty.

“Merlin, kill me now.” Pansy sat back.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t think Merlin’s listening.”

“I hate the world,” said Pansy.

“I hate it too,” said Harry.
Pansy smiled that little smile. “You’re okay.”

“No, really,” Harry said. “It’s politics. They’re just so—”

“Boring?”

“Hopeless,” Harry said. “It makes me really angry.”

She looked at him from under her eyelashes. They were quite short, actually, but she had nice eyes. They were quick, and saw things, though she always pretended like she didn’t. “You didn’t look so angry, listening to them,” she said.

“That’s because Hermione’s going to save the world,” Harry said.

“Is she now.” Pansy looked down at her nails again. “You really love her, don’t you?”

Harry thought about telling her that it wasn’t that kind of love, but Pansy already knew that he was gay. Besides which, sometimes he wondered what kind of love it wasn’t. He could gladly spend his life with just Hermione, if the question of sex wouldn’t inevitably come into it. So, “Yes,” was all he said.

Pansy glanced at Malfoy and Hermione. “I don’t think Draco’s going to save the world,” she said, after a while. “But let me tell you.” She turned her bright black eyes back on Harry. “He sure is going to try. When that boy gets something in his head, he just doesn’t ever let it go.”

“Malfoy’s got it in his head to save the world?” Harry asked, surprised.

Pansy raised a single brow, slowly, as was her wont. “You didn’t know?”

“No,” Harry said. “I mean, he says he’s changed his mind about the things he’s done. But that’s a far piece away from saving the world.”

Pansy looked at Malfoy and Hermione again. “Draco is a self-centred little twerp.” Harry opened his mouth, and Pansy peered at him. “Are you going to contradict me?”

Harry closed his mouth, and shrugged. “You know him better than me.”

“I do,” said Pansy. “And he thinks he’s the centre of the world. He blames himself, that most of Slytherin sided with the Dark Lord’s allies.”

“You’re right,” Harry said. “That’s . . . really self-centred,”

“You’re catching on.” Pansy glanced at Malfoy again. His cheeks were tinged faintly pink, either from the pint in front of him, or from talking to Hermione, Harry never could tell.

Malfoy always looked really happy here, at the pub.

“Now that he’s gone and changed his mind,” Pansy said, “he thinks it’s his responsibility to make amends. Not just for himself, but for . . . our kind.”

Peeling his eyes off Malfoy a little bit reluctantly, Harry turned back to Pansy. “Your kind?”

“Pure-bloods, Death Eaters, Slytherins, whinging spoiled brats, you name it,” Pansy said, “Draco’s going to drag them kicking and screaming onto the side of light, whether they like it there or not.”

“The side of light?”
Pansy waved a hazy hand. “Oh, you know. The light where we don’t perpetrate wars upon each other and all hold hands together, singing. It’s where all the fist-pumping radicals live these days.”

“You don’t think that might be a good idea?”

“Me?” Pansy shrugged. “I don’t care. I’ll likely follow wherever Draco leads. He can be convincing.”

Harry wanted to ask her how Malfoy was convincing, but he felt deep down that he would be asking for all the wrong reasons, and so didn’t ask it. “Don’t you care at all?” he said.

“About politics? No.”

“It’s more than just politics,” Harry said.

“Now you’re going to go off like Draco,” Pansy said. “I can tell. You two are peas in a pod.”

Harry blinked. “I’m not in a pod with Malfoy.”

“Aren’t you? Weren’t you going to say that it’s more than politics, Pansy, it’s the way we live? That it’s the shape of our world, and we’re the ones who’ve got to shape it? Trust me, I’ve heard it all before.”

“Er,” said Harry. “You have?”

Pansy just looked at him a while in her flat, unmoving way. “Draco was conflicted all through sixth and seventh year. There were dozens of times he almost did something different, and yet every time, he did the exact thing that his father wanted—that his father had bred him to do. He never did stand up and get to say, ‘I’m my own person, and I’m going to do this my own way’. Don’t you see that he regrets it? He’s going to spend the rest of his life looking for an opportunity to say just that, because he never did it when he feels he should have. Why do you think he started asking you to have drinks with him? He wanted to prove to himself that he could do it.”

Harry looked at Malfoy again. His cheeks were still pink, his eyes bright. His hair caught the light, and he moved his hands a lot when he talked. He frequently got rather excited, Harry realized, whenever they talked about anything—whether it was work or Quidditch or the office coffee. Harry had never really made the connection that it meant Malfoy was passionate.

“You better watch out,” Pansy said. “Your face will give you away.”

Harry didn’t know what his face was giving away, but he stopped looking at Malfoy abruptly. “Oh,” he said. “You mean, like yours?”

“Do you think I was born without any facial expressions?” Pansy said expressionlessly. “I used to practice in the mirror for hours.”

“Why?”

“So no one would know when they had hurt my feelings, of course. It worked for a while, but now it’s got to the point that when I want to make an expression, I can barely do it.”

“You’re doing it now,” Harry said.

“Am I?” she said, and smiled.

It wasn’t her little smirking smile. It was a real one.
“Potter,” Malfoy said suddenly. “You’ve done something to Pansy’s face.”

“It was only a temporary affliction,” Pansy said, but she was still smirking, just a little.

“What did you say?” Malfoy looked at Harry curiously.

“Er.” Harry licked his lips.

“We were talking about the time we heard a noise in that field beside my house, do you remember? You ran screaming like a girl.” Pansy turned back to Harry. “It turned out to be a goose.”

“Malfoy ran screaming from the forest when we were in first year,” Harry said. “But that actually turned out to be one of our professors possessed by Voldemort, so really Malfoy, it’s okay.”

Malfoy glowered. “Am I all you ever talk about?”

“Why, darling, are there other subjects?” Pansy asked, her flat voice almost pleasant.

“I suppose there are,” said Malfoy, “but few are more interesting.”

“He’s very charming,” Hermione said, “when he wants to be.”

Harry licked his lips again. “Actually, we were talking about politics.”

“You hate politics,” Malfoy told Pansy.

“Yes,” said Pansy. “We were talking about how I hate them.”

“You hate everything,” Malfoy said.

“See?” Pansy told Hermione. “I can be charming, too.”

* * *

18 December, 2003

“You go on ahead, Potter,” Malfoy said, just as Harry was stepping out of the lift. “I’ve just remembered; I’ve got to deliver these files.”

Harry put his hand on the lift door, and stepped back inside. “I’ll go with you.”

Malfoy put his hand where Harry’s had been to stop the door closing. “I’ve just got to pop down to Level Ten,” he said. “I’ll only be a few.”

“I’ll go with you,” Harry said.

Malfoy stepped out of the lift, still on the ground floor. Harry followed him.

Malfoy was looking at him in a strange sort of way, head tilted. He did this sometimes, looked at Harry as if he was one of Hermione’s Beings, a species Malfoy did not quite have figured out, and yet was interested in. Malfoy shook himself, and the look went away. “It’s not your case,” he said.

“Oh,” Harry said. “You mean it’s secret?”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “It’s Sengupta’s testimony on the use of the Muggle Artefact’s Department’s funds. I can hardly think of anything less secret. I just meant, the girls are waiting.”
“Oh,” Harry said again. He hadn’t thought of that. “You said you’d just be a few.”

“Gilmore will most likely snag me and demand to have a chat.” Malfoy was beginning to smile, his slight, polite smile. His hand was on his strap again, but it was loose. “You don’t need to escort me everywhere I go, Potter.” He shook his hair out of his eyes. “I’m not a woman. I can get there myself.”

Harry frowned. “I don’t escort women,” he said. “They can get where they need to go whenever they need to.”

“Tell that to Hermione.” Malfoy smirked.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Maybe I will. I’ll tell her you said she needed an assistant.”

Malfoy just smiled. His hand tugged on his strap. “I’ll—I’ll see you at the pub, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Harry said.

Malfoy went back to the lift, and Harry turned away.

* *

When Harry got to the pub, Pansy was by herself.

“Where’s Draco?” Hermione said, when she arrived.

“He had to stay late,” Pansy said. “Harry’s been crying into his cups.”

Hermione looked at Harry curiously, unwinding her scarf. “Have you, then?”

“What?” said Harry. “No.”

“It’s true,” Pansy said, “I lie. He’s just been telling me about the time you were a cat.”

Frowning, Hermione sat down next to Harry.

Harry slid her pint over to her. “Er,” he said. “Pansy said that Malfoy told her that Goyle and Crabbe—that Goyle said they followed a trail of sweets in second year, when the Chamber of Secrets was being opened, you remember.”

“Draco figured it out, did he?” Hermione said, not sounding very concerned. “I suppose he would. He’s clever.”

“Vince and Greg woke up stripped and tied down,” Pansy finished. “You were kinky bastards. So, Granger.” She put her chin on her hand. “Were you going to strip me and leave me in a cupboard, too?”

“I suppose you would like that,” Hermione said. “Where did you say Draco was?”

“He had to deliver some files,” Harry said. “He said it would only be a moment.”

“He keeps saying that,” Pansy said. “I think he misses him.”

“It’s not that,” said Harry.

“What is it, then?”
“It’s that you keep tricking me into telling you things about Hogwarts,” Harry said.

Pansy blinked. “Is there something wrong with a little honesty?”

“Anyway,” said Hermione, “I intended to be Millicent Bulstrode, not you.”

“So you like them curvy,” Pansy said. “I never would have guessed. Don’t worry. I think you would be very pretty as a kitty.”

Hermione looked at Harry. “What else have you told her?”

“Worried about blackmail?” Pansy said.

“Er,” said Harry. “The fight you and Ron were having third year.”

“And fourth year,” said Pansy.

Hermione shrugged. “It was all of Hogwarts, really.”

Pansy raised a slow brow. “Letting bygones by, are we?”

“Sure.” Hermione shrugged again. “Why not? Draco and I have.”

“Yes,” said Pansy. “Draco.”

Hermione put her hair over her shoulder. “You know, I’m not really as interested as Harry in Draco’s dungarees.”

“That’s a pity.” Pansy stirred her drink.

There was quite a long silence.

“Your hair looks very nice,” Pansy said eventually, looking up at Hermione.

Hermione looked startled. “I . . . thanks.”

Pansy went on stirring her drink. “What are you using on it? I know it frizzes.”

“Er,” said Hermione. She was probably looking for the insult in that statement.

Harry knew he was.

“Vladimir’s Elixir,” Hermione said finally. Her voice was very careful.

“Yes, I suppose that makes sense.” Pansy stirred her drink some more. “Well, that covers hair. Would you like to talk about cosmetics, now?”

“Er,” Hermione said again, “I’m not actually all that interested in hair and make-up.”

“Thank Merlin.” Pansy just kept stirring. “I suppose we should talk about men, then?”

Hermione looked at Harry. “Harry’s sitting right here.”

“Excellent,” said Pansy. “Men bore me. Let’s talk about objective morality, for a while.”

“Objective morality?” Hermione’s brow furrowed.
“Perhaps you’ve heard of it? People like Draco and your boyfriend here are obsessed with it.”

Hermione’s brow furrowed further. “Harry’s not my boyfriend.”

“Details.” Pansy stirred. “If we’re going to do it, we better do it quick. We can’t do it while Draco’s around.”

Hermione’s brow would be ripe for harvest, if she wasn’t careful. “Why not?”

“We don’t talk about morality.” Pansy took her straw out of her drink, and laid it on the table. “He’d disown me.”

“He wouldn’t,” Hermione began.

“He would,” Pansy said. “I have no moral centre. It upsets him. He tries to be accepting, but really, he just keeps trying to make me see things, over and over again, and I’m not going to. Quite honestly, I don’t care to.”

“What’s he trying to make you see?” Harry asked, interested.

“That we have to work together to build a better world,” said Pansy. “That his dad was . . . totally misguided. That Volde—Old Snakeface was a crazy insane psychotic serial killer, and that we can’t let that happen again, and we’re the only ones who can make sure it doesn’t, that sort of thing; take your pick.”

“I,” said Harry. “Draco says those things?”

Pansy’s lip curled a little. “Not in mixed company.”

“I believe it,” said Hermione. “He really wants to make things better, Harry.”

“I believe that,” Harry said, mostly because it wasn’t like he hadn’t been sitting there for all those weeks with Hermione and Malfoy arguing about politics. Though Malfoy had mostly been arguing about how Hermione should see the pure-blood side of things, he didn’t seem to be doing so to change Hermione’s mind—rather to adjust her arguments and make them even stronger. But Harry had never heard Malfoy say what Pansy had said about wishing he had stood up and acted on his own during the war, and he certainly never heard him say his dad was misguided.

“And you won’t,” Pansy said, because Harry had said the last bit aloud. “I said that he’s self-righteous; I never said he wasn’t tetchy.”

“Good to know,” said Harry.

Hermione was looking with curiosity at Pansy. “I assume you don’t agree with him.”

Pansy shrugged. “It’s not that I don’t agree. I just don’t care.”

Hermione frowned. “You care about the world, don’t you? And the future?”

“Not really, no.” Pansy leaned in. Her hair was done up in these loops beside her ears that twisted around toward the back, and Harry thought it was strange, that someone could care about their hair that much, but not about the world. “Look,” said Pansy. “I care about a very limited number of things. One of them is Draco Malfoy. Another is my brother. Another is Millicent Bulstrode. Other than that, mostly I care that I am well-dressed and well-fed and comfortable, and warm when I want to be warm, and cool when I would like to be cool, and that there is a breeze coming in from the
parlour when I wish it, and that I only ever have to deal with Mother when I choose to.”

“Then you don’t care about your parents?” Harry asked.

“Define ‘care’. Would I save them in a fire? Probably not.” Pansy sipped her Bloody Fairy. “Oh, don’t look at me that way. I’d save them if it were at no risk to myself, of course, but would I Apparate into a burning building at the risk of my own death to save them? No. Lots of people wouldn’t; I’m just more honest than the rest of them.”

“But,” said Harry, “they’re your parents.”

“More importantly,” said Hermione, “they’re people.”

Harry looked at Hermione then. He wasn’t sure what she meant by that.

“The way you’re looking at me now,” said Pansy, “is why I never discuss these things with Draco. That boy would Apparate into a burning building just to make his daddy proud.”

“But not any more,” Harry said.

Pansy raised a brow.

Harry began, “You said—”

“Oh.” Pansy waved a hand. “If Lucius says jump, Draco still says, ‘How high?’ He’s never not going to. It’s just, his next question is always, ‘Is it an evil jump?’ or ‘Is it a Death Eater jump?’ And then if he decides the answer is yes, he doesn’t do it. Sometimes he doesn’t do it just to be a brat. But trust me—Draco will always want to jump.”

Harry thought of Malfoy, the sun in his hair, the absent little smile he always gave to Harry. He thought of Malfoy’s hand on the strap of his bag, the way that Pansy said that Malfoy was trying so hard, the way that Malfoy looked so pink and excited whenever he talked to Hermione.

Harry thought of Malfoy first asking him to the pub, realizing now that Malfoy had been plenty nervous, and for some reason it made him feel so, so sad.

“But you don’t agree with Lucius,” Hermione said abruptly.

Pansy blinked. “Goodness, no.”

“You’re not touting the Death Eater party line.”

“Of course not,” Pansy said. “The Death Eaters were a bunch of fanatics, anyway. Draco’s right about that. You can’t really call them a party, can you? Just a bunch of wacko fundamentalists gone completely mental.”

Hermione frowned. “So, you’re moderate.”

“No.” Pansy slipped her straw back into her drink. “I’m a reformist, just like Draco.”

“Malfoy’s a reformist?” Harry asked.

Pansy spared him a baleful glance. “Haven’t you been listening?”

“I’m confused,” said Hermione.
“I don’t believe in Draco’s cause,” said Pansy. “I could care less. But I care for Draco, and I care for
those other things I mentioned, and it seems like right now the best way to protect those things is to
 toe the line with bleeding hearts, just like yourself. It’s really the only option that makes sense.”

Harry felt oddly stricken. “That’s why you come out to the pub with us?” he said.

“Don’t be such an utter imbecile,” said Pansy. “I come out to the pub with you because I find you
entertaining. You’re very similar to Draco, you know.”

Harry began, “But you just said—”

Pansy turned to Hermione. “As for you, Draco says you’ve got a brilliant mind, and I think he might
be right.”

Hermione blushed. “Draco—he says that?”

“Don’t wet your knickers,” said Pansy. “I just mean, you may be able to understand what I’ve said.
Draco never can. Merlin knows I don’t understand him.”

Frowning, Hermione picked up her drink, put it back down. “I think I do understand,” she said
finally. “I don’t know. It’s interesting. I’ve never really thought about it that way before.” She paused
thoughtfully. “When you think about it, I suppose there are probably many people who are just like
you. Only they don’t think about it that way either.”

“I suppose not.” Pansy knocked back the rest of her drink. “Granger, you’re all right.”

“It’s Hermione,” said Hermione, still looking thoughtful.

“Well, hello,” said Pansy. “I’m Pansy.”

Malfoy arrived several minutes later. “They’re talking about hair products,” Harry said, as he pulled
out his chair. “What took you so long?”

“Gilmore, didn’t I tell you?” Malfoy looked amused. “I was just twenty minutes.” Reaching out, he
 took a sip from a pint.

Harry wondered if he noticed that the pint belonged to Hermione, who was talking to Pansy about
 hair products with an enthusiasm that had been completely absent before.

“Did you miss me?”

“What?” Harry said, looking up from the pint to Malfoy’s face.

“Anyway, hair?” Malfoy still looked amused. “I’m surprised. That’s so . . .”

“Girly?” Harry said. “It’s true, they had to warm up to it.”

“Did they now?”

“They had to talk about meta-ethics and the philosophy of moral universalism first,” said Harry.

Malfoy’s eyes went much larger, and then in the next second, his gaze grew heavy-lidded, lazy.
“Those are big words, Potter.” His voice was a low murmur.

Harry smirked. “I recently learned them.”
Malfoy’s gaze drifted up the length of Harry’s face. “We could talk about your hair,” he drawled.

Harry tugged his fringe self-consciously. “It’s not—”

“We could,” Pansy said suddenly. “We could talk about your hair all evening, Harry. Don’t think we don’t already, sometimes.”

“Do we?” Malfoy looked at her in that lazy way, smirking.

“Well,” said Pansy, “you do.”

“Do you?” Harry said, in a pretty good imitation of Malfoy’s drawl. He smirked at Malfoy.

“A little of Hermione’s elixir would probably go a long way,” Malfoy said, looking back at Harry’s hair.

Harry pushed up his glasses. “How did you know Hermione wears elixir anyway?”

Malfoy shrugged. “I thought it obvious.”

“Also, I told him,” Hermione said, a little piqued.

Harry frowned. He didn’t remember them talking about hair at all, any of the times they’d had drinks at the pub. “When?”

“We met for lunch last week,” Hermione said.

“I,” Harry said. “Oh.”

Malfoy looked surprised. “Do you have to ask before meeting me for lunch?” he asked Hermione.

“No.” Hermione sighed. “It’s just, it’s Ron. He’ll be jealous.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “Weasley.”

Harry wasn’t sure why he felt so confused, all of the sudden. “You’re not going to tell Ron?” was the best reason he could think of.

“This is going to be interesting,” Pansy said.

* * *

Next

This entry was originally posted to Dreamwidth. Read Comments | Reply
8 January, 2004

“You really think this is a good idea?” Harry said, stepping out of the lift at the Ministry.

“Of course,” said Malfoy. “It’s my idea. Therefore it’s bloody brilliant.”

“Want to keep that modesty to a minimum?”

“You use foreign words,” Malfoy said. “Why are we stopping here?”

Harry was standing near the Fountain of the Brethren. “I don’t know,” he said. “Because what if Ron kills you?”

Malfoy smirked. “Would you be upset?”

“Yes,” said Harry, and as Malfoy preened, went on, “Ron would be a murderer, and I’m an Auror, and it would mean I’d have to take my best friend to Azkaban. So, yes, I’d be upset.”

Malfoy stopped preening. “You never know. I may kill him.”

“Then I would have to take you to Azkaban.”

Malfoy started preening again. “Would you be upset?”

Harry looked at him a little while. Malfoy didn’t have his bag—maybe he really thought Ron would murder him, and that there was no use bringing work home with him. His suit was grey and he was holding his jacket and robes; his waistcoat was—well, it wasn’t half bad, and his white sleeves were turned up at the cuffs. Harry understood why people used to dress that way.

Like, a hundred years ago.

“What?” Malfoy said. He had stopped preening.

“Nothing,” said Harry. “Let’s go.”

“No,” said Malfoy, catching up. “What?”

Harry spared him a glance. “You look like you’ve dressed for a funeral.”

“I have done.” Harry threw him another glance, and Malfoy grinned at him. “We’re meeting Weasley, aren’t we?”

“He’s not that bad,” said Harry.

Malfoy’s open grin changed into the more familiar smirk. “I’ll tell him you said so.”

“Look,” said Harry, and stopped again.

“I’m looking, Potter.”

Malfoy had this sort of . . . mood now, whenever he looked at Harry. It was more than just the polite little smile he used to have; it had broadened into an aura of vague amusement. He didn’t seem to
think that Harry was hilarious, or anything like that; he just seemed to think that Harry was . . . funny. Very funny.

It annoyed Harry to no end.

“Look,” Harry said again. “Hermione likes you. And I like her, and Ron, and she likes Ron, and I like Pansy, so can you just—just not be a prat, okay?”

Malfoy suddenly stopped smiling. He was quiet for a moment, chewing on the inside of his cheek. “When have I been a prat?” he said finally, his voice quiet.

You were just now, Harry wanted to say, because of how amused Malfoy had just looked, the way he had been smiling—but Harry couldn’t put his finger on what was wrong, exactly, with smiling, so he didn’t say it.

“I mean in recent memory.” Malfoy’s voice was still quiet. “I can think of a thousand times, when we were younger. I’m sure you can think of a thousand different times. But that was then, and—and if I have been a prat to you at all since I asked you to the pub, I would like to know, so that I can—”

“You haven’t been,” Harry said quickly. “I’m just nervous. About Ron. He’s—he’s pretty sensitive, and you’re . . .”

Malfoy waited.

The light was bright enough to see little motes of dust in the air.

“I’m what?” Malfoy said at last, in that quiet way.

Harry shrugged. “You’re Malfoy.”

Malfoy’s jaw tightened. “Trust me,” he said. “I’m doing what I can to fix it.” He turned on his heel and headed toward the Floo.

Harry wanted to run after him, to tell them that it wasn’t what he had meant. It wasn’t what he had meant at all; it was just . . . it was what Ron would say, and Harry wanted Malfoy to be prepared for it. That was all.

It didn’t change the fact that Harry had said it too, which made him no better than Ron—quite a bit worse, actually, as he hadn’t actually given Ron a chance, to see what he would do.

And it made him fifty times more of a prat than Malfoy, anyway. Sighing, Harry turned and followed Malfoy out the Floo.

Pansy had been right; this certainly was going to be interesting.

* 

Inviting Ron to the pub had been Malfoy’s idea, and in Malfoy’s idea, Pansy wasn’t invited.

“You’re too much,” he had told her.

Pansy had looked bored and said, “I’m more than any man can handle.”

Ron and Hermione were already at the pub when Malfoy arrived, Harry trailing a little behind. Malfoy didn’t even hesitate; he walked straight up to the table and thrust out his hand.
It was fairly aggressive, and Harry knew that it was all his fault.

Ron, because he was Ron, and thirty times the man Harry ever gave him credit for, took it and shook it.

Malfoy pulled out a chair and sat down. Then he began counting on one hand. “I’m sorry for calling Hermione names. I’m sorry you vomited slugs, even if it was your own damn fault. I’m sorry my father gave your sister that journal. I’m sorry I made fun of your friends. I’m sorry I tried to get Hagrid fired, and I’m sorry I almost got your friend’s hypogriff killed.” He started on the other hand. “I’m sorry I made light of Cedric Diggory; I’m sorry I was in the Inquisition Squad; I’m—”

“You’re going to start needing to use toes, pretty soon,” Ron said. In his Ron-ish way, he sounded vaguely alarmed.

“I haven’t even got to the good ones yet,” Malfoy said.

“I don’t know,” said Hermione gently, “your carrying on about that scratch from Buckbeak was first rate.”

“I’m sorry I was a Death Eater,” Malfoy said.

Ron looked at him curiously. “Sorry I called you ‘Amazing Bouncing Ferret’ for so long.”

“I’m sorry about William Weasley’s face,”

“Who, now?” Ron made an odd chuckling sound. “You can call him Bill.”

“I’m sorry I let Death Eaters into Hogwarts,” Malfoy said.

“Er,” said Ron. “Buy us a round, we’ll call it even, yeah?”

“I’m sorry I almost killed you.”

“Well,” said Ron, a little helplessly. “It happens.”

Hermione looked reprovingly at Harry.

What? he mouthed, because it wasn’t like she could just know. No one was that good.

“So,” said Ron, into the awkward silence. He laughed again, uncomfortably.

Malfoy was glaring down at the table.

“Hermione says you like chess.” Ron just kept at it, really. He never quit; that’s why he was Harry’s friend.

Pansy had said Malfoy was that way, too.

“Yes,” Malfoy said. Grimacing, he looked up. “I’m sorry. I just had some things I needed to get off my chest. Apparently.”

“Okay,” said Ron. “I get it. Just, you’re really gonna be sorry, if you keep apologizing. I mean . . . that’s not actually a threat. I just . . .” Ron shrugged. “Hermione says you’re all right, now. And honestly, you haven’t been a git to me in years.”

Ron’s laugh was so, so awkward, and Harry loved him. He loved him deeply, and dearly, and would
never tell him that, because it was sort of gay. And even though he was gay, he didn’t feel that way for Ron. But maybe he would have done, if he had been at all attracted to him, if Hermione wasn’t in love with him, if a thousand things hadn’t happened the way they had.

Harry could have hit himself—for being the one to almost fuck this up, for not trusting it, for saying what he had to Malfoy at the Ministry—if it would have helped at all.

“I do like chess,” Malfoy said. “Hermione says you’re brilliant at it. Do you . . .” His gaze drifted in Harry’s direction, but didn’t quite make it there. His eyes snapped back on Ron’s face, and he looked him square in the eye. “Fancy a match sometime, Weasley?”

“Sure,” said Ron. “And really, if you’re going to call Bill Bill, you can call me Ron.”

“All right,” said Malfoy, brows raised. “You can call me Draco. Tell me, do you play Go, Ron?”

That name sounded really, really weird coming out of Malfoy’s mouth. Ron looked like he thought so too.

Even Malfoy looked like he thought so too, but neither of them budged.

“Er,” said Ron. “No? As I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“It’s a wizarding game,” said Malfoy. “Hermione says you excel at strategy. You’ll like it.”

Ron shrugged. “Okay. You might as well teach it to me some time.”

“Yes.” And then, just like that, all the stiffness was gone, and Malfoy was suddenly very Malfoy, which meant that he was smirking. “How about those Cannons?” he said.

“They’ll win this year,” Ron said, as though on cue.

Malfoy snorted. “Not bloody likely. Have you even looked at the stats on their newest Chaser?”

“Up and comer,” Ron said promptly.

“Tosh,” said Malfoy. “No one else wanted her.”

Ron began, “Baxter Gibson—”

“Has been carrying the entire team for three years running,” said Malfoy. “And where has he been carrying them? Straight up to the bottom. Throw me another.”

“Cassandra Clark—”

Malfoy faked a yawn. “You really are as ridiculous about this team as they say.”

Glowering, Ron turned to Hermione. “What all did you tell him?”

“About Quidditch?” Hermione said, innocent. “You know I won’t talk about Quidditch. Other than to say it’s—”

“—an unnecessary expression of violence—” Ron began.

“—not to mention dangerous—” said Harry.

“—that is to say, completely demeaning to the intellect, if you have half a brain—” said Ron.
“—not to mention a substitution for the phallic envy that dominates the workings of our oppressive patriarchy,” said Malfoy.

Ron gave a low whistle. “Oy. You’re good.”

“I have practice,” Malfoy said. When Ron looked at him inquiringly, he explained, “Pansy.”

“Parkinson, eh?” said Ron. “I knew she wasn’t half bad.”

“Half-bad?” said Hermione. “Whenever I say those things, you cover your ears and say, ‘la la la’.”

“But I like you,” said Ron. “Even when you say those things. Sometimes especially when you say those things, if you’re using really big words like ‘phallic’ and—whatsit, ‘kyriarchy’.”

“Big words always do get me hot,” Malfoy said.

“Phallic is not a big word,” Hermione said, frowning.

“Dirty,” said Malfoy, and leered.

“You’re part of the problem with the patriarchy,” said Hermione.

Malfoy turned to Ron. “I always cover my ears and say, ‘mi mi mi’ when Pansy uses foul language like this with me. You and I should form a singing group together.”

“You’re always saying, ‘you you you’,” Harry said, just to be a part of the conversation.

Malfoy barely glanced at him. “What other teams do you support, Ron?”

“Cannons are enough for me, mate.”

Malfoy shook his head sadly. “My soul weeps for you.”

“Well,” said Ron, and shifted in his chair. “Er, what about you? What teams do you support?”

“Holyhead Harpies,” Malfoy said promptly.

Ron brightened considerably. “Really? My sister plays for that team.”

Malfoy smiled. “I know. That’s one reason I support them. She’s really quite good.”

Ron puffed up at that. “She is, isn’t she?”

“Of course,” said Malfoy, “she’ll be utterly slaughtered by the Tornadoes.”

Ron frowned. “What do you mean, she’ll be—”

Hermione leaned in. “What did you say to him?”

“What?” said Harry. He didn’t know what Hermione was talking about, but Ron and Malfoy were still talking, and he wanted to hear what they were going to say—even if he had heard Malfoy argue this case a hundred time already. He knew which teams Malfoy favoured; they had talked about it a lot in those first several months, when it had just been them. They had violently disagreed.

Harry found he missed it.

“What did you say to Draco?” Hermione said again.
Abruptly, Harry’s focus snapped onto Hermione. “What do you mean?” he asked blankly.

Hermione huffed. “When he came in, he was in a strop about something.”

“He wasn’t in a strop.”

Tucking a bit of hair behind her ear, Hermione said, “I know Malfoy wanted to get this right. For our sakes.”

Harry glanced at Malfoy. He was talking to Ron easily, as though they had known each other for years—which they had, Harry supposed, but not like this. Never like this. Malfoy looked comfortable, sitting there in his stupid, three piece suit—nothing at all like the pointy, twitchy person Harry had known at Hogwarts. This person was a man—he was grown-up—he looked a little like his father, actually, but not in a bad way, just... his shoulders were broader, and his jaw was a little more square than it used to be, though it was still narrow.

Malfoy had expressive hands—long, capable hands, that said things in weird shapes when he talked, and his voice had this particular timbre; it reminded Harry of—

“Harry,” said Hermione. “What did you say to him?”

“What?” said Harry. “I didn’t say anything.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I know you said something.”

Harry frowned at her. “How?”

“Oh, Harry.” She looked at him rather sadly. “No one can get to Malfoy quite the way you can.”

“He wasn’t in a strop,” Harry said.

“Fine, have it your way.”

“They’re getting on, aren’t they?” Harry said, looking at Ron and Malfoy again. “That’s all that matters, isn’t it?”

Hermione huffed again. “Yes. I suppose that’s all that really does.”

* * *

**15 January, 2004**

“Hey, Malfoy?” Harry had headed over to SO to catch Malfoy before their usual meeting in the lift, finding him at his desk.

Malfoy was just reaching for his bag. “Hey, Potter. Headed to the pub?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I wanted to talk to you.”

Malfoy raised a brow.

Harry pushed his glasses up. “I’m sorry. About last week.”

Malfoy frowned. “Last week?”

“Er.” Harry’s eyes searched Malfoy’s face. “I mean, about saying you were going to muck it up with
Ron. That was out of order. You’re not—it wasn’t fair. I’m sorry.”

“Oh.”

Harry stood there for a while. It wasn’t as though Malfoy had said anything about it since then. He was the potions expert for Specialist Operations, and Harry was an Auror, so Harry didn’t see all that much of him at work, except when they had a case that Harry needed potions advice on. When Harry had seen him at the Ministry, Malfoy had been nothing but polite.

“All right,” said Malfoy.

That’s it? Harry wanted to ask, but didn’t. “Okay,” he said instead.

Malfoy looked at him curiously. “Pansy asked whether she should come tonight.”

“Why shouldn’t she?”

Shrugging, Malfoy looked away. “It’s not like our respective friends have a very good history together.”

Harry frowned. “Is this because of what I said?”

“I wouldn’t want anyone to be made uncomfortable.”

“I’m not uncomfortable,” Harry said. “We’re not uncomfortable.” For bloody sake, Harry wanted to say, I’m a Gryffindor.

But it was he who had acted uncomfortable last time.

Malfoy just shrugged again. “All right,” he said. “I’ll owl her.”

* *

When Harry and Malfoy got to the pub, Ron and Hermione were sitting side by side at a table, so Harry and Malfoy ordered drinks and sat across from them. A little while later, Pansy arrived. “Don’t get up on my account,” she said.

Malfoy made a face, and Ron looked confused, possibly because no one was standing.

“Hullo Weasley,” Pansy said, and sat down at the head of the table, next to Malfoy and Hermione.

Ron said, “Uh. Hi, Parkinson.”

“I’m sorry about the song,” Pansy said.

Ron scratched the back of his neck. “Song?”

“Weasely Is Our King,” said Pansy. “Shall I jog your memory by singing a few bars?”

“Pansy.” Malfoy’s tone was sharp.

“No, no,” Ron said, though Harry thought his bluster sounded false. “Go right on ahead.”

“Pansy,” Malfoy said again.

Pansy didn’t sing. Harry couldn’t really imagine Pansy singing. Instead, she spoke in a sing-song voice, the way you do with nursery rhymes. Harry wondered if she had said it over and over to cheer
people up, the way you do with nursery rhymes.

“This Weasley budget is but a string,
That’s why he can’t buy an-y-thing,
That’s why the Sly-ther-ins all sing,
Weasley is our King.”

Harry was impressed, actually. He thought Pansy may have achieved several other pitches besides her usual monotone.

“Please don’t be upset, Ron,” Malfoy said. “Pansy’s not going to be in our singing group.”

“You should be upset, if I’m not to be in your singing group,” said Pansy. “Malfoy gave up lyrics writing when he couldn’t rhyme with ‘ugly’. I’m much better with rhymes; I kept at it. There are ninety-seven verses, by the way.”

“See?” Hermione nudged Ron. “I told you you would like her.” She turned to Pansy innocently.

“Pansy, do you remember when you accidentally ate those puking pustules in fifth year?”

“Ha ha,” said Pansy.

“I’ve always wondered what to call the exact shade of colour your face turned,” Hermione said. “At first I thought olive, but then Parvati suggested chartreuse.”

“Is this your way of implying you put pustules in my salad?” Pansy said.

“No,” Hermione said proudly. “It was Ron!”

Ron looked from Pansy to Hermione, then back to Pansy. “Sorry about that,” he told her.

“No hard feelings,” said Pansy. “I was a complete cow at Hogwarts.”

“Er.” Ron scratched the back of his neck again. “You’re not going to list off all the mistakes you made, are you? Because it could take a while.”

“The only mistake in Weasley Is Our King is that ‘porcine’ doesn’t rhyme with ‘phlegmatic’ at all,” said Pansy.

Ron stared at her, then looked across at Malfoy. “I see what you mean,” he said, “about the vocabulary.”

“Malfoy doesn’t have a problem with it,” Pansy said.

Malfoy smirked. “Ron doesn’t either.”

“Doesn’t he, now.” Pansy looked at Ron, interest evident in her slowly raising brow.

Frowning, Hermione said, “The obvious rhyme for ‘porcine’ is ‘asinine’.”

“Thanks, sweetie,” said Ron.

Hermione frowned some more. “Well, it is.”

“Pansy did say she was sorry she wanted to give me over to Voldemort,” Harry said.

“I only said it to get on his good side,” said Pansy.
“What are you going to do now you’re on my good side?” Harry said.

“I don’t know yet,” said Pansy. “I consider it an investment in my future. Sort of like giving you up to Snakeface would have b—”

“Don’t,” Malfoy said.

Pansy looked at Malfoy, whose jaw was clenched. Both her brows went up, which actually seemed a bit energetic of her, considering that it was Pansy. “Draco,” she said. “You know I don’t think—”

“Just don’t,” Malfoy said.

Pansy shut her mouth.

Malfoy frowned down at his drink.

The pub was called The Round Table. The tables weren’t round; they were large and dark, made of heavy wood, with knots in them. The air was warm and the beer was good, and the food rather sophisticated, for a pub, but hearty; there was usually music of the sort you’d have found in Irish taverns maybe three hundred years ago, in the Muggle world.

Harry liked it. It was just the sort of place to go with friends to have a pint, but he’d never been there before Draco Malfoy took him there. Malfoy had looked pleased with himself when Harry had said that he had never been. He’d looked even more pleased a week after they had been the first time, when Harry had stopped him outside the lift and asked him if he’d care to go again. Harry was fairly certain Malfoy wasn’t happy just because Harry liked the pub.

“I think it’s safe to say we’ve all done things we regret,” said Harry, his voice quieter than he actually meant it to be.

Malfoy turned toward him slightly, but stopped when Ron said, “I sort of regret not hearing the other ninety-five verses of Weasley Is Our King.”

“I would sing them all,” said Pansy, “but I can’t in mixed company. Some of them are dirty.”

“Dirty?” Ron choked on air, a bit.

“Yes,” said Pansy. “Your shoulders didn’t depress me, at Hogwarts. Everything else depressed me. Your biceps depress me even less, now.”

“’Malign’,” said Hermione. “’Blood line’. ‘Has no spine’. See, there are plenty of things that rhyme with porcine. Or ‘bovine’. You could have even just used ‘swine’.”

Pansy looked at her. “I couldn’t use ‘has no spine’.”

“Why not?” said Hermione. “It’s a perfectly valid rhyme.”

Pansy rolled her eyes. “We’re talking about Weasley. Not Percival, obviously.”

“You can call me Ron,” said Ron. “Percy’s got a spine.”

“Oh,” said Pansy. “Where does he keep it?”

Ron smiled. “In a drawer, I think. But I’ve seen it once or twice.”

“Don’t even get me started on phlegmatic,” said Hermione. “Static, erratic, fanatic. I can go on.”
“I’m going to get us a drink.” Standing up, Pansy headed for the bar.

Ron watched her go. “She’s something else.”

“A better word for phlegmatic would have been hebetudinous,” Hermione said.

“Very nice,” said Malfoy.

Hermione brightened. “Thanks.”

Ron put his arm around Hermione and squeezed. “Want to tell Malfoy your big news, honey?”

“Oh!” Hermione brightened further still. “I got Rackham to sign it!”

“Really?” Malfoy looked surprised, then smiled. “Good work. I would have thought he’d never come around. Honestly, Hermione, that was well done.”

Hermione was basically a Lumos at this point. “I think it was the point you made about werewolves, and I’ve been talking to him about the trolls. And the house-elves. I really appreciate your perspective on those things, Draco. It really helps.”

“Oh.” Malfoy looked down at his pint. Harry didn’t even have to look at him to know that his cheeks were pink. “I—you’re welcome.”

“Now all she’s got to do is run for Minister,” Ron said, and squeezed her again.

“Really, Ron,” Hermione said, looking very pleased. “You’ve got to have tons of experience for that. I don’t work for government, remember?”

“Why is that, exactly?” Malfoy asked.

“They think she’s too radical,” said Harry. “I think you would be a great Minister, Hermione.”

Malfoy turned toward him again, just slightly. “I didn’t know you paid attention, Potter.”

“I pay attention,” Harry said. “I just don’t like what I see.”

Hermione said, “That’s why—”

“She’s going to say that that’s why I should get involved,” Harry said, turning towards Malfoy in order to explain. “But it’s exactly why I shouldn’t. When I get involved, I get angry. And no one wants to see me angry.”

Malfoy studied him a moment. “Some people might.”

“Sometimes I wish I could just tell everyone to shut up and listen to each other,” said Harry.

“If everyone shuts up, no one’s talking,” Malfoy pointed out.

“Yeah.” Harry turned back to the table and took a sip of his lager. “Except me. You see how it’s a problem.”

Malfoy was looking at him, not with his usual smile, but he was looking at him, and he hadn’t quite done that since Harry had said what he had said last week.

When Harry thought about how Malfoy had acted around him before last week—the aura of
amusement with which Malfoy had regarded him—Harry realized Malfoy hadn’t been laughing at him at all. Malfoy had been—Malfoy had been playful. It had been something approaching fondness.

And Harry had gone and fucked it up.

He took another gulp of lager. He didn’t know when it had begun to register at all, whether he had Draco Malfoy’s approval.

“Harry’s got control issues,” Ron said.

“Thanks,” Harry said.

Ron grinned. “No problem, mate.”

“Hermione can do politics,” Harry said. “She’d be a good politician. She’s not going to hex anyone’s bollocks off.”

“Probably,” Ron said.

Malfoy raised a brow. “Speaking from personal experience, Weasley?”

Hermione leaned in, smirking. “Would you like to find out, Malfoy?”

Malfoy smirked as well. “Not on your life. I would like to know, though, what you plan to do about Meagre.”

Hermione started talking about Bertram Meagre. Meagre was a member of the Wizengamot, and influential with some of the other members, and it was they who had cut down the last legislation regarding rights for fairies—which were treated basically like insects by wizarding laws. Even if fairies were annoying, Harry thought it should have been pretty clean-cut, but of course, some of the pure-blood old guard were pulling up ancient instances of fairies stealing children, and the like. Though Hermione had read the histories, it wasn’t the same at all as being close to a family who had had incidents with changelings, because some of those families were still recovering, Malfoy claimed, even if it had been ten generations back.

“But what about the changelings themselves?” Hermione said. “Does anyone even care about them?”

“Er,” said Malfoy. “Well, generally changelings suck the life out of the human child’s mother, so . . .”

“So no one cares about them? That’s horrific,” said Hermione. “Those children were abandoned by their parents, just given to people who have no way of understanding what they are. How are changelings to know how to behave in this world?”

“I . . .” Malfoy glanced at Harry. “I hadn’t thought of it that way,” he said.

“Think of how lonely those fairy children must have been,” said Hermione, “how different than us they are, and how little they understood.”

Malfoy’s gaze started to slide in Harry’s direction again, and Harry wasn’t thinking about why, just that Malfoy was going to look at him. But Malfoy refocused on Hermione instead, and said, “Yes, I understand. Our worlds are very different. But there aren’t any—there aren’t any changelings these days, and fairies have lost a lot of the power they held, so—”
“So we should just take *everything* away from them?”

Malfoy sneered. “That’s not what I’m saying at all, Hermione, and you know it.”

“No need to get excited mate,” Ron said, in a perfectly easy way.

Hermione bit her lip, and Malfoy looked absolutely devastated. “I’m sorry—”

“No,” Hermione said. “I’m sorry, I just get so—”

“Let me.” Malfoy leaned in. “I don’t mean to be a prat. I just want you to understand—the fey are a people who were very, very powerful. They had a world that was basically their own, plenty of land, and no one questioned them because they were just *there*. They did whatever they wanted; they took whatever they wanted. They hurt whoever they wanted, and they didn’t give a toss for anyone else.

“And then the world changed, didn’t it, and they woke up one day and discovered they didn’t have the run of fields and forests any more. Their first instinct wasn’t to accept it, to work together with the humans and the Mug—the humans and make a better world. Their first instinct was to fight it, and they were crushed. And then they didn’t have anything, and what was more, they were being punished for being what they were—who they were—the horrible, dreadful things they were, even though they had been those things another lifetime ago. You think I can’t identify with that? You think I can’t understand?”

Malfoy put his arm out on the table, and Harry wished he wouldn’t do it. He wished he didn’t have to see, but Malfoy was folding back his pressed white sleeve, slowly, one cuff’s length at a time.

“Oh, Draco.” Hermione’s eyes were wet.

The Dark Mark was twisted and ugly, and Malfoy’s arm was strong and pale beneath it.

Hermione covered it with her hand.

“Now you tell me your side of the war,” Malfoy said, “and you’ll see how Meagre and those other gits in the Wizengamot feel.”

“I see Draco is flashing his tattoo around again. He always does that when he wants to be sexy.” Pansy had sauntered up with her drink. Plunking it down on Ron and Harry’s end of the table, she drew up a chair. She had been at the other end before. “I don’t want to sit with the adults,” she said. “They look like they’re having a moment.”

“Oh, that’s nothing,” said Ron. “I have plenty of scars. Do you want to see?”

Pansy looked at him. “Will I get to feel up your arm, too?”

Hermione gave a choked little laugh, and took her hand away. “Okay,” she said. “I’m sorry. I get it now.”

Malfoy quickly started rolling down his sleeve. “Don’t apologize,” was all he said.

Hermione laughed again, a little less choked, this time. “Anyway, you’re right,” she said. “This is a problem. How do we make them see that—that fairies have changed?”

“I haven’t a clue.” Turning his wrist, Malfoy neatly buttoned up the cuff. “But I think you’re on the right track, when it comes to Rackham. With Meagre, I feel like we’re—don’t get me wrong—I just mean, he doesn’t feel like you have an understanding of where he’s coming from. Someone like that
"All right," said Hermione. "So what we’ve got to do—"

Pansy leaned in, her long, lean fingers wrapping around Harry’s elbow. "What did you do to Draco?" she said, her voice lower than usual.

Harry frowned. "What? I didn’t do anything to—"

Pansy rolled her eyes. "He’s been in high dudgeon all week."

"That’s not my—"

"How often do you think he goes about flashing that great ugly scar?"

Harry glanced at Malfoy, who was listening to Hermione in his intensely focused way. The thing was that Malfoy looked like he was really listening, when he was having a conversation like this, and it was visible. It was as though he was making a really conscious effort to hear what the other person had to say.

Harry turned back to Pansy. "You said he does it whenever he wants to be sexy."

"Never," Pansy said. "He never does it. You just watch your back, Potter. If you ruin this . . . little idea of friendship he’s got, I will be seriously displeased."

Startled, Harry said, "What little—"

But Pansy sat back, and Malfoy was talking, and he just sounded so horribly sincere. He had never used to sound that way before, except when he was saying he’d make Harry pay, and then his voice had been laced with venom. Now it was suffused with something much like—like graciousness, and it didn’t sound like Malfoy at all, except that it did. Harry thought he’d probably recognize his voice anywhere, the way he would Ron’s, or Hermione’s, and wasn’t that just strange. He thought that he would know Pansy’s too, and that was downright bizarre.

"You’ve got to convince him it’s in his best interests," Malfoy was saying. "You can’t take the moral high ground with him, because he’s just going to shake his finger and quote instances of kidnappings and terrorism, and there isn’t any argument you can make against that that he’ll listen to. And you can’t threaten him, because he’ll just come down that much harder on all the Beasts and Beings you’re trying to protect."

Hermione twirled her hair around her finger. "Okay, that makes sense. But what if we got him to see it in the light you just put it?"

Malfoy shook his head. "Meagre wasn’t a Death Eater."

"No," Hermione twirled her hair some more. "But he does have sympathies, doesn’t he? And fairies are—well, they’re very pure in a way. They’re pure magic. And they did once have very powerful magic."

Malfoy chewed the inside of his cheek. "That’s an interesting point. If—"

Pansy turned to Ron. "What do you when you see a fairy, Ronald?"

Malfoy went on talking, Hermione listening, sometimes nodding, tucking her hair behind her ear. Her drink was mostly forgotten, elbows on the table, and Malfoy was probably going to start in on
her pint too, because he just did that, sometimes.

“It’s Ron,” said Ron. “Find a fly swatter. How about you?”

“I keep them in jars,” said Pansy. “They make a very good night-light.”

“We swing gnomes around our heads,” Ron said. “Then we chuck them as far as we can.”

“You’re all right,” Pansy said, as though she had just decided.

Harry put his head in his hands. Malfoy and Hermione were still talking about things like understanding fellow men, and the principles of being human. “Great,” Harry said. “I could have lived without the realization that degnoming is cruel.”

“You can still do it,” Pansy said.

“No,” Harry said. “I can’t.”

“Why not?” Pansy seemed interested.

“Because it isn’t right,” Harry said.

“This disappoints you,” Pansy said.

Harry nodded miserably. “Degnoming is fun.”

“You’re all right too.” Patting his hand awkwardly, Pansy turned back to Ron. “Our gardener thwacked our gnomes with shovels.”

“How come we never thought of that?” asked Ron.

“Because your mum doesn’t kill people,” said Harry.

Ron just looked at him.

Realizing his mistake, Harry open his mouth. Shut it. Looking down at the table, he tried to think of something to say.

“This is awkward,” Pansy said.

Ron looked at her a little disbelievingly. “Are you ever appropriate?”

“No,” said Pansy. “No one liked Draco’s aunt anyway. She was absolutely mental.”

That didn’t make it right, Harry wanted to say, and didn’t, because of Ron. It wasn’t that Harry thought it was wrong, exactly. Harry didn’t know what to think, and that was the main reason he didn’t get involved in politics, because politicians didn’t talk the way that Hermione did—or like Malfoy did, come to think of it. Everyone just said that they were right and everyone else was wrong, and Voldemort obviously had been wrong, but Harry had no idea whether Molly Weasley was right for killing Bellatrix.

He had no idea if he would ever know.

“She was at that,” was all Ron said. He sipped his ale and smacked his lips. “Anyway,” he said, “mum kills doxies.”
“Does she now.” Pansy looked interested again.

“We did too,” Ron said.

“Doxies aren’t,” Harry began. “Oh, no. They are, aren’t they?”

“Sentient? Self-aware?” Ron shrugged. “Hermione thinks they’ve got about the intelligence of Kneazles. But you wouldn’t swat a Kneazle, now, would you?”

“Kneazles are cute and fluffy,” Pansy said. “I would swat them instantly.”

“Do you still kill doxies?” Harry asked Ron, horrified.

Ron shrugged. “Hermione’d have my head.”

“You’re like a puppy,” said Pansy. “Trained and everything.”

Smirking, Ron said, “Are you going to swat me?”

“I might.” Pansy’s mouth twisted into her little smirk. “If you ask nicely.”

“I feel like everyone I know is really corrupt,” Harry said. “Or—” He glanced at Malfoy, who was deep in an earnest conversation with Hermione. “Or really not corrupt. What I mean is, it’s confusing.”

“It’s all right,” Pansy said. “You were locked in a cupboard. I was neglected and objectified.” She turned to Ron. “What’s your excuse?”

Ron shrugged. “I don’t know. Born this way?”

“Come, come,” Pansy said. “Didn’t you have a terrible childhood too?”

“Oh, that.” Ron glanced at Harry. “Well, no. Harry’s aunt and uncle, now—”

“I didn’t ask about Harry.” Pansy was just talking in the same voice she always used, but somehow it sounded quieter. “I was asking about you.”

“Er.” Ron looked slightly uncomfortable. “Well, you know.”

Pansy’s perfectly tweezed black brow went up again in its lazy, mocking way. “No, I don’t know. If you want me to tell you the things I’ve imagined about your family, I can, but I doubt that you’ll be pleased.”

Ron laughed. “Go ahead. I can take it.”

For a moment, Pansy just looked at him. She seemed as though she were about to speak, and then she didn’t.

“Ron,” Harry said, “you can talk about it. It’s not as though I’m going to think you hate your mum, or anything, if—if—I mean if, you were ever unhappy.” He frowned. Of course Ron must have been unhappy, from time to time. Everyone was, and just because Harry couldn’t imagine growing up as a Weasley being other than perfect, probably he wouldn’t feel that way if he’d actually got to do it.

“I doubt that’s what he’s worried about,” said Pansy.

“Oh,” Harry said. “Is it—I mean, was it me?” He knew that that was sometimes a problem too, and it
wasn’t his fault, but sometimes Harry still felt guilty. And he knew he shouldn’t feel guilty, mainly because it made Ron feel even guiltier, for being jealous of—of the attention and the fame and people sending him Valentine’s, and the thousand things that Harry didn’t want, but Ron did. “Because Ron,” he said, “if it was me, I’m not going to—”

“Not everything is about you, actually,” said Pansy, and Harry shut up.

Ron shook his head. “It’s not that. I didn’t have a terrible childhood.”


“I didn’t.” Ron frowned down at his drink. “I really didn’t. It was Fred and George who were always getting into trouble. And Ginny who always argued with Mum. And it was Percy who was always unhappy, and . . .”

“And William made the best marks, and was the best looking, and Charles the kindest, and the most talented,” said Pansy, sounding bored.

Ron shrugged. “That’s all, really.”

“Yes,” said Pansy, as though she had made a point. “That’s all.”

Harry wanted to say he was sorry, without quite knowing why.

“As for you,” Pansy said, “you had plenty to make you special. After all, you had one best friend who was a genius, and your other best friend saved the wizarding world. How could you possibly want more?”

He’s good at chess, Harry wanted to say, but didn’t. He had decided to work on how not to be a tool. “Ron saved the wizarding world too,” he said.

“The lot of you look miserable,” Malfoy said suddenly, the low murmur of his conversation with Hermione abruptly ending. “Pansy, what did you do to them?”

Pansy turned her head to look at him in her eerie, feline way. “Ronald said he would show me his scars.”

“Did you?” Hermione said curiously. “Did you show her the one on your—”


“None that you can see.” Pansy’s lip curled.

Malfoy glared at her balefully. “You’re more trouble than you’re worth.”

Pansy flapped a lazy hand. “Practically everything is more trouble than it’s worth.”

“Not everything,” Harry heard himself say.

He didn’t look at Malfoy, but he could feel him, sitting beside him.

* * *

17 June, 2004

“Hullo, Potter,” Malfoy said, before even glancing his way. He was putting papers in his bag, getting
ready to go.

“Hullo,” said Harry. He met Malfoy at his desk in SO every once in a while; Specialist Ops was further down than the Aurors Division, so there wasn't much point in going down before coming back up. Malfoy could have come up and stopped at Harry's desk, but he almost never did.

It had been about five months since Ron started joining them at the pub, and they all had drinks almost every Thursday—Pansy, Malfoy, Ron, Hermione, and Harry, sometimes in varying combinations. Malfoy hadn’t ever really—well, it wasn’t like he held a grudge, but he never quite seemed as . . . open as he had, before Harry had said what he had, about Ron.

It was such a little, stupid thing, and Harry wished he’d never said it. He also wished Malfoy wouldn’t be a ponce, except that he wasn’t being a ponce. Harry wasn’t sure Malfoy even remembered it, or even realized why he acted . . . careful, around Harry. He was just a little more distant than he was with Hermione, or even Ron, as though he were well aware that Harry hadn’t forgiven him for being Draco Malfoy—which Harry had, a thousand times over, in his heart. Malfoy acted as though Harry could still hurt him, and the reason Harry didn’t correct him was because he could.

He knew he could. He was very good at it.

Leaning against the edge of Malfoy’s cubicle wall, Harry watched Malfoy close up his bag and get his coat. Malfoy didn’t always wear a three piece suit, but he usually did. Harry had ceased to find it funny. He didn’t find it funny at all. In fact, it was rather galling, the fact that Malfoy had grown up to be easy on the eyes.

“Are you ready?” Malfoy said.

Harry realized Malfoy had gathered his things and was standing there just looking at him. “Yeah,” he said, and pushed himself off the wall.

Malfoy glanced at him as they walked. “Are you all right?” he said.

“Yeah.” Harry put his hands in his pockets. He’d forgotten his robes, which was typical.

Malfoy paused, shaking the hair out of his eyes. “Are you sure? You’ve seemed . . . distracted, lately.”

Harry looked at his shoes, and said, “It’s nothing.” Then he looked around. Most of the people from the office were gone or headed home.

Malfoy tilted his head. “Would you like to go back to my desk?”

As Harry stood there, frowning, Malfoy turned and walked back in the direction of his cubicle. Harry followed him, watching as Malfoy neatly laid his robes and coat over the back of his chair, putting his bag back on the desk. He sat on the edge of the desk, just leaning there with his hands on either side. He looked very casual. His eyes looked very kind.

“Sighing, Harry said, “It’s Ron and Hermione.”

Malfoy raised his brows. They were gold, just like the rest of him.

“They’re fighting,” Harry said.

Malfoy studied him a moment. “I don’t mean to be a git, but—”
“I know they’re always fighting,” Harry said, already knowing what Malfoy was going to say. “Just because they fight a lot, doesn’t mean they don’t love each other.”

Malfoy smiled faintly. “I believe you’ve met my mother and father.”

“They didn’t—”

Malfoy just gave him a look.

“Oh,” Harry said. He looked at his shoes some more. “Did it . . . did it ever feel like they were breaking up?”

Tilting his head, Malfoy looked at him in a such a way that Harry began to get uncomfortable, thinking he had said too much, rather, about the way he felt. Just when he was about to tell Malfoy to forget it, Malfoy stood up. Picking up his robes and coat, he put them on the hook, then pulled out the desk chair. “Sit down, Potter,” he said. His voice was rather low.

Harry looked at him, looked at the chair, and sat down.

Malfoy leaned his hip against the desk again. “Sometimes I felt like they were breaking up,” he said. “Sometimes I felt like it was my fault.”

“I doubt it,” Harry said, because if he knew anything at all, he knew two things.

One was that his mother had loved him.

The other was that Lucius and Narcissa loved Malfoy.

“I don’t know,” Malfoy said. “Usually when they fought, it was about me.”

“What,” Harry began, and then realized it would be nosy to ask.

Malfoy waved a hand. “Oh, everything. Where I should go to school, whether I was receiving a proper education, whether I was allowed to prefer men. Whether I should be allowed to wear plaid. Whether I should be allowed to become a Death Eater. The usual things.”

Harry swallowed. “Did you?”

“What?”

“Wear plaid?”

Malfoy smiled at him. “In your dreams, Potter.” He put his hands in his pockets. “Don’t tell Pansy about the plaid.”

Harry looked at his hands. “I don’t know what they’re arguing about. Hermione won’t talk to me. Usually she talks to me.”

“I thought that something was not quite right.”

“Has she . . .” Harry looked up. “Has she talked to you?”

Tilting his head, Malfoy looked at him a little while. “You’re off your nut,” he said at last, quietly, “if you think that Hermione would confide in me before she would you.”

“You don’t always confide in the people closest to you, Malfoy.”
“Case in point,” Malfoy said, and looked away. He chewed the inside of his cheek. “Do you think . . . shall I talk to her?” He still didn’t look at Harry.

Harry looked up at him, and realized that was what he’d meant to ask all along. “Could you?” he said.

Malfoy nodded.

“Thanks,” Harry said.

“Not a problem. Well, then.” Standing up, Malfoy took his coat off the hook. “Would you care to go get intoxicated with me?”

“Absolutely,” said Harry.

*

Harry didn’t know whether Malfoy had planned on talking to Hermione that evening, but if he had, he wouldn’t have been able to. Hermione wasn’t there. When Harry and Malfoy arrived, just Pansy was there. When Ron joined them, he was alone.

“Where’s your better half?” Pansy said.

“Volunteering at the sanctuary.” Ron sat down, not looking very happy about it.

“The sanctuary?” said Pansy.

Ron rolled his eyes. “Do you listen to anyone but yourself?”

Pansy looked bored. “Sorry. It’s déclassé to eavesdrop on the pointless jabbering of the hoi polloi.”

“And talk in bloody English for once, why don’t you.”

Pansy looked even more bored. “I said fuck you.”

“That’s the problem,” Ron mumbled.

“Excuse me,” Pansy scraped her chair across the floor. “While Ronald mopes about his wife’s ice fortress of a snatch, I’m going to treat myself to a Chardonnay.”

“It’s Ron,” Ron called out after her. “And she’s not my wife!”

Pansy walked over to the bar.

“What’s your problem?” Harry asked.

“My problem?” Ron snorted. “Did you hear what she just said about Hermione’s—”

“You were a git to her,” Harry said.

“If she wasn’t so . . .” But Ron didn’t finish. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Ron,” Harry began, and stopped, because Malfoy was touching him.

His hand was on Harry’s elbow, and when Harry looked at him, Malfoy inclined his head slightly.

Harry was going to tell him to fuck off, because Ron was his friend, and he knew how to handle
him, and he wanted to know what was happening, dammit, but Malfoy took his hand away, and then Harry didn’t say anything.

When Malfoy started talking to Ron, his voice was very light and cool. “I assume you’re in a strop because Flanders trounced Australia.”

“Bloody World Cup,” said Ron, and looked happier already. “Bloody Hastings. He hasn’t been able to hold onto a Quaffle since bloody 1994. Why is he even still on the team?”

“There, there,” said Malfoy. “The Harpies still may win the League Cup.”

Ron snorted again. “Not if you talk to Ginny.”

Malfoy turned to Harry. “Well, Potter? Have you?”

“What?” Harry hadn’t really been thinking about Quidditch at all. Mostly he’d been thinking about what Malfoy had said about his parents fighting, and whether he had ever—

“Talked to Ginerva Weasley,” Malfoy said.

“Oh,” said Harry. “Well, she says the Magpies are going to utterly thrash them.”

“Campbell couldn’t find the Snitch if his life depended on it,” Malfoy said.

Ron looked sadly at his drink. “It’s always Puddlemere United, in the end.”

“I hear that’s an excellent dessert, Puddlemere,” Pansy said, sliding back into her seat at the table.

Malfoy frowned at her. “Where’s your Chardonnay?”

Pansy looked at him blankly. “I’ve ordered a round shots.”

“It’s not a dessert.” Ron sounded morose. “It’s Quidditch.”

Malfoy was still frowning at Pansy. “Why did you do that?”

Pansy was still being blank at Malfoy. “I felt that it was necessary.”

“And Gudgeon is never going to catch a Snitch, not ever.” Ron was still morose at everyone, and if things were going to continue this way, Harry was glad that Pansy had ordered shots.

“Oh, Quidditch,” said Pansy. “The sport?”

“Did you see that interception, though?” Ron said. “Karoonda is bloody amazing.”

“She should have been watching the Snitch,” Malfoy said.

Ron just sighed. “She would have done, if it weren’t for bloody Hastings.”

“It wasn’t just Hastings, Ron, admit it,” Harry said. “Did you see Nuhaka on that final score? Fumbled it completely.”

“I approve of Quidditch,” Pansy announced.

“Pansy, you hate Quidditch,” Malfoy said. “And Karoonda may be good, but Beaumont is in another league altogether.”
Ron rolled his eyes. "Karoonda could take Beaumont any time."

"Er," Harry said. "Ron, mate, Karoonda missed the Snitch by at least a metre."

"All I'm saying is—"

"It's a brutal, boorish game," said Pansy. "So much blood and gore. That's why I approve."

"You don't, though," said Malfoy. "And then there's the offence."

Ron looked aghast. "Flanders' offence is terrible!"

"Ron," Harry said. "Kick-It Kelly is not the second coming."

"Kick-It Kelly," Ron began.

"When you think about it," Pansy said, "it's like a ritualistic, generational pattern of dick waving. A codified expression of the primal masculine aggression of more tribalist—"

"Girls play Quidditch, Parkinson," Ron said.

"It's Pansy," said Pansy. "And make no mistake, Ronald, it has nothing to do with penis envy."

"Uh," said Harry. "I think girls play Quidditch because they like it."

Pansy turned her empty gaze on him. "Women play Quidditch because we don't need vast stores of testosterone in order to utterly and completely emasculate their opponents. It is, in fact, a symbolic kind of castration—"

"No," Harry said. "I'm pretty sure they play because they like it. Or because they want to win, yeah, but not in order to prove they don't need, er," Harry said, "cock."

"This is interesting." Pansy looked at him disinterestedly. "In Hermione's absence, I thought that Draco would prove to be the default feminist."

Harry frowned. "I'm not a default feminist."

"Potter's doing all right," Malfoy said.

"Cheer up," said Pansy. "Feminist isn't a dirty word." She looked at Ron in an apathetic kind of way. It was pretty much as close as she came to leering. "Unless you want it to be."

"Remember when we were talking about Quidditch?" Harry said sadly.

"It's okay to talk about castration." Ron leered at Pansy, a real leer. "I don't mind it."

"I thought there was a reason you liked her," Pansy said, and smirked.

The leer fell off and Ron immediately looked depressed.

Then the shots came, and everyone took one, and Ron ordered another round right away. All of them drank, and Malfoy threw back his exactly the same way anyone does a shot, only Harry had never imagined Malfoy doing things that were . . . well, normal and collegiate like shots, which was probably why Malfoy's Adam's apple distracted him.

Then they started to talk about Quidditch again, and when Pansy grew impatient, Malfoy ordered
another round and Pansy made Ron talk to her about music, because they liked the same bands. Harry didn’t know any, because he liked Celestina Warbuck, and Petunia’s favourite music had been mostly Doris Day, with some Bing Crosby, and she’d played it on the radio all day long. Malfoy liked classical wizarding things, and sometimes Hermione talked to him about things like Strauss and The Beatles, and Malfoy listened intently and asked thoughtful questions that made Hermione beam.

“The Pixie Sisters are amazing,” Ron was telling Pansy in a slightly inebriated way. “Bloody amazing. You really should give them a try.”

Pansy got more smirky when she was drunk, which Harry suspected she sort of was. “Are they actually pixies?”

“I don’t like The Beatles,” Malfoy said.

“What?” Harry turned to him.

“The Beatles,” Malfoy said, louder. “I tried them and I—I don’t.”

He looked so utterly crushed that Harry was tempted to pat his shoulder, but he didn’t. “I’m sure that’s okay,” he said instead.

Malfoy shook his head sadly. “It’s not. It’s not; I’ve failed utterly at understanding Muggles.”

“I think you can understand Muggles without liking The Beatles,” Harry tried to point out, but Malfoy just kept shaking his head, more sadly still.

“You can’t understand Muggles if you don’t like The Beatles,” he said. “Hermione says.”

“Malfoy,” Harry said. “I was raised Muggle too. Dudley didn’t even know what The Beatles are.”

Malfoy leaned toward him. “Who’s Dudley?”

“My cousin.”

Malfoy leaned further still. “You have a cousin?”

It was taking Harry a while, for some reason, to realize that Malfoy was drunk, too. “I have a cousin,” he said.

Malfoy looked sadly at his drink. “I had a cousin. But she died.”

“Sorry.” Harry had to resist trying to prop Malfoy up.

“You knew her, though,” said Malfoy, who was starting to lean again. “You knew her quite well. You were . . . pals.”

“Tonks?” Harry looked at Malfoy curiously. “Yeah. She was . . . she was pretty amazing.”

“I regret it.” Malfoy hiccupped. “I regret not knowing her.” His hair was in his eyes again, and honestly, Harry couldn’t see any reason why he shouldn’t reach out and—


“What happened to that big vocabulary?” Ron said, and leered some more. He was leaning too.

“I sometimes have the urge to express myself in a primal way,” said Pansy.
“Do you,” Ron said, and leaned more.

“Wouldn’t you like to—”

Malfoy leaned again. “They’re going to do something they regret,” he said.

“Like what?” Harry asked him.

“I can’t explain it to you.” Malfoy stared sadly at his empty shot glass again. “I might do something I regret, too.”

“Malfoy,” Harry said.

“Pansy’s right,” Malfoy said. “Get us more shots.”

So Harry went and got more shots.

This had never really happened before. For one thing, Ron had never come without Hermione before. Sometimes Hermione came without Ron; Harry thought that it was because Hermione was closer to Malfoy than Ron was to Malfoy or Pansy. He had been surprised that Ron would come alone, but then again, Hermione was waist-high in her work on the sanctuary.

After getting Rackham to sign her petition, Hermione had become something to reckon with politically, and all the sudden the press were paying attention to her various projects, one of which was The Magical Beast Sanctuary. Bertram Meagre called it the “petting zoo,” but it certainly wasn’t a zoo, and was much more than a safe haven. The sanctuary was a place where Beasts not considered Beings by the Ministry could not only live, but learn, in tutorials led by volunteers. Some of them, like the trolls, fairies, and gnomes, were learning life skills in order to begin to form self-sustaining societies.

Hermione’s dream was that the various Beasts could form their own—city-states was the word she used, and that there could be regulations regarding things like commerce between the wizarding and Beasts world. She also dreamed of house-elves founding a town for free elves to live and work in on their own, but right now she was pretty busy trying to prevent the trolls from eating the volunteers.

Harry doubted the sanctuary or Hermione’s non-profit work was the root of whatever problem she was having with Ron. There were lots of things they argued about—marriage, children, jobs, keeping sock drawers organized. Laundry. Trash. Crookshanks. Harry had heard just about everything, which was why he was concerned now, because Hermione wasn’t actually talking to him. He knew that lately, Ron had been having a problem with how much she worked. Still, Hermione usually had enough time to come around to the pub almost weekly, and Harry knew they saw other friends.

He knew, for instance, that Malfoy sometimes went for dinner.

Sometimes they even just saw Pansy—at least, Harry had heard as much. A couple weeks ago, Pansy had a Portkey to go see The Cashmere Labyrinth perform in Wales, and she had invited Ron, saying that Ron was the only one she knew who even knew who The Cashmere Labyrinth was. “Seeing as how Draco and Millicent are completely uncultured, Blaise is too cultured, and let’s not even discuss Gregory. So, how about it, Ronald?”

“It’s Ron,” Ron had said. “That sounds great, actually. I’ll ask Hermione to come with us.”

Ron had told Harry, once, that he’d been terrified that if he went on being pig-headed about people like Draco Malfoy, Hermione would leave him. It was initially why he’d been so nice to Malfoy.
Later, he said it was because if Hermione could forgive Malfoy, so could he.

Still later, it was because Ron just really liked wizarding Go. They met and played it sometimes even when Hermione wasn’t around.

Harry had thought asking Malfoy to teach him wizarding Go, but he knew that Malfoy would look at him strangely. Harry had completely given up on strategy games, because he usually lost them, and Harry liked to win.

As Harry stood there waiting to order the shots, he thought maybe he wouldn’t mind losing to Malfoy.

When Harry got back to the table, Pansy was saying,

“*Weasley’s arms are quite first rate*  
*Muscle-bound, robust, obstin ate*  
*That’s why we all commen tate,*  
*Weasley is our potentate!*  

*Weasley’s cock will make you sore*  
*They say he’ll fuck you like a whore*  
*That’s why Slytherins all roar*  
*Weasley is our em per or!*

*Weasley’s balls—”*

“I told her not to,” Malfoy whispered, leaning in. “She can’t stop, when she gets excited.”

“Maybe she shouldn’t use the word whore that way,” Harry said.

Malfoy smiled at him. “Were you a feminist at Hogwarts?”

“I don’t know that I’m a feminist now.”

“Sure you are. You and Hermione are bestest—best friends.”

“Okay,” said Harry.

“I like it.” Malfoy put his head on Harry’s shoulder. “I think I’ll go to sleep.”

Harry didn’t move. After a while of that, he thought Malfoy really might be asleep, and looked down. “You like that I’m a feminist?”

“God,” Malfoy said, “yes.” His lips were moving against Harry’s neck. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“No,” Harry said.

He really didn’t mind it at all.

* * *
“Potter,” Malfoy said.

“Malfoy?” Harry looked up, surprised to see him. It had been a week since the epic drinking at the pub, but Malfoy wasn’t coming to the pub tonight. He’d mentioned to Harry a few days back that he was talking to Hermione to see if he could find out what was wrong. Yesterday, Hermione had told Harry she and Malfoy were going for a coffee instead of coming to the pub. Harry thought it must mean that Hermione might actually tell Malfoy what was going on with her and Ron.

“Hi,” Malfoy said. “I’m just—I’m on my way to go meet up with Hermione, and I wanted to say, sorry we’re not going to the pub. Next week, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I’m meeting Pansy there, though.”

“Oh.”

“I mean,” Harry said, “since you’re going out with Hermione.” He stopped himself before asking Malfoy if it was all right, because of course he didn’t need permission from Malfoy, and Malfoy would think he was being weird. Still, Harry felt strangely uncomfortable. It was the surprise on Malfoy’s face. “She said she might bring a friend,” Harry said instead. “She said—she said I should meet him.”

“Oh.” Malfoy looked down. “That’ll be Zabini.”

“Zabini?”

Sneering, Malfoy looked up. “You remember Zabini, don’t you, Potter?”

“Malfoy,” Harry said.

Malfoy sighed, pushing his hair back from his eyes. “I’m sorry. It’s just . . . this mess with Hermione.”

“Did she tell you anything?”

“I think . . .” Malfoy chewed the inside of his cheek, and Harry tried to think of what to say.

He tried to think of what Malfoy had said, when Harry had told him last week that he thought there was something wrong between Hermione and Ron. Harry had felt perfectly comfortable then, and afterwards they’d gone and got really and completely sloshed, and Malfoy had gone to sleep on his shoulder, and Harry had been sore the next day because of how still he had been sitting.

“Do you want to go to the lounge?” Harry asked. “No one’s in there.” He started walking that way, and Malfoy followed him.

In the lounge, Harry got out his mug, washed it with a cleaning spell, filled it up with water, and tapped it with his wand to make it cold. “Here,” he told Malfoy.

Malfoy took it and sat down at the lounge table.

Harry sat down too, while Malfoy looked down at the water for a while.
“I think it’s something to do with Ron and Pansy,” Malfoy finally said.

“What?”

Malfoy looked miserable. “I think Hermione’s jealous.”

“Ron and Pansy?” Harry took the mug, because it wasn’t like Malfoy was drinking it, and because suddenly his mouth felt dry. “That can’t be right. If anything . . .”

“I know,” Malfoy said. “I thought it was going to be . . .”

“Ron getting jealous of you and Hermione.”

Nodding, Malfoy nicked the mug, drinking the water. “There’s no reason he should be. I’m . . . very gay, and Hermione has absolutely no interest in anyone but him. She never has had interest in anyone but him.”

“But Ron is the same way about Hermione,” Harry said. He thought about stealing Dawlish’s mug from the cupboard, but instead just snagged his own back and drank another sip. “He would never—not with Pansy.”

“Stop at ‘he would never’. Pansy is not the qualifier here. He would with Pansy, in a heartbeat, if it weren’t for Hermione.” Malfoy snagged the mug back, taking another sip.

Harry looked at Malfoy in confusion. “He and Pansy are just friends.”

“Sure, they are,” said Malfoy. “But if Hermione does something utterly stupid, such as break up with him, he’s going to be an utter arse, and do something stupid himself, and Pansy will go along with it because she thinks it’s funny, and she is such a cow, and sometimes she just really needs to—God, Potter.” He looked up, and saw Harry’s face. “I am so, so sorry. I didn’t mean it that way.”

“You think,” Harry said, and then had to try again. “You think . . . Hermione’s going to break up with Ron?”

“No,” Malfoy said quickly. “I’m sorry. I just meant things could get—”

“You meant they might break up.”

“No. I’m going to see Hermione tonight. Things will be all right. I’ll talk to her. I only meant that I think she’s grossly thrown out of proportion—certain things. That’s all.”

Harry tilted his head, watching determination build in Malfoy’s face. Harry remembered that look from Hogwarts, especially during sixth year, when Malfoy had looked so drawn and pale, and he’d kept trying to fix the Vanishing Cabinet by himself, and telling Snape he didn’t need any help.

“I can handle the truth, Malfoy,” Harry said quietly.

Malfoy bit the inside of his cheek.

Pulling the mug his way, Harry took another sip. “Tell me what you really think.”

Malfoy swallowed and looked down. “I don’t know.”

“Hermione’s not the jealous one.” Harry just felt the need to say it.

Malfoy shook his head. “She’s only human, Potter.”
Harry nodded slowly. “Okay,” he said. “But does she have any reason . . .”

“Pansy’s not like other girls.” Stealing back the mug, Malfoy drained the rest of the water.

“Okay,” Harry said again. “But I know Ron. He doesn’t stray. Not after—he’s never going to leave her,” he said. “And he’ll damn well do his best to never give her a reason to leave him.”

Malfoy nodded once, sharply. “I thought as much.” His thumb rubbed across the rim of the mug.

“All right,” Harry said. “You go and talk to Hermione. I’ll go have drinks with Pansy. It’ll all work out, yeah?”

“Yes.” Malfoy took his hand off the mug, startled. “Are you . . . going to talk to Pansy, then?”

Harry’s brows went up. “Do you think it would be a good idea?”

Malfoy shook his head, brushing the hair out of his eyes. “No. She’s . . . difficult.”

“Yeah. I kind of figured.” Harry gave him a wry smile. “I might talk to Ron, though. See if I can help.”

“Potter?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

Harry thought it was kind of ironic that Malfoy was thanking him, since Ron and Hermione were—well, he would always be closest to them, so Malfoy was helping him too, but maybe Malfoy wasn’t talking about that, anyway. He was holding out the mug.

Harry took it. “No problem,” he said. “We’re all friends, right?”

Malfoy looked startled again. “Yeah.”

“Next week,” Harry said, “same time, same place.”

Malfoy snorted. “You’re buying, Potter.”

Harry grinned.

* Malfoy was right; it was Blaise Zabini Pansy had brought to the pub for Harry to meet.

“Here you are, Harry,” said Pansy. “Meet the most useless man in England.”

“I hope I’m useless in more countries than that,” said Zabini, putting out his hand.

“Er,” Harry said, shaking it. “We’ve actually met.”

“How good of you to remember,” Zabini said. They sat down, and Pansy pushed drinks in front of them.

Harry always thought of Malfoy as put together, but Zabini looked so perfect and well-dressed that he almost made Malfoy seem . . . sort of casual, just a little more careless than Harry had ever pictured Malfoy before. Harry wondered just how long it took for Zabini’s teeth to gleam that much,
his eyebrows such a perfect shape, his clothes so perfectly pressed, and well cut. Not that it didn’t produce an effect.

Blaise Zabini was just about the best looking man Harry had ever seen.

Pansy waved a hand at them. “Talk. Amuse me. Draco’s been an absolute beast, lately.”

“You always ask so nicely,” Zabini said.

Harry looked at Pansy curiously. “Malfoy’s been a beast?” he asked, thinking about how Malfoy had said that Pansy could be a cow sometimes. Harry had thought they were pretty good friends.

He wondered whether they were fighting. Hermione and Ron were always fighting, but it just didn’t seem possible that Hermione was jealous of—

Pansy rolled her eyes. “He always is, when he’s recovering from a hang-over.”

“I try never to recover from anything,” said Zabini. “It saves time.”

“Blaise is mostly one-liners,” Pansy said.

Zabini ignored her, smiling at Harry. “How have you been since we last saw each other?”

Harry tried to remember the last time he had seen Zabini.

“It was when Pansy here suggested we turn you over to the Dark Lord,” Zabini said. “We were debating the benefits of offing you when we were herded to the dungeons. Some say you did off it.” He looked at Harry encouragingly.

“Oh,” Harry said. “I got better.”

“Excellent,” said Zabini. “Death is unpleasant to me. I’m determined to avoid it.”

“That’s going to be difficult,” Harry said.

“Life is a sexually transmitted disease that is, in the end, fatal.” Zabini said. “I plan to have as little to do with it as possible.”

Harry was startled into laughing. Resolving not to think about Hermione and Ron, he said, “What do you do?”

“I warned you,” Pansy told Zabini, in her bored tone. “He’s not very quick.”

“Nothing at all, if I can possibly help it,” said Zabini.

When Harry continued to look confused, Pansy smirked. “He’s a professional gentleman, Harry.”

Harry looked at Zabini in surprise. “You’re a hooker?”

Zabini burst out laughing, a rich deep sound.

Pansy just smirked. “Don’t you just wish,” she said.

“I have no profession,” Zabini said, still smiling a brilliant smile. “I am a landowner. I live with my mother. I practise ennui.”

Harry frowned. “It’s not hard.”
Zabini laughed again. “I don’t suppose it is, but I would venture to say that you haven’t mastered it.”

“Blaise is arrogant,” Pansy said. “And he’s an arse. I like him very much.”

Zabini looked at Harry guilelessly. “I’ve asked her to marry me, and she’s refused.”

“I would die of boredom,” Pansy said.

“It would be completely unromantic,” Zabini agreed. “Pansy, darling, please reconsider.”

Hermione and Ron still talked about getting married. Usually it turned into an argument.

Ron wanted to get married, because he wanted children. Hermione didn’t want to, because she wanted a career. And then Hermione wanted to, because she wanted to be with him forever, and Ron didn’t want to, because his current job wasn’t good enough, he said. Molly wanted them to because she wanted them to be happy, and Ginny didn’t want them to because she wanted them to be happy. She kept warning Ron and Hermione both that it was important to explore.

Zabini turned to Harry. “I dislike romance, you see. It’s abhorrently messy.”

“He’s lying,” Pansy said.

“Oh,” Harry said.

“What do you think of romance?” Zabini asked him.

“I think it’s all right.” Harry wanted Hermione and Ron to be happy, and he also wanted them to get married. He didn’t know if one necessarily resulted in the other, which was why he tried really really hard never to say anything about it either way.

“You’re a bachelor, then?” Zabini said.

“What?”

“If you believe in romance, you must be a bachelor.” Zabini smiled. “It’s quite all right. I’m a bachelor, too.” His smile curled wickedly. “Some say that is my profession.”

“He actually is a prostitute,” Pansy said. “It really depends on who you ask.”

“I’m not married, if that’s what you mean,” Harry said.

Zabini sipped his figtini. “What happened to Miss Weasley?”

“Ginny?” Harry rubbed his forehead. “We broke up.”

“How succinct. When did this happen?”

“Three years ago,” Harry said.

“Is she unattached?”

“I don’t know.” Sometimes Ginny’s opinions about not just settling down were rather strongly worded. Sometimes Harry thought she took ‘exploring’ a little bit to the extreme, and then felt guilty, because he wanted Ginny to do anything she liked, and just because he wanted to ‘settle down’ didn’t
mean she should. “She was seeing Dean Thomas. But she’s not any more.”

“Don’t dangle live bait in front of Blaise,” said Pansy.

Zabini looked shocked. “Pansy, you amaze me.” He turned to Harry with an appealing gaze. “My only desire is to free poor young things from the hooks society has driven into their soft underbellies.”

Pansy rolled her eyes. “Preferably before big bad fish propose to gobble them up, and the little fish say yes, get married, and live happily ever after as flotsam.”

“Marriage is boorish,” said Zabini. “Only fish get married.”

“I think it’s nice,” said Harry.

“I’m not a fish,” said Zabini. “I prefer to be . . . algae. There is nothing to do, if you are algae, but lie there all day long, floating in the sun, and slowly you are nibbled to pieces by a hundred different mouths.”

“That’s an image,” said Pansy.

Zabini looked at her sadly. “I would never recover from marriage.”

“Your mum recovered.” Pansy sipped her wine. “Quite a few times.”

Zabini looked at her even more sadly. “That’s why I would never recover.”

“Anyway,” said Harry, trying not to think about break ups, “you said you asked Pansy to marry you.”

“I know.” Zabini brightened considerably. “To my good fortune, Pansy is not a fish. She is a shark. Sharks are completely uninterested in algae. Ginerva Weasley however—she is precisely the kind of fish I wouldn’t mind nibbling me to pieces.”

“Ginny isn’t a fish,” said Harry.

“Of course she isn’t,” said Zabini. “She is a delightful young woman, and I have always been fond of her.”

“You didn’t seem to think so highly of her sixth year,” Harry said.

“On the contrary, I admired her greatly sixth year. Seventh year even more. She is quite the beauty, in a rage.”

“I heard you on the train,” Harry said. “After you got back from your first Slug Club meeting.”

Zabini’s brow knit. “Oh, of course. I remember Draco’s braggadocio about certain improvements he claimed to have made to your face. I hardly believed him.” He smiled pleasantly. “I have always found your face rather pleasing as it is.”

Harry frowned at him. “You didn’t find Ginny’s family pleasing, I think it was.”

“Ah,” Zabini leaned back, his long, elegant finger idly tracing the rim of his glass. “You’re referring to a time when ridiculing lineage was still somewhat in vogue.”

“In vogue,” said Harry.
“I have to admit, my attitude in that regard was one of the few times I did not predict the inevitable trend of fashion.” Zabini took a sip of his cocktail.

“Trend of fashion,” said Harry.

“Forgive me, Potter.” Zabini looked quite sincere. “I was gauche.”

“Gauche.”

“You keep repeating everything I say,” said Zabini. “Will you understand it another way? I was self-conscious and rather gangly at that age; I wished to be thought sophisticated and chic; I parroted things I heard dignitaries and elitists say. I didn’t take the trouble to understand them, and am still in the habit of saying things because they sound nobby or posh, but I will never be such an ignorant, filthy, block-headed cunt again.”

“Oh,” said Harry. “I guess I understand that.”

“I suppose you do,” said Zabini, “but you’ll think less of me when you learn that it won’t happen again less because I think it wrong, and rather more because I am so horribly embarrassed at having been so utterly crass. It pains me even to recall some of the things that I said, and it has nothing to do with how I made anyone feel, and everything to do with having made myself a fool.”

“Oh,” Harry said again. He thought about it. “Pansy said she wouldn’t save her folks from a burning building.”

“Pansy is vulgar,” said Zabini.

Pansy looked bored. “I try.”

“I would never say such a thing,” said Zabini. “It would be in bad taste.”

“But,” said Harry, “the thing is, would you save your parents from a burning building?”

“That is not the thing,” said Zabini. “And nor is it the point. The point is that my mother will never be in a burning building. I shall see to it that it never happens.”

“But what if it does?” said Harry.

Zabini sipped his cocktail. “It won’t.”

“But what if it does?”

Zabini sighed. “We’ll never know, will we? But this is my hypothesis: if there were a burning building, with my mother in it, and if it should occur to me, in the heat of the moment, that someone may perceive a decision that saves my own skin is uncouth, why then I should Apparate into that burning building directly, and die screaming, but accepted by society. There, does that answer your question?”

“I don’t know.” Harry thought about it some more. “That’s a really weird answer.”

“It’s a weird question,” said Pansy. “It’s really quite morbid.”

“I dislike morbidity,” said Zabini. “That’s why I disliked Death Eaters, though they were rather modish in the late nineties.”

“So, you weren’t a Death Eater?” Harry asked.
“Blaise?” Both of Pansy’s brows went up.

Harry had thought only Malfoy could make her do that.

“Of course I wasn’t a Death Eater,” said Zabini. “What did I just say about being uncouth?”

“And you weren’t for Voldemort?” Harry asked.

“Malfoy was right,” Pansy said. “You really do paint all the Slytherins with the same brush.”

Harry looked at Pansy. “Malfoy said that?”

“In eighth year,” Pansy said.

“Oh,” said Harry. “Does he . . . think that now?”

Pansy raised a brow. “You tell me.”

“Tom Riddle was a hooligan,” said Zabini. “Zabinis never side with hooligans.”

“Hooligan,” said Harry.

“There you go, repeating things I say again,” said Zabini. “Would you prefer that I tell you Voldemort was evil? Rotten to the core? Morally repugnant? He might have been all of those things, but if you want the truth—of course you do; you’re Harry Potter—I didn’t side with him, but only because I found him personally distasteful, and Mother didn’t approve.”

“Okay,” said Harry. “But you said Voldemort was a hooligan.”

“I thought it droll,” said Zabini. “Didn’t you?”

Harry thought about it. “I suppose.”

Zabini looked at him thoughtfully. “Why did you break up with Miss Weasley?”

“I’m gay,” said Harry, because it was the easy answer.

“Oh, is that all?” said Zabini.

“I told you not to dangle fresh bait,” said Pansy.

Zabini ignored her. “Miss Weasley could hardly blame you for being gay.”

“I’m not bait.” Harry turned to Zabini. “If you say something like, ‘all the cool kids are doing it these days,’ I’ll hit you.”

“I would hardly be so predictable.” Zabini was looking thoughtful again. When he spoke, his voice was a little less bright than it was generally. It was almost gentle. “It isn’t a crime, Potter.”

“I know,” Harry said. “I’m not ashamed of it.”

“Harry’s not ashamed of anything,” Pansy said.

Harry looked at her. “Yes, I am.”

Pansy’s shiny black eyes didn’t flicker. “Do tell.”
“For one,” said Harry, “Malfoy was right. I did paint all Slytherins with the same brush, and I’m sorry for that. I’m ashamed of it, and I should have . . . I don’t know. I should have made more of an effort to . . . get to know some of you. Or, I don’t know. Understand.”

“We didn’t exactly make it easy.” Zabini was still using that softer voice.

Harry pushed his glasses up. “You can call me Harry.”

“We didn’t exactly make it easy, Harry,” said Zabini.

“None of us did.” Harry looked up at Zabini, who was looking at him in that calm and placid way, and was really, very attractive. “But it’s easier now.”

“Thanks be to Merlin,” said Zabini. “I do so love things that are easy.”

“I would venture to say that Harry is rather difficult,” said Pansy.

“I do so love a challenge,” said Zabini.

Rolling her eyes, Pansy said, “You contradict yourself.”

Zabini smiled affably. “I’m vast. I contain multitudes.”

“I’m still not bait,” said Harry.

“That’s all right.” Zabini’s smile grew warmer by degrees. “I’ll just stretch out and photosynthesise. If we happen to cross paths, then it is as the water wills.”

“One-liners,” Pansy said, “and ridiculously extended metaphors.”

“Zabini contains multitudes,” Harry said.

Zabini’s smile was lazy and bright. “Call me Blaise.”

* * *

22 July, 2004

“Nice scarf,” Malfoy said.

Harry was just getting ready to leave his desk, grabbing his coat and a purple swath of cloth. “It’s Pansy’s.”

Malfoy raised a brow.

“She left it at my flat.” Malfoy’s other brow went up, and Harry realized how it might have sounded. “She and Blaise and I went to a horror movie. We had drinks at my flat after.” It had been several weeks since he met Blaise. Harry liked him—he was interesting, for one thing, and seemed to be completely lacking in malice, for another.

“Oh.”

For some reason, Harry still felt like he hadn’t explained it enough. “Pansy said you didn’t like horror movies.”

“Pansy isn’t coming.”
“Oh.” Harry looked down at the silky purple thing.

Malfoy had been right. Hermione and Ron were fighting about Pansy. A little after Malfoy and Hermione had met for coffee instead of coming to the pub, Hermione had explained.

It had started when Ron and Pansy ended up going to The Cashmere Labyrinth in Wales alone. Ron had asked Hermione if she really wanted to go, seeing as how she didn’t really care for the band, and Hermione—well, she said she might have sort of suggested that Ron just wanted to be alone with Pansy, and Ron had got angry, and she had got angry, and they had fought. So Ron had gone with Pansy alone, and Hermione had been jealous.

She said she knew she was being ridiculous. Yet, for some reason, she and Ron still hadn’t made up. It was going on for longer than usual, this time.

“I can take it,” Malfoy said.

“What? Oh. Okay.” Harry gave him the scarf.

While Malfoy folded it and put it in his bag, Harry figured it was time they went to the pub. When he made to leave, Malfoy didn’t move.

“I like Muggle movies,” Malfoy said suddenly.

“I didn’t think you didn’t, Malfoy.”

“They’re a great way to understand Muggles, and I think some of them are really good. I like the historical ones.”

“Mostly I like the ones Hermione tells me to watch,” said Harry.

“I don’t only like the films Hermione likes.”

Harry looked at him curiously. “Well, I also like sci-fi.”

“I just mean, I’ve made an independent effort to understand Muggle culture, and literature. And football. I might not have thought so before, but now I realize that it’s very important. We share a world with them.”

Malfoy was tall. He was even taller than Harry, but he was slighter than Harry, so he seemed to take up a little less space. He still dressed just as neatly as he always had—mostly in creams and greys, though sometime he wore black, and Harry wished he wouldn’t. Malfoy looked stark in black and the effect was very striking.

His shirt was black today and his suit charcoal grey, which wasn’t much better.

“Are you saying you like horror?” Harry said finally, because if he didn’t say something soon he was probably going to comment on Malfoy’s choice of clothing.

“No.” Malfoy turned to leave Harry’s cubicle. “I’m saying Pansy is a cow.”

Harry caught up. “Why?”

“Nothing. She’s just been a right bint, lately.”

“She hasn’t been a bint to me,” Harry said.
Malfoy just snorted softly. When he reached the lift, he stopped and turned around. “Ron isn’t coming.”

“I know,” Harry said.

Ron and Hermione had a lot to work out, and some of it was Hermione and Ron just being . . . Hermione and Ron, stubborn and blind and stupid, but some of it wasn’t. Ron liked Quidditch and music and chess, and Hermione liked advocacy, academia, and organizing shelves. Ron didn’t like his job, and Hermione understood why he stayed with George, she truly did, but it was hard on her, loving her own jobs as she did, and hearing him complain, and wanting just to tell him to do something different. Especially when he couldn’t just put up with Crookshanks, for Merlin’s sake.

Hermione had told Harry all of it in a bit of a mess, shortly after she’d talked to Malfoy. There had been a lot of tears and mucous, and she kept apologizing for shutting him out. She hadn’t wanted to make things difficult with Pansy, she had said—or with Malfoy, or Harry and Malfoy, or Harry and Pansy, or Harry, Pansy, and Malfoy. Harry hadn’t even really tried working out what she meant by that, exactly. Mostly he’d just hugged her.

After all, things seemed to be going all right with Malfoy so far.

“I wondered if I . . . I thought I might invite Greg instead,” Malfoy said. “But only if you . . . I understand why you wouldn’t.” His hand was tight on his strap.

“Sure,” Harry said.

“You don’t . . .” Malfoy chewed the inside of his cheek. “He’s . . . thanks, Potter.” He didn’t quite meet Harry’s eyes.

“Sure,” Harry said. “Why don’t you owl him now?”

“All right,” Malfoy said, and they went to send the owl.

When they got to the pub, Hermione and Goyle were there talking.

Goyle barely looked up. “Heya, Potter, Draco.” He turned back to Hermione. “But what about Gringotts? They had one.”

“They had it chained in a dungeon!” Hermione said.

“Yeah, and it was bloody useful, wasn’t it? Or, I guess it wasn’t that useful, seeing as how you and Potter here stole it. Though just how you managed, with Potter’s history of almost getting char-broiled, that’s a mystery.” Goyle thought about it. “That was the best part of the Triwizard Tournament.” He glanced at Harry. “Sorry, Potter.”

“That’s okay,” said Harry. “I stripped you and put you in a cupboard.”

Goyle just turned back to Hermione. “See, if I tamed dragons, I could still char-broil him. I could even have him extra crispy.”

“Remember how we talked about not killing Potter,” Malfoy said, with a notable lack of concern.

“I meant to say I’m sorry,” said Harry, “about the cupboard.”

“Better be quicker next time,” said Goyle. “Or I’ll char-broil you.”
Harry raised his brow. “You and what dragon?”

“Me and the dragon I’m going to tame, only Hermione here says dragon taming is unethical.” Goyle frowned and turned to Malfoy. “Draco, are we still being ethical?”

Malfoy nicked Goyle’s pint and sat back. “We’re still being ethical.”

“Maybe you are.” Goyle turned to Harry to explain. “Draco’s been soppy, ever since he’s started being ethical.”

Malfoy just went on drinking Goyle’s pint. Goyle didn’t seem to mind. “Remember how much fun we’ve had since we’ve become ethical?”

“What fun?” Goyle grunted. “I mean, besides not going to gaol and getting Kissed, I suppose. That’s just a pack of laughs, innit.”

Malfoy put down Goyle’s pint. “Remember that manticore?”

“That wasn’t ethical,” said Goyle. “That was just the right thing to do.”

“You saw a manticore?” Harry asked. He hadn’t known anyone but Hagrid who’d met any manticore.

“Caught one,” said Goyle, proudly. “But I let it go, on account of he talked a lot, and was smarter than me.”

“He tricked you?” Harry said.

“How could he do that?” Goyle sipped his stout. “I had him tied but good.”

“Oh,” said Harry. “Well, you said—”

“Oh, that. I just don’t like if there are too many people around who are smarter than me. I’ve got a threshold.” Goyle glared at Malfoy, who grinned.

“You’re not going to like Hermione at all,” said Harry.

Goyle scowled. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Um.” Harry glanced at Hermione. “I just think she’s quite sharp, that’s all.”

Goyle shook his head. “She’s a dunce about dragons.”

“I know plenty about dragons,” said Hermione, piqued. “My boyfriend’s brother—”

“My sister’s best friend raised a dragon,” said Goyle. “Top that.”

“Okay,” said Harry. “One of my best friends mostly raised a dragon, except Malfoy got frightened and reported him.”

“You were such a girl,” Goyle told Malfoy. He turned back to Harry. “I was always telling him, he was such a girl.”

“I’m pretty sure you helped him,” said Hermione.

“Also,” said Harry, “I’m pretty sure you were a girl in sixth year. Under Polyjuice, but still.”
“What is this,” said Goyle, “pick on Greg day?”

Malfoy smirked. “Is it a day ending in y? Anyway, I don’t mind being a girl. Girls are hot.”

Harry wished he’d ordered a drink at the bar before he’d sat down.

“Malfoy,” said Goyle, “you’re a poof. I keep telling him he’s a poof,” he told Harry and Hermione, “but he keeps forgetting.”

You forget you’re a poof? Harry wanted to say, but somehow couldn’t. He couldn’t even really look in that direction. Luckily Hermione said, “Um, Greg, I don’t think being gay is something you forget. I mean, people can be confused. Or bisexual, or—”

“Oh, no,” said Goyle. “You’re thinking of Blaise.”

“Blaise is bisexual,” said Malfoy. “He’s not confused. He always knows exactly what he wants.”

Harry didn’t know what expression Malfoy was making, because he still wasn’t looking over there.

“That’s why Malfoy’s such a pissant about Blaise,” said Goyle. “Malfoy never knows what he wants.”

Malfoy was silent.

“Anyway,” said Goyle, “like I was saying, they used a dragon in Gringotts. Bloody useful, it was.”

Hermione put her nose in the air. “They didn’t need to use a dragon. There are other kinds of security.”

Goyle shrugged. “Maybe they didn’t. But that would’ve been way less cool.”

“Cool is not the point,” said Hermione.

“Cool is so the point,” said Goyle. “I’d make Draco tell you cool is very much the bloody point, but he wouldn’t back me up, just like the big sodding wanker he’s let himself become. He would be lying, though, because he thinks that mucking about doing the right thing is cool these days.”

“What do you think doing the right thing is?” said Hermione.

“Dead boring,” Goyle said promptly.

“I don’t know.” Hermione smirked. “I think it’s kind of hot.”

Goyle rolled his eyes. “Merlin’s saggy tits, just make out already.”

“I thought Draco was a poof?” Hermione looked innocent, while Malfoy smirked as well.

“Greg reminds me that I am,” said Malfoy.

“You’re a bloody disgrace, you are,” said Goyle. “Potter, what do you think about it?”

“What?” Harry looked away from Hermione, who was batting her eyelashes at Malfoy, laughing.

Goyle grunted impatiently. “About doing the right thing?”

“Um,” said Harry, because he didn’t want to say what he really thought, in case Goyle would tell him to snog someone too.
It wouldn’t be a good idea, with Malfoy wearing black, and everything.

“I think you should try it,” Harry said instead. “You might like it.”

“Speaking of doing the right thing,” Malfoy said, “is Meagre seriously going to stamp out that bill?”

“I don’t know,” said Hermione. “I think he’s wavering.”

“Wavering?” said Malfoy. “What’s there to waver on? He should’ve signed it last week.”

Hermione smiled. “It only went up yesterday.”

“I know.” Malfoy drank more of Goyle’s pint. “He should be run out on a rail.”

“I think his supporters are getting disillusioned,” said Hermione.

Malfoy raised a brow. “Think he’ll pay for it next election?”

“Let’s hope so. With Wang breathing down his neck, he doesn’t look pretty.”

“It’s not Wang making him look bad. She's starting to come off as mental as he is.”

“Mental?” Hermione looked appalled. “You mean, saying Beings who are perfectly capable of rational thought deserve——”

“Here they go,” said Goyle.

Goyle was right, actually. Hermione went on talking, even though it wasn’t like Goyle had turned down his voice to have a separate conversation. When Hermione and Malfoy got going, they really got going.

“Does she ever talk anything but politics?” Goyle said.

Harry looked at him, startled. “Were you talking politics before we got here?”

“Not really,” said Goyle. “I don’t talk politics. But usually she does.”

“Usually?” Harry frowned. “You mean, you’ve met Hermione before today?”

Goyle laughed. He laughed and laughed, and then looked at Harry. “Oh,” he said. “I thought you were making a joke. Malfoy says you’re funny.”

Harry glanced at Malfoy. He was deep in conversation with Hermione. “He does?”

“He also says you’re smarter than we thought. I think he’s off his nut, personally. Potter,” Goyle said very slowly, “I met Hermione when I was eleven.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I just meant, since Hogwarts. It wasn’t like she talked a lot of politics back then.”

Goyle just kept talking very slowly. “You might not have noticed, but Draco and Hermione are sort of chummy. It’s like they’re mates, or something.”


It made sense. Hermione and Malfoy were friends, so Hermione was friends with Malfoy’s friends. Harry didn’t know why they wouldn’t be.
Just, it hadn’t occurred to him, when Malfoy had said he was bringing Goyle to the pub, that Malfoy brought Goyle everywhere else but the pub. And yet, that made sense too. Malfoy always used to bring Goyle everywhere. Malfoy may have changed a lot, but he was the same person.

“I just mean,” Malfoy was saying, “she could buy into the conservative crowd, if she made more of an effort.”

Hermione snorted. “You mean, if she was more moderate.”

They were still talking about Natasha Wang. Natasha Wang was a member of the Wizengamot, directly opposed to Meagre and his ilk. She came out strongly in support of some of Hermione’s statements, but Malfoy and Hermione argued about her a lot. She caused big stirs in the press, because she was kind of sensational.

“You’re not moderate,” Malfoy pointed out.

“And look where that’s got me.”

Malfoy just shrugged. “You’ve got me.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “And Harry, and . . .” Frowning, Hermione looked down, stirring her drink. “Anyway, that wasn’t what I’m talking about. I’m talking about—”

“But that is what we’re talking about.” Malfoy shook the hair out of his eyes. “I’m not Muggle-born. I’m not—I wasn’t raised with the idea that—with the ideas you have. You and I, we don’t think the same, but I’m saying, you’ve got me on your side.”

Hermione’s smile was soft. “You did that on your own.”

It was Malfoy who rolled his eyes then. “Yes, I’m a very special snowflake. But I don’t have to be. Someone could make the others—others like me, I mean—could make them see, but Wang’s just so full of righteous indignation. She doesn’t care what people like me think, because if we’re not with her, we’re against her.”

Hermione frowned. “Maybe. But I’m not sure there’s—”

“You could do it.”

Hermione looked up, startled. “What? No, I—”

“You could do it, and I should know.”

“How?” said Hermione.

Malfoy just smiled. “Because, I’m a very special snowflake.”

Hermione began, “But I’m not—”

“Usually when the go off like this,” said Goyle, “Ron and I just talk about Quidditch.”

“Ron?” Harry asked, startled.

“Ron. Ginger? Completely barmy when it comes to Quidditch.” Goyle shook his head. “You know, Pansy used to say you didn’t pay any attention to us at all in school. Draco said you did, and I believed Draco, because he’s devilishly clever, and Pansy is sort of a bitch. But now I’m more inclined to believe Pansy. I did go to Hogwarts, you know.”
“I know,” said Harry. “It’s just, you were so busy at Hogwarts cheering when I almost got charbroiled; it’s just . . . this is weird, that’s all.”

“Don’t think I won’t still cheer.” Goyle nicked his pint back from Malfoy and drained the rest. “I’m gonna go to the bar,” he said, standing up.

“Okay.” Harry stood up too. He hadn’t got a drink to begin with. Neither had Malfoy. Malfoy mostly just got fizzy water anyway, when he wasn’t nicking other people’s pints, so Harry thought he’d order.

Malfoy caught Goyle’s wrist. “Fizzy water?”

Rolling his eyes, Goyle shook off Malfoy’s grip. “Yes, your excellentness.”

Malfoy just smirked at him, and turned back to Hermione.

The pub had poor service. Someone would eventually come around and ask what you wanted, but it was best to just go up to the bar. The bar was a big tree, cut in half length-wise and then jointed in an “L”. Harry stood beside it with Goyle, waiting to catch the bartender’s attention.

“So,” Harry said, in order not to be awkward, “you’re going to tame a dragon?”

Goyle shrugged. “Maybe two or three.”

“Why does Hermione think it’s unethical?”

“She says dragons are thinking creatures. I don’t know why she always gets her shorts in such a twist. Horses are thinking creatures, aren’t they? What, we can’t ride horses, now?”

“Maybe dragons are different.” Harry thought Hermione would probably know. Charlie said they were smart as humans, but Charlie couldn’t really be trusted not to exaggerate when it came to dragons.

The bartender was serving three witches down on the other end. It was sort of busy, tonight. Harry turned back to Goyle. “What are you going to do with a tamed dragon?” he asked.

“Dunno. Read it poetry. What do you think, Potter? I’m going to terrorize villages and such. No one’s going to mess with me, if I have a dragon.”

Harry felt his eyebrows rise. “Do people mess with you now?”

Goyle rolled his eyes. “You sound just like Draco.”

“Malfoy would probably tell you that terrorizing villages is unethical.”

“Merlin’s balls, we can’t do anything any more.” Goyle put his forearms on the bar. “Mostly, I just think it’d be cool, having a dragon. I’d ride it around, and people would think I was tough. They’d say, ‘we can’t do anything to Greg. He has a dragon.’ And I’d only feed it rabbits and cats and things—you know, useless animals no one wants. It’d probably really like me, a dragon would.”

“Oh,” said Harry, because suddenly, he thought he understood.

“Yeah.” Goyle started tapping the bar restlessly. “That’s why I’m going to be a dragon tamer.”

“When did you first get the idea?”
“The Triwizard Tournament,” Goyle said immediately, “when that Weasley brought the dragons.”

“Charlie,” said Harry.

“Yeah, that Weasley. I wanted to be him. Draco told me I couldn’t, seeing as how I wasn’t freckled or ginger or poor or a disgrace or nearly as fit, but mostly I think he was upset because he wanted to be that Weasley, too.”

“Malfoy wanted to be Charlie?”

Goyle snorted. “Don’t be daft, Potter. Everyone wanted to be that Weasley. He handles dragons.” He drummed his hands. “With Draco, though, mostly he wanted to have an earring.”

“Um.” Harry’s mind sort of went blank.

“I know,” said Goyle. “That’s what I thought too.”

Harry was pretty sure Goyle hadn’t thought what Harry was thinking right now. In fact, Harry was sure of it.

“Luckily, he got over it. Hey, can I get a Scallywag Stout?” Goyle asked the bartender, who had just come up. “Oh. And get me some of those cheesy pepper crisps. The ones with the wavy lines.”

“Don’t forget Malfoy’s fizzy water,” said Harry.

Goyle rolled his eyes. “Merlin’s saggy balls. And a fizzy water.”

“I’ll have a Mermaid Blonde,” Harry said. The bartender left to pull their drinks, and Harry turned back to Goyle. “You work for the Ministry too, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” said Goyle. “I’m a Creatures Collector. Hermione wants to get my job changed.”

“She wants you to get a new job, or she wants to change what your job is?”

“The second one. She thinks impounding creatures is cruel.”

“Do you?”

Goyle shrugged. “I don’t like how we don’t get to keep them. Maybe she should change that. But really, I want to be a Magizoologist.”

“A Magizoologist?” Harry had to ask, because Goyle had fumbled the pronunciation, a bit.

Goyle didn’t seemed disturbed by it. “You know, like Luna.”

Harry just looked at him. “Luna. Luna Lovegood?”

“Are you sure you’re not mental?” Goyle frowned. “Draco used to say you might be.”

“But how do you know Luna? Besides Hogwarts, obviously,” Harry added, as Goyle rolled his eyes.

Goyle shrugged. “Luna and me, sometimes we go on hikes and stuff. I think nature hikes are stupid, but we see some pretty neat things. Once we saw a roc. I don’t mean like a rock on the ground. I mean like one of those great big birds. It was awesome. Luna wouldn’t let me cast fireballs at it, though.”
“I imagine she wouldn’t,” Harry said, still trying to figure out why Luna had chosen to hang out with Gregory Goyle.

Then again, Luna chose to hang out with Thestrals. Harry guessed he really shouldn't be shocked.

“I wouldn’t have really hurt it anyway,” Goyle was saying, “maybe just got it to land. And then I could have ridden it around. And if I did hurt it, then maybe I could keep its skull.”

Harry leaned on the bar as well. “How did you get interested in Magizoology?”

“Care of Magical Creatures was my favourite class.”

“Was it?”

“Yeah. Draco hated it. I think mostly he just didn’t like going outside. I did hate those Blast-Ended Skrewts. And those Flobberworms. What an utter pile of complete sodding shite. But Hagrid didn’t make us do tests the way the other teachers did. He didn’t make us learn big words either and he didn’t make us write things down. I think that secretly that’s really why Draco didn’t like him. Draco likes to be clever.”

“He did say he likes big words,” Harry said.

“In a kinky way. Is that nasty, or what? You should’ve seen the way he used to get around Blaise. He’d get so worked up, he’d’ve done anything Blaise asked. Then Blaise would laugh at him and Draco would fly off the handle.”

Harry looked around for the bartender. It had been a while. But he didn’t look like he was coming, and Harry didn’t know how else to distract himself from asking, “So, Malfoy and Blaise?”

“Well, not any more,” said Goyle. “Draco says it’s way more important to get at the heart of matters than having a big vocabulary.” He drummed his hand some more. “Maybe that’s why Draco and me, we’ve always been friends. Even if he is a little princess.”

Harry looked around for the bartender again, mostly because he didn’t want to think any more about Malfoy, who was still wearing black. “So,” he said, turning back to Goyle. “You thought Hagrid was all right?”

Goyle just grunted. “He had a motorbike, didn’t he?”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “I guess.”

“I’m going to get me a motorbike.”

Harry smiled. “Is that before or after you get a dragon?”

“Maybe before. You really are just like Draco.”

“What?”

Goyle grimaced. “You’re humouring me. You think I don’t know when people are humouring me? Draco does it all the time.”

Harry watched him drum his fingers for a while. Goyle dressed as impeccably as Pansy, but he was still a great deal overweight. He might have had an appealing face, with his rich brown hair and large, rather bovine eyes, if he didn’t also pretty much wear a perpetual scowl. Just then, he didn’t look any more unhappy than usually, but then again, Harry wasn’t well versed in reading Goyle.
“You know,” he said finally, “I don’t know that Hagrid’s using that motorbike over in France. You might be able to buy it off him.”

“What?” Goyle looked at him suspiciously. “Are you serious?”

“I’m serious,” Harry said, trying to look as earnest as he could. He could look pretty earnest. Usually he didn’t try to be otherwise. “I can put you in touch with him.”

“That’s bloody fantastic, Potter.”

Harry grinned. “You can call me Harry.”

“Does this mean you’re not going to call me Goyle?”

“I will if you want me to,” Harry said, surprised.

“What? No. I bloody hate that name. Do you know just how many people have called me gargoyles? They all think they’re so bloody clever. They think they made it up! Like it’s really that witty.”

“Sorry,” said Harry.

“I guess this means I can’t call you Potty, though. Draco’d probably hex me six ways to Sunday. He really doesn’t like when people make fun of you nowadays.”

“Oh.” Harry looked for the bartender again. “Well, I’ll just call you Greg, then.”

“Unless it’s him making fun of you,” said Greg. “Draco is such a ponce.”

The bartender came and gave them their drinks and Greg’s crisps; they paid and they took them back to the table. When they sat down, Hermione was saying, “She has no—”

“You can’t believe her, when she says things like that,” Malfoy said.

“Right.” Hermione grimaced. “So, she lies.”

“No,” said Malfoy.

“Here’s your fizzy water,” said Greg.

“Okay, yes,” said Malfoy, “she lies, but she just says those things to—to be provocative.”

“She’s always being provocative,” Hermione said. “That’s kind of the problem.”

“Also I got those cheesy crisps you like,” said Greg. “You know, the ones with the pepper.”

“That’s just her nature,” said Malfoy.

“That’s not actually an excuse!” Hermione didn’t yell, but she sounded really, really angry.

It was around then that Harry realized they weren’t actually talking about politics any more.

“What do you want her to do,” said Malfoy, “be someone she isn’t?”

“I want her to stop propositioning my boyfriend!”

“There’s not a chance he would ever say yes,” which wasn’t what Malfoy had told Harry, “so why does it matter? Ron doesn’t have a problem with it, anyway. He knows Pansy is just being Pansy.”
“She is just being Pansy,” Hermione said, “and that’s the problem. Draco, she has no remorse. She said so herself. She doesn’t care about anything.”

“She cares about me!”

“You told me to warn you when you get excited,” Greg told Malfoy, taking a handful of crisps. “You’re getting excited.”

“This is between Hermione and me,” Malfoy said.

Greg shrugged and ate his crisps.

“You can’t be someone’s conscience, Draco,” Hermione said. “That’s not how it works.”

“I’m not her conscience.” Colour was high in Malfoy’s face. “I’m her friend. And some day you’re going to wake up and realize that you don’t know how everything works.”

“She said she didn’t care about the world. She said she didn’t care about—”

“I don’t care what she said! You don’t know anything about her. You don’t know what she’s been through—what we’ve been through, together.”

“I know you care about her,” said Hermione. “And she cares about you, in her own way. But caring about someone isn’t enough to tell you right from wrong, and I think—”

“No,” said Malfoy. “They need you to do that for them, is that it?”

“That’s not what I meant at all.”

“It is, though. You come in with this idea that everyone should love and understand each other, and if they don’t understand that philosophy, by God, you’ll make them understand it—instead of trying to understand theirs.”

“That’s not fair. I only want you to see—”

“There you go again.”

“You’re one to talk. You go on and on about understanding your point of view. I’m trying. I’ve always tried. It’s not like you can say the same.”

Greg was reaching for his pint, and Malfoy’s hand clamped down on Greg’s wrist suddenly.

“Steady on, mate,” Greg said.

Malfoy wasn’t even looking at him, but he didn’t let go. His face was livid. “You walked into our world already knowing exactly what you thought of it,” he told Hermione. “You and your little friends. So clever, so heroic, so good.”

Greg tried to pull his arm away from Malfoy, but Malfoy held him fast, his knuckles pale, his eyes very bright. Shrugging, Greg reached around with his left hand to liberate the pint his right one had been reaching for, and drank more stout.

“We weren’t always right,” said Hermione, “but no, we weren’t the ones condemning people based on who their parents were, or—”

“Hermione.” Harry’s voice was quiet. “Don’t.”
Hermione looked at him. “I’m just . . .”

“You’re just.” Malfoy sneered. “You’re just right. You’ve just always been right. You’ve always known right from wrong. You came in knowing it. And when we weren’t doing it your way, you knew we were wrong.”

“Well,” Hermione said, “you were wrong, then—”

Malfoy stood, chair scraping back, hand still tight on Greg’s arm. “You don’t understand us. You’re never did understand us, and you’re never going to, because you’re just a—”

Malfoy cut off abruptly. Then he went white as a sheet.

“Come on,” he said to Greg.

“No,” said Greg. “This is between Hermione and you.”

“Draco,” said Hermione.

Malfoy tugged Greg’s arm. “We’re going.”

“I haven’t finished my pint,” said Greg.

“Now,” Malfoy said, and tugged again.

“Fine.” Greg chugged the remaining two inches of his stout, grabbing a handful of crisps before letting Malfoy drag him away.

Hermione watched them go, then collapsed into her chair. “Oh, Harry,” she said, burying her head in her hands. Then she burst into tears.

Harry touched her on the shoulder, awkwardly petting her hair, and told her that everything would be okay.

* * *
30 July, 2004

“Hey, Malfoy,” Harry said, when he found Malfoy sitting at work in his desk in SO.

Malfoy turned around slowly. “Hello, Potter,” he said. “What can I do for you?” His tone was perfectly polite, and very, very cold.

Harry had seen Malfoy at work a couple of times since he’d fought with Hermione. Mostly Malfoy had just looked the other way. Harry hadn’t said anything to him; Hermione was still pretty upset, and he figured Malfoy was, too. It was clear they needed some time.

Now, though, it had been a week, and Hermione was moping about, and she kept arguing with Ron even more because of it, and Ron said she was being a bint, and he loved her so goddamn much, why did she act this way, so Harry thought maybe by now, it might be all right to talk to Malfoy.

“I wanted to know if you wanted to come to the pub,” said Harry. “Since you didn’t come yesterday.”

Malfoy smirked. “Plan on throwing mud at my face, Potter? Need to practice your slashing hexes?”

“No,” said Harry. “Mostly I thought we could just get a pint.”

The smirk changed into a sneer. “Maybe I’ll bring some Dementors along. I could invite some Death Eaters. Perhaps a werewolf for good measure? I’m sure I still have some Peruvian Darkness Powder. Maybe you can bring a Hufflepuff or two, and I’ll have them murdered for afters.”

“Again,” said Harry, “mostly I was just planning on the pint. Usually after that, I just go home and have dinner, maybe watch telly or listen to the wireless. If you want to entertain yourself afterwards, that’s your affair.”

Malfoy stood up. His cheeks were pink, which always made his eyes look bright. “What do you want?”

“I’ve been saying,” Harry said, “I want to have a pint with you. If you don’t want to have one with me, you can say no.”

Pressing a hand to his temple, Malfoy turned away. “Why?”

“Because we usually do on Thursdays,” Harry said, “but you weren’t there yesterday.”

Malfoy turned back with the sneer set in place again, and it was full of such vitriol that Harry suddenly remembered why Malfoy had been not at all attractive at Hogwarts. “Want to know why?”

“I know why,” Harry said. “It’s because you had a fight with Hermione.”

“And do you want to know why that happened? It’s because I’m a bigot, Potter. I’m a Death Eater, aren’t I? I’m petty and mean-spirited. Self-absorbed, cruel. I’m heinous, Potter. I’m beneath contempt.”

Harry pushed his glasses up. “Well, if you’d told us that from the beginning, instead of pretending to be all that other stuff, you’d have saved us a lot of time.”
“Why are you . . .” Malfoy grit his teeth in frustration. “Why aren’t you _angry_ with me?”

Harry put his hands in his pockets. “You didn’t fight with me. You fought with Hermione. She feels awful, by the way.”

“Hermione,” Malfoy began, and stopped. He shook his head.

“Also, I think everyone is right on a level with contempt, every once in a while. That is, everyone is worthy of it at some point.” Harry took his hands out of his pockets. “I don’t think you’re heinous, Malfoy.”

“Why don’t you hate me?” Malfoy looked a little forlorn.

“I don’t think you’re any of those other things you said either,” Harry said. “I’d say specifically, but I don’t remember them all.”

Malfoy held his eyes for a moment, and then looked away. “She’s never going to forgive me.”

“Sure she will,” Harry said. “Once she forgives herself.”

“That can’t be true.”

Harry thought about it. “No, you're right.” Malfoy hung his head, and Harry said, “She already forgave you. The second you walked away. Actually before that; I don’t think she really thinks there’s anything to forgive you for. But she feels really, really guilty and I can’t seem to convince her that you both just got excited and angry, and now that it’s over, it’s going to be okay.” Harry looked at Malfoy for a bit. “It’s going to be okay,” he added for good measure.

“I never would have said it,” Malfoy blurted out.

“Said what?”

“I wasn’t intending to.” Malfoy’s eyes were beseeching. “I don’t think that way any more. I don’t use that word. I don’t even _think_ that word.”

Harry thought about asking what word Malfoy meant, but he thought it probably would’ve been disingenuous, because he was fairly certain he did know. “So,” he said instead. “Do you want to go to the pub?”

“Oh, God,” said Malfoy. He sounded a little choked.

“At least let’s go somewhere . . .” Harry looked around. “Not here.” He walked out of Malfoy’s cubicle, and Malfoy followed behind him.

People were starting to go home for the evening, but Harry had headed over early so he could be sure he would catch Malfoy, and there were still quite a few hit wizards and witches about. Harry stopped when he realized Malfoy had stopped a little ways back, in one of the lesser populated corridors. There was hardly anyone around.

“Is she coming?” Malfoy said. “To the pub. Hermione.”

“Oh.” Harry tugged his fringe. “No. I mean, I think she’s still pretty bent out of shape.”

“Good. Not about her being bent out of shape. I mean . . . I mean, I don’t think I could face her.”

“She doesn’t want to face you. She feels really badly, Malfoy.”
“She feels badly.” Malfoy sagged against the wall. “God. I was a bastard.”

“I think you’re both making it out to be way worse than it really is.”

“We have a history, and it . . .” Trailing off, Malfoy looked over at him. He looked sort of haggard, shadows of violet under his eyes.

“You and I have a history, too,” Harry said.

Malfoy’s gaze drifted down, somewhere near Harry’s mouth. Maybe he was focused on his chin. It could have been his neck. “Yes,” Malfoy said, his voice low.

“Okay,” said Harry. “So I’m telling you, it’s not that bad.”

Malfoy looked away.

Studying him a little while, Harry tried to think of ways to make it better. That’s what Hermione did for him, when he was truly out of sorts. “Want to invite Pansy?”

“Pansy.” Closing his eyes, Malfoy thunked the back of his skull against the wall. “I could do with never seeing that cow again.”

“You don’t think . . .” Harry frowned. “You said it wasn’t her fault.”

“Of course, it’s her fault. Pansy’s a—a—I can’t even think of a word that I dislike enough that I’m still willing to say, is what she is.”

“So . . . you think Hermione had a point?”

Malfoy grimaced. “Of course, she had a point. Haven’t you seen her with Ron?”

Harry thought about that. “Pansy’s that way with everyone.”

“Ron does it back.”

That was true. Pansy and Ron could get really carried away with each other, but actually Hermione and Malfoy could really get carried away as well. Harry hadn’t thought there was much difference between Hermione and Malfoy talking politics and Pansy and Ron talking about music, food, and not caring about things that other people cared about. Except that Hermione and Malfoy were really serious, and Pansy and Ron usually weren’t serious at all.

“Didn’t you say yourself that wasn’t Pansy’s fault?” Harry said. “Seems like that’s between Hermione and Ron.”

“It’s not that.” Malfoy’s mouth was an unhappy little line. He looked down at the floor. “When Ron does it, he’s just being—he’s just being Ron. Humouring her. He doesn’t mean anything by it.”

Harry was surprised. “You think Pansy means something by it?”

“No. Yes. What I mean is, Ron and Hermione, they’ve—they’ve got their problems. To Pansy, they’re like a gaping wound, and she’s going to go and pour salt on it. Ron is oblivious to it. He thinks she’s just harmless, but she’s not. She sees something bleeding, and she’s going to poke it with sticks just to see what it does. Just because she can.”

Harry thought back to Pansy saying that Malfoy had been a beast. She’d been saying that ever since Hermione and Ron started fighting. “You’ve been telling her not to.” He thought about how short
Malfoy had been, when he had had Pansy’s scarf. “Have you had a fight?”

“Sometimes it seems like we’re always fighting. Ever since the war ended. She just doesn’t listen. She’s destructive.” Malfoy looked wretched. “She’s unkind.”

“Pansy’s all right,” Harry said.

Malfoy shook his head. “She’s never going to—she’s never going to think about anybody but herself. She’s never going to want to. I’ve tried to make her do the right thing, and I—”

“Well, now you’re just saying the things Hermione said.” Harry felt impatient, for some reason. He was thinking about the things Malfoy had said, about how he loved Pansy, about how he’d been through things with Pansy.

Harry loved Ron and Hermione, and he’d been through things with them that no one else was ever going to understand. No one outside the three of them would ever know what it had been like, during the war. No one else would ever understand what they were to each other—so when Malfoy had said that Hermione didn’t understand, Harry had thought Malfoy was right, in a way. He didn’t remember what Malfoy had said, exactly, but he’d thought he’d understood it.

He’d liked it.

“Pansy doesn’t only care for herself,” Harry said. “She cares for you. You said so.”

Malfoy wasn’t looking at him. “Maybe it’s not enough.”

“Sure, it’s enough,” Harry said. “She loves you.”

“That’s not going to make her a good person.” Malfoy shook his head. “Greg’s the same way. I just can’t get them to—”

“Look—” Harry cut himself off. Someone passed by in the corridor with a sheaf of files, and Harry stepped closer to Malfoy. When the person was gone, he said, “Just come to the bloody pub with me. I don’t want to do this in the corridor.”

Malfoy’s eyes slid up Harry’s face, but he didn’t quite meet his eyes. “Okay,” he said, his voice low. “I’ll get my things.”

*

It wasn’t until they were seated at a booth with drinks in front of them that Harry said, “Did Hermione tell you about Snape?”

Malfoy raised a tired brow. “If you’re going to tell me he was a spy, then you’re a bit behind the press.”

“I mean, did she tell you about why he did it?” Only Hermione and Ron knew the full story behind the memories Snape had given Harry.

Frowning down at his pint, Malfoy said, “Because he was trying to do the right thing.”

“He did it because he was in love with my mum.”

Malfoy scowled at him in startled surprise.

“He was,” said Harry. “With his memories, at the end, he was trying to tell me what I had to do—but
he was also trying to tell me why he had done what he did. I don’t think it was an accident.” He took a sip of lager.

“But . . .” Malfoy chewed the inside of his cheek. “But Snape didn’t . . . I know they went to Hogwarts together, but he was in Slytherin. He hated your dad. How would he have even . . . Their paths must have hardly ever crossed.”

“They did, though.” Harry drank more lager. “They were friends as children. When they got older, Snape started getting interested in . . . being like pure-bloods, and my mum, she . . . well, she was just my mum. My dad was a right git to him. Snape, I mean. Then Snape called my mum a Mudblood.”

Malfoy flinched, but “Oh,” was all he said.

“Yeah.” Harry took another gulp of his pint. “I like to think that eventually my dad wasn’t such an arse. That Mum forgave him for being a bully, and he tried to make it up to people—but honestly, I don’t know. But they got married, and she and Snape didn’t, you see, so . . .”

“Snape resented her.”

“I suppose.” Harry shrugged. “But when Voldemort wanted to have me killed, that’s when Snape realized he didn’t . . . he knew it wasn’t what Mum would want. He tried to protect me—but it wasn’t me, really. It was Mum. It was always my mum.”

Malfoy chewed his cheek some more. “I thought he changed his mind.”

“I think he did,” Harry said. “But mostly because he loved her. He didn’t care about anything else.”

“He did too.” Malfoy’s voice was quiet.

“I didn’t mean—I mean, he didn’t care for me. Or saving the world. Those sorts of things. He cared about a small number of things—my mum. You. Your mum, maybe. But that was all.”

Malfoy shook his head. “That wasn’t all.” When Harry looked at him questioningly, he explained, “He sacrificed you, in the end. Or, he thought he did.”

Harry frowned. “Well, yeah.”

“What I mean is . . . do you think your mum would have wanted you to be sacrificed?” Malfoy leaned forward. “You say he decided to side with Dumbledore because he knew your mum wouldn’t want you to be killed. But what did he do in the end? What was Dumbledore trying to do all along?”

Pig for the slaughter.

That was what Snape had said.

Harry shook his head. “I had to die. I had . . .” They’d still never told anyone about the Horcruxes. “It’s complicated, but it had to happen, or Voldemort never could have been defeated. I had to die, so that others could live.”

“You’re . . .” Malfoy’s eyes flicked up to the lightning scar, almost imperceptibly, and then he was meeting Harry’s gaze again. He licked his lips. “Snape believed that too,” was all he said.

“My mum would have believed it,” Harry said.

“You think your mum would have sacrificed you to save the world?”
Harry just shrugged.

“My mum never would,” Malfoy said. “And if what you’re saying about Snape is true, he would have believed that your mum never would. So what he did in the end . . . it wasn’t about your mum at all.”

“I guess we’ll never know.” Harry drank more of his beer. “I’m just saying, it’s enough to care about someone. Love is enough.”

“Potter.” Malfoy’s voice croaked. He licked his lips again. “Can—”

“So, you are here.”

Harry looked up at the sound of Ron’s voice.

“Budge over,” said Ron.

“Ron.” Surprised, Harry made room for him in the booth, and Ron sat down. “What are you—”

“Hermione thought you’d be here,” Ron said.

“How did she—”

“She said she thought you’d go tell Malfoy she was sorry.”

Harry glanced at Malfoy. “Hermione didn’t tell me to.”

“You did though, didn’t you? Mind if I snag your pint; Malfoy always does it to everyone else.” Ron took a gulp. “She just thought it was the sort of thing you’d do. Hey, Malfoy.”

“The sort of thing I’d do?” said Harry.

“You never like a lot of dodging; that’s what she says.” Ron turned to Malfoy. “Look, Malfoy, Hermione feels terrible. Whatever it is she said to you, it can’t have been as bad as all that.”

“What she said to me.” Malfoy looked pale.

Curious, Ron turned back to Harry. “Is he going to hold a grudge?”

“No,” said Harry.

“Good.” Ron swiped another gulp of lager, looking back at Malfoy. “Hermione’d break her heart, and then I’d go do something stupid, like kill you, and then Hermione’d never forgive me. God, she’s being a right—right—I don’t even know what.”

“That’s what Malfoy said about Pansy.”

“Parkinson.” Ron snorted. “Can you believe she’s in such a fuss about Parkinson? If it were me in a strop, I’d believe it. I’m the ignorant hothead, right? But no, she has to go be unreasonable. Bloody women.”

“You’re not,” Malfoy said, and then had to begin again. “You’re not angry with me?”

“You?” Ron scowled at him. “Why bother being angry at you? I’m not in love with you.”

“That’s a relief, Ron,” Harry said. “Malfoy was really worried about you being in love with him.”
Malfoy swallowed. He looked sort of like he couldn’t believe that this was actually happening.

Putting his elbows on the table, Ron frowned dejectedly.

“Ron,” Harry said, “are you all right?”

“Yes. No. I want to drink. I want to drink around people who are sane. Are you sane?” Ron looked at Malfoy.

Malfoy still looked unsettled. “I can be a prat.”

Snorting, Ron turned back to Harry. “Fancy that. He’s sane. How ‘bout,” Ron turned back to Malfoy, “she mope at home about you and me, and we mope here about her. Make sense to you?”

“No,” said Malfoy.

“Me neither,” said Ron. “Where’s Parkinson?”

“Remember,” Harry said, “she’s being a right Malfoy-doesn’t-know-what.”

“Great.” Ron slumped. “You fight with her, too?”

Malfoy frowned. “Yes.”

“I’m not fighting with anyone,” said Harry. “Ron, want to have a go?”

Ron snorted again. “I would wipe the floor with you.”

“In your dreams.”

Ron just stared dejectedly at the table again.

“Well,” Malfoy said, after a little silence. “This is maudlin.”

“Downright mawkish,” Harry agreed, swiping back his pint.

Malfoy brightened a little. “Melancholy even.”

Harry smiled crookedly. “Morbid.”

“Pathetic,” said Malfoy.

“Bathetic,” said Harry. “Characterized by bathos.”

Malfoy looked at him, startled.

Harry just smirked.

“I’m tired of pathos, and bathos,” Ron said. “And ethos, actually. Can we just get back to mild, brown, and stout?”

“Intoxicants,” said Harry.

“Potables,” said Malfoy.

“Aqua vitae,” said Harry.
“No one speaks English any more,” Ron said sadly.


Harry laughed. “Good job, Malfoy.”

“I just want to get wasted,” said Ron. “Is that so wrong?”

“Inebriated,” said Malfoy, in that low, lazy voice.

“Bacchanalian.” Harry put his elbow on the table, and grinned.

Malfy’s eyes were getting darker.

“What’s even wrong with you?” Ron wanted to know.

Turning his grin on Ron, Harry said, “Lately, I’ve been reading a thesaurus.”

“I’ll go get Weasley’s drink,” Malfoy said, quite suddenly. He slid out of the booth, not looking at Harry.

“Make it a round,” Ron called, as Malfoy walked toward the bar. “Firewhiskey, yeah? I sure hope he sorts this out with Hermione,” he said, turning back to Harry. “She’s a mess.”

“They’ll sort it out,” Harry said. “Hermione’s got a lot going on.”

Ron put his head in his hands again. “I don’t know what’s wrong with us. I love her so bloody much, you know?”

“I know,” said Harry.

Ron looked up. “And I would never—with Parkinson; I wouldn’t—”

“I know,” said Harry.

“Hermione’s right about you.”

“Yeah?”

“You’re not a dodger.” Ron drank the rest of Harry’s pint. “You always get right to the heart of the matter.”

Harry looked over in the direction of the bar. “Sometimes it takes a while.”

* * *

3 August, 2004

“Hullo, Potter,” Malfoy said.

“Malfy!” Harry broke his quill, and almost spilled over his pot of ink.

They’d got drunk with Ron four nights before. It wasn’t a Thursday. It wasn’t even evening.

“I was just . . .” Harry looked at his broken quill and the large blot of ink dripping from it to spread over his report.
“Working.” Taking out his wand, Malfoy tapped the parchment. The ink sucked up into a blobby, floating ball, which Malfoy directed into the pot. Then he tapped the quill. “Reparo. I wanted to know if you were interested in grabbing a bite to eat.”

“Now?” Harry looked around. It was definitely the middle of the day.

Malfoy put away his wand. “Yes, now.”

“Sure,” said Harry. “Okay. Yes. Let me . . .” He looked down at the papers on his desk and then realized he had no idea what he had been doing with them. “I’ll just get my robes,” he said, standing up.

“Good,” said Malfoy. “I’ve arranged to meet Luna at the pub.”

Harry stopped, hand half way to his robes. “Luna?”

“Luna.” Malfoy smirked. “You’ll remember her from such escapades as Dumbledore’s Army, raids on the Department of Mysteries, liberation from dungeons, et cetera.”

“I know who Luna is,” said Harry.

“Good,” said Malfoy. “Lunch might have proved awkward, otherwise.”

“I just didn’t know . . .” Harry remembered Greg talking about Luna at the pub, but he hadn’t really made the connection that Greg knew Luna through Malfoy.

Malfoy’s smirk fell away, but he didn’t seem upset. When he spoke, his voice was rather gentle. “I should have specified. You may remember Luna from helping her to escape the dungeons of Malfoy Manor.”

“Oh,” said Harry, helplessly. “That Luna.”


“Okay,” Harry said, and got his coat.

*  

When they got to the pub, Luna wasn’t there yet. Harry had thought perhaps they might go elsewhere, seeing as how it wasn’t Thursday and it wasn’t evening and they weren’t getting drinks, but Malfoy had just looked at him and said, “Spinach and artichoke dip, Potter.”

“I know,” Harry had said, “but there’s always the Leaky, or Nazma.”

“There isn’t the Leaky.” Malfoy had put his nose in the air rather haughtily. “There isn’t Nazma. There is only spinach and artichoke dip.”

“You’re rather high-handed.”

“I can’t help it.” Malfoy sniffed. “It’s the way I was raised.”

Harry didn’t really know what to say about that, so he didn’t say anything, and here they were at the pub, and Malfoy was beaming at his spinach and artichoke dip, and a fried onion.

“You got two starters,” Harry pointed out.
“I like starters. Is it wrong to like starters?”

“No.”

“I’ll order some Brussels sprouts. Will that make you happy?”

“I hate Brussels sprouts,” Harry said.

“They’ll be cooked in butter. Sautééd in a pan. You have no taste, Potter.”

“I’m here with you.”

“Stuffed mushrooms, then.”

“What kind of pub has stuffed mushrooms, anyway?”

“This kind of pub,” said Malfoy. “My favourite kind of pub. Pubs with spinach and artichoke dip. I’m seeing Hermione tomorrow.”

“You can get mushrooms if you want,” said Harry. “Did you talk to her at all?”

“Will you eat mushrooms if I get mushrooms? I can’t eat all this myself.”

“That’s why you don’t only order starters, Malfoy.”

“We talked a little,” Malfoy said. “You were right. She said she was sorry.”

“You didn’t believe me?”

Malfoy looked down at the menu card in his hands. “I just couldn’t believe that she would be the one apologizing to me.”

They were sitting near a window, and the sun was slanting in. Harry hardly ever saw Malfoy look this way—lit by sunlight, because usually they ate at the pub in the evenings, and the Ministry was underground. He looked sharper, more angular in the light.

“You didn’t say whether you would have the mushrooms,” Malfoy said.

“Just get what you like,” Harry said. “You’re pickier than me.”

“I’m not picky,” said Malfoy.

“You eat Brussels sprouts.”

“That doesn’t make me picky,” said Malfoy. “Luna likes tiny cabbage-like things.”

“Hermione and Ron are still having problems,” Harry said.

“Yes, well.” Malfoy put the menu down. “Pansy is still being a bint. Luna also likes mushrooms.”

“Really, only the button kind. It’s not Pansy’s fault.”

“Maybe. She certainly wasn’t making things easy on them, though, and she was doing it deliberately.”

“Hermione spends a lot of time working,” Harry said. “Ron says he hardly ever sees her.”
“Ron’s got to understand what she’s trying to do.”

“Ron understands,” said Harry. “He also wants to spend time with his girlfriend, though.”

“Well,” Malfoy said, “it doesn’t help that when Ron can’t spend time with Hermione, he spends it with Pansy.”

Harry began, “Ron isn’t—”

“I know that. Potter, even she knows that. It doesn’t change the way Hermione feels.”

“I guess it can be hard being friends with someone of the opposite sex,” Harry said. “I mean, if you’re straight. Or friends of the same sex if you’re not, I suppose. Or . . .” Trailing off, he frowned.

“Stop at, ‘it’s hard being friends,’” said Malfoy. He poked at the spinach and artichoke dip. “Did you have . . . a good time with Pansy and Blaise?”


“Yes,” said Malfoy. “He is that.”

“Charming,” Harry said.

“That, too.”

“You don’t like him?”


“You’re fairly good friends, right?”

Malfoy brushed his hair out of his eyes. “I—we’ve always been friendly. I’ve always liked him. I’m very fond of Blaise.”

“But you were better friends with Crabbe and Goyle.”

Jaw hardening, Malfoy looked away.

“Hey,” Harry said. “I wasn’t . . .”

Malfoy jabbed the spinach with the spoon. “Weren’t what?”

Watching him, Harry wondered if his mother had ever told him not to play with his food. His mother was Narcissa; of course she had. Harry wondered what Malfoy had been like when he was little. He’d probably thrown food a lot and had tantrums, and Lucius probably sent him off to his room, and Malfoy probably cried and cried, until late at night when he got to come down and have a sorbet after all, and his mother patted him on the head, and it all sounded very familiar, except that there wasn’t another little boy in that house living under the stairs.

Harry didn’t think Narcissa would have allowed it, actually.

“I think Greg’s all right,” Harry said.

“Blaise was never interested in the Dark Lord,” Malfoy said, after a moment. “His family wasn’t, and I may have never been, if it weren’t for my family too, so I never thought much of it. Even when things became . . . quite difficult, it never really struck me that he didn’t get involved. Some people
didn’t. The smart ones didn’t, and the frightened ones, and the ones who were confused.” He stirred the spoon in the spinach dip. It wasn’t really the sort of dip that needed stirring. “I may have been frightened and confused, but I was hardly smart.”

Harry wanted to reassure him somehow, which was stupid. Malfoy had been stupid. They had been young, then.

“But when the war was over, Blaise still didn’t care. He doesn’t care now, about reform, or proving that we pure-bloods can adapt, or working to understand Muggles. He doesn’t care about any of it. I think—I think he must care for something, or else . . . . We all care for something. But honestly, I think that he cares for very little, and I just . . . I find it hard to understand.”

Harry tilted his head, thinking about Pansy, and the way Malfoy had said, she cares for me.

“Maybe Blaise just has a funny way of showing it,” Harry said.

Malfoy’s chair scraped against the floor, and Harry thought for an alarmed moment that he’d done something wrong, when he saw that Luna had arrived, and Malfoy was standing for her, and helping her out of her coat.

“Thank you, Draco,” said Luna.

Malfoy put it on the back of her chair and pulled it out for her. As she sat down, he hovered for a moment, as if waiting for other things he could do.

“Hello Harry,” Luna said, as Malfoy sat down.

“Hullo,” said Harry.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen you,” said Luna.

“It was the start of summer,” Harry said.

“I’ve ordered spinach,” said Malfoy, moving the bowl and crisps closer to her, “and artichokes.”

“I quite like spinach,” said Luna.

Malfoy beamed at her. “And how are the, er, Snorkacks?”

“Little luck as ever,” said Luna, spooning spinach onto her plate. “It’s good of you to ask.”

“See anything else good lately?” said Harry.

“A Horny-tailed Gruntykins,” said Luna. “That was in Mexico.”

“You were in Mexico?” Harry asked.

“Yes. I was hoping to see a Chupacabra, but the rain has lately chased them into hiding.” Luna scooped more spinach onto her plate.

Malfoy started scooping too. Maybe he was just scooping because Luna was doing it, or maybe he realized that he was starting to look a little like a guard dog, with the way he might as well have been sitting at her feet, so attentively was he watching her. “What happened to Jorge?”

“Oh, he’s still in Mexico,” said Luna.
Malfoy took some crisps as well. “You won’t see him any more?”

Luna looked at him strangely. “Not unless I’m in Mexico. It would be very hard to see him from England.” She thought about that. “Without sufficient practice.”

“Who’s Jorge?” Harry asked, feeling utterly lost.

“A friend.” Luna munched on some crisps. “I was very surprised to hear that you and Draco have become friends. I think it’s nice. Did you order the Brussels sprouts, Draco?”

“Potter wouldn’t let me,” Malfoy said, breaking one of his crisps and pushing spinach around with it. “He detests Brussels sprouts.”

“That’s okay, Harry,” said Luna. “We all have our quirks. Can we get the mushrooms? They only use criminis, here.”

“You’ve been here before?” Harry asked, surprised.

Now it was him Luna was looking at strangely. “Draco and I come here all the time.”

“Oh,” was all Harry could think of to say.

“We really like the spinach dip,” Malfoy said, smirking.

“Apparently.” Harry grabbed some crisps, and Malfoy let go of the spoon, so he could scoop up some of the dip. Since it was so amazing, and everything. “I just didn’t know you two were that good of friends.”

“I suppose you can get spinach with people you dislike,” said Luna. “But I wouldn’t want to.”

Harry dipped another crisp. “How did it happen?” They looked at him, and he said, “You becoming friends, I mean.”

“I stayed a little while in Draco’s basement.” Luna looked a little confused. “Don’t you remember?”

“Um,” said Harry. “Right. Here’s the part I’m not clear on.” He glanced at Malfoy, who was moving back the spinach bowl so Luna could reach it, just in case she wanted more. “It just doesn’t seem like you become friends with someone just because you’re locked in their dungeon, was all I meant.”

Luna looked at him curiously. “Have you ever been locked in a dungeon?”

“Um.” Harry had to think about it. “Not really.”

“I don’t really recommend it.” Luna ate her spinach dip with a fork. “But I did make plenty of friends.”

“I should imagine you’ve never had prisoners locked in your cellar, either.” Malfoy wasn’t looking at him. He was dipping a crisp.

“Guessed I missed out on that one,” said Harry.

“You didn’t.” Malfoy chewed his crisp, and swallowed. “It’s awful. They’re not your prisoners, but it’s your cellar, and it drips, and you’re too much of a coward to help them.”

“Draco helped me,” said Luna.
“Did you want something to drink?” said Malfoy.

Luna glanced over at him. “I’ll have your water.”

Moving his water closer so that she could reach it, Malfoy asked, “Do you want lemonade?”

“I think they’ve stopped making summer lemonade,” said Luna. “I really only like summer flavoured lemonade.”

“I’ll order the mushrooms,” Malfoy said, and stood up.

“I don’t think he likes to think about it,” said Luna, when Malfoy walked over to the bar.

“About locking you in a dungeon?”

Luna was slender and pale, in a way that almost seemed frail, with her bony wrists and rather fluffy yellow hair. Harry thought of the way Malfoy had drawn out her chair, of the way that he had arranged the things on the table so that she could reach everything, and the way that Luna didn’t seem to notice.

It wasn’t that Malfoy thought she couldn’t do things for herself, Harry realized. It was that he wanted to do things for her.

“I think he wanted to rescue me.” Luna was starting in on the fried onions now. “Like a prince in a story.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“No,” said Luna. “In stories they don’t generally say. But he brought us food sometimes, and when I asked, he brought me other things.”

“What things?”

“Spools of thread, beans, bottle caps, corks. You know.”

“Actually,” said Harry, “I don’t.”

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot that you don’t make jewellry.”

“Er, Malfoy doesn’t either.” Then the thought struck Harry, and his eyes goggled a bit. “Does he?”

“No. But I made him a bracelet.”

“You made Malfoy a bracelet,” said Harry.

Luna calmly cut apart her onion. “I would make you one, if I thought you would wear it.”

“Er,” Harry said again, “did Malfoy wear his?”

“For a little while.” Luna took a bite of onion. “It was a friendship bracelet.”

Harry glanced up. He couldn’t see Malfoy over at the bar, because it was around the corner.

For some reason, Harry wanted to make sure he was actually there—as if he actually might not exist, like some of Luna’s other creatures.

Harry turned back to Luna. “You said you thought he wanted to help you escape,” he said. “Why
Luna ate some more onion. “I think it has to do with Chupacabras. Or even Snorkacks, if you still don’t believe in them. I assume you don’t. What happens is that someone sees a Chupacabra for the first time, and she says, “I saw something strange.” The next person sees a Chupacabra, and she says, “I saw something strange that was small and bear-shaped, with spikes on its back.” A third person sees a Chupacabra and says, “I saw something small and bear-shaped, with spikes on its back, and all my goats are dead.” And the fourth person says, “I saw a Chupacabra.

“And then there are numerous reports, and we’ve all heard of Chupacabras, but most of us don’t believe that they exist. But people keep seeing them, and when they see them, they know. And eventually, there’s enough evidence that even if we haven’t seen one, we know that they exist. Like giraffes. Have you seen a giraffe, Harry?”

“Er,” said Harry. “Once, I think. It was at a zoo.”

“It might have been a fake. But you believed it, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Er, because it was a giraffe.”

“Did you believe in unicorns, before you knew about the wizarding world?”

“I suppose I didn’t.” Harry had no idea where this was going. Because it was Luna, it probably wasn’t going anywhere that would really make any sense. But because it was Luna, it was interesting, and whenever he thought of Malfoy pulling out her chair and hovering near her, and the way he looked at her—it made Harry wish that he was that considerate, too.

“Sometimes Muggles capture unicorns. They keep them in cages. If you had seen a real unicorn at a Muggle fair, would you think that it was a fake?”

“I don’t know.” Harry pushed spinach around his plate with a crisp. “Probably.”

“So it all comes down to what it takes, to make you believe in something. Are you the sort of person who has to see it to believe it? Are you the sort of person who will believe anything that people tell you? Or perhaps you believe in something because someone you know and trust says it’s true.

“And while we’re speaking of belief, there’s more than one kind. Intellectually, you might believe something, but what if deep down—where it really matters—you can’t convince yourself? Or, conversely, you believe in something, but people you love and trust have told you that it isn’t true. You can’t prove it, having never experienced it for yourself, so no matter what you feel in your heart of hearts, you cannot convince your mind to believe it. Can you pass the spinach?”

“Sure,” said Harry, and passed the spinach.

Luna scraped the rest out of the bowl and put it on her plate. “That’s the difference between Draco and I,” said Luna.

“What’s the difference?” Malfoy asked. He’d just come up with a plate of mushrooms. Harry made room for it on the table while Luna went on eating spinach, and Malfoy sat down.

“You operate on the principle that seeing is believing,” said Luna, and took a mushroom.

Malfoy looked a little hurt. “I never said there wasn’t a possibility that you would see a Chupacabra.”

“I didn’t mean to be unkind,” said Luna, and Malfoy instantly went soft all over. “I was just talking
to Harry about my threshold of belief theory.”

“Oh, this is interesting; you’ll like it.” Malfoy turned toward Harry, smiling.

Malfoy hadn’t smiled at him very much, the way he used to, before Harry had been an utter prat to him in May, but now Malfoy looked sincerely glad, as though pleased to share something with Harry. Harry just looked back, startled.

Malfoy’s smile fell away. He turned back to Luna.

“Threshold of belief?” said Harry.

“Yes.” Luna took another mushroom. “Basically, it’s about what you need in order to convince yourself of something. How many things need to happen. How many trials you need to face, and how critical they are.”

Harry frowned, thinking. “Critical?”

“Yes. Most trials aren’t critical. Even if all your goats are dying, you think there’s got to be another explanation. But if your goats are dying, and you’ve spelled against coyotes and hunters and disease, that’s more critical, because there are less possible explanations. But if you’re faced with a Chupacabra—you see it with your own eyes, that’s the most critical trial. You have to make a decision right then, about whether you believe it exists. If you don’t, there’ll be some immediate consequences. But those trials are most rare. Hardly anyone ever sees a Chupacabra.”

At last, Harry understood. “You mean . . . like, if you were asking someone about what they saw, that’s not a critical trial. Because it’s not there in front of them, or they can’t tell what’s going to happen if they deny it. So they just kept saying they didn’t know over and over. Like they can’t decide, because they don’t have to.”

“I think so,” said Luna. “Can I have more onion?”

Malfoy passed her the plate of fried onion.

Luna actually ate quite a lot. Harry had never realized it before. “Or maybe they really just don’t know,” he said.

“I think it’s a great way to talk about something like Snorkacks,” said Malfoy. He was looking at Luna proudly. “People might be dismissive, but they’re not going to dismiss a giraffe. It really makes you think about how subjective reality actually is, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” Harry said, so Malfoy wouldn’t stop smiling again.

Malfoy turned to him. “So it’s quite epistemological—the limits on human knowledge, and such. We can’t really know what’s out there, or what’s true.”

Harry tried to think of something else to say, when all he could really think of was how his face had felt, bloated by the stinging hex when the Snatchers got him, and the look on Malfoy’s face at Malfoy Manor.

“I think,” said Harry. “I think a lot of times people know what’s really going on. I mean, they know the truth. They just don’t know what to do with it.”

“How can we be certain, though?” Malfoy said. “Doesn’t our perception of reality limit our understanding of it? Hermione has been telling me about this Muggle theory.” He waved his hands,
as though to paint his words. Malfoy did that when he got excited. “There’s a cave with shadows, and people think the shadows are real things, because they’ve never seen the light. Having never seen actual objects, they can’t conceive of them; they can only deal in the impressions those objects create.”

Harry frowned. He wasn’t really all that great at theoretical discussion, but Malfoy was looking at him as though he thought Harry perfectly capable of having opinions on abstract thoughts.

In fact, he was looking at him as though he was really interested in Harry’s opinions on abstract thoughts.

“I don’t think it matters,” Harry said abruptly.

Malfoy’s brow furrowed.

“I mean,” said Harry, “maybe it matters in a philosophical way. But if you can’t know what’s real or true, then all you’ve got is your impressions, and your perceptions. All you can do is try your best to see things as clearly as possible. You have to do the best with what you’ve got.”

When Harry had started talking, the corner of Malfoy’s mouth turned a little bit, and now it was turned a lot, and now he was smiling. It was an absent, thoughtful smile; he couldn’t know he was doing it, and it was so open and so horribly honest that suddenly Harry was uncomfortable in his own skin.

“Are we getting afters?” said Luna.

“Oh, well I don’t think it’s a perfect metaphor,” said Luna. “I think that a friendship dessert can go on and on. They’re not without their crunchy parts.”

“Mostly I just like food,” said Luna, and so they ordered mousse.

* * *
26 August, 2004

“Working late?”

Harry turned around from his desk.

Malfoy was leaning against the edge of the partition on Harry’s cubicle, smirking. Ever since he had made up with Hermione, Malfoy had been in a good mood with everyone. Except Pansy.

“Give me a second,” Harry said, and turned back to his desk.

Malfoy’s desk downstairs was a much neater affair. Harry had scrolls, evidence bags, and coffee mugs everywhere. Still, though, Harry had noticed Malfoy didn’t exactly line up his quills. Sometimes Harry had noticed random scraps of paper on Malfoy’s desk, and once or twice, origami.

Harry had always thought Malfoy must be a very meticulous sort of person, because of the things he wore and the way he looked. However, having got to know Pansy, and knowing Blaise now a little better too, Harry was starting to think that everyone Malfoy had known and grown up with had dressed like that, and that compared to them, Malfoy was just a little more . . . messy. A little more casual, maybe. Not compared to the rest of the world—just compared to them. Harry had thought that the first time he had seen Blaise Zabini.

He thought that still. He didn’t know why he thought about it so much.

Malfoy was just leaning there so against his wall, looking very relaxed, one hand in his pocket, in his cream-coloured suit.

Harry had planned on writing the final line on his report. Instead, he shoved a bunch of scrolls in a drawer and tapped the evidence bags with his wand, then stood up. “Okay,” he said, “let’s go.”

“I like your filing system,” Malfoy said, as they walked.

Harry snorted. “Organization is Hermione’s hobby.”

Malfoy smirked some more. “What are your hobbies?”

They got on the lift. It was empty; Malfoy had been right—Harry had had to work a little late.

“Saving the world, going to the pub.” Harry smirked back at Malfoy. “What else is there to do?”

Malfoy rolled his eyes, but couldn’t seem to help a smile. “Your life is fascinating.”

“Sorry I’m not dramatic enough for you, Malfoy.”

Malfoy looked at the lift doors a little while. “Hermione and Ron are still fighting, aren’t they?”

Harry’s smile fell away. “Yeah, they . . . yeah.”

“I hope it gets sorted,” Malfoy said.

“Me too.”
The lift dinged, and they stepped out. “When we fought,” Malfoy said, “I thought it was all going to . . . Not just Hermione and I. I mean everything. Me and Ron, and . . . you. The way things are with us.”

“What?” said Harry, mostly because he was pretty sure there hadn’t been any verbs in that sentence. Malfoy didn’t look at him. “I thought it was all going to come apart. That there wouldn’t be any pub.”

“Gee, Malfoy.” Harry grinned at him. “You really do like that spinach dip.”

“You,” Malfoy began. He tried to glare at him, but a little smile played at the corner of his mouth. He looked away. When he looked back, the smile had got bigger, and he wasn’t trying to hide it any more. He rolled his eyes. “You are such a tosser.”

“I try,” said Harry. They walked over to the Floo. “Is Pansy coming?” he asked, before they went in. Malfoy’s smile went away. “No.”

Harry thought about asking about it, but decided not to. He thought, just maybe, he was learning to understand Draco Malfoy. It was a strange and intricate process. Harry didn’t really mind it at all.

* *

When they got to the pub, Hermione was there. It was a lot like old times, until Blaise showed up.

“Draco,” he said. “Harry. And Miss Granger, how delightful to see you again.”

“Oh,” said Hermione. “Zabini?”

Harry had assumed Hermione had got reacquainted with Blaise too, as Hermione seemed to be friends with all of Malfoy’s friends. Apparently, she hadn’t.

“You must call me Blaise.” Blaise was holding a cocktail. Putting it on the table, he sat down across from Harry, next to Malfoy.

“Pansy said I should pop in,” said Blaise.

“Pansy.” Malfoy’s voice was stiff.

Hermione looked vaguely alarmed. “Is she coming? Here?” She suddenly looked like she wanted to be anywhere else.

“No, she’s having a massage.” Looking around the table, Blaise’s brows raised in concern. Maybe he saw Hermione’s discomfort, or Malfoy’s annoyance. “However, now that I can honestly report I have seen you, I’m not obliged to stay.” His head tilted. “Shall I leave?”

“No,” said Harry, because it wasn’t like it was Hermione or Malfoy’s table. It also wasn’t like everyone was fighting with Pansy.

“Hermione and Malfoy are going to talk politics,” Harry said. “You can distract me.”

“I am very distracting.” Blaise grinned, then turned to Hermione. “You’re looking very well, Miss
Granger. I’ve been hearing so much about you.”

“Oh. Um,” said Hermione. “Call me Hermione.”

“How’s the fishing been?” Harry asked.

“Superb,” said Blaise. “I have had a few very promising nibbles in the last week or so.”

Apparently satisfied that Pansy wouldn’t suddenly appear, Hermione looked interested. “You fish? I’m not sure I’ve heard of anyone fishing in the wizarding world. I suppose I thought it wouldn’t take on as a hobby, since you can just summon fish out of the water with a wand.”

“Oh, but I never use force,” said Blaise, looking slightly appalled. “That takes the fun out of it. Patience and persistence require finesse.” He sipped his figtini. “I’m quite fond of finesse.”

“My dad used to say the same thing,” said Hermione. “Where do you fish, then?”

“The usual places.” Blaise gave her a pleasant smile. “Ballrooms, drawing-rooms, Hyde Park when the weather is fine, estate picnics. Where did your father fish?”

“Er,” said Hermione. “Generally in a boat, I think.”

“I don’t think Blaise would like boats,” said Harry.

“Oh?” Blaise raised a flawless brow.

Harry just smiled. “It would cut the algae.”

Blaise threw his head back and laughed. Hermione looked confused, and Malfoy looked sullen. Harry explained to Hermione, “Blaise photosynthesises for a living.”

“Er.” Hermione looked a little uncomfortable. She always looked that way when she corrected people’s factual errors, but it actually hadn’t convinced her to stop doing it. “Photosynthesis is what plants do.”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Blaise does what plants do. He lies around in the sun all day.”

“So long as I’m indoors with the blinds sufficiently drawn,” said Blaise. “Too much sun would ruin my complexion.”

Harry snorted. “Your complexion is perfect.”

Blaise smiled brilliantly. “How good of you to notice. It is rather, isn’t it?”

It was. Blaise’s dark skin was smooth and flawless, just like his bald head was smooth and flawless, just like his full lips were sensual and flawless—just like all of him, really. Harry couldn’t help but notice.

Harry couldn’t help but notice also that Malfoy kept pushing his Brussels sprouts around his plate, and wasn’t saying anything.

“You don’t make your own food, do you?” Hermione said. “That’s what plants do.”

“I do differ significantly from a plant on the matter of production,” Blaise said.

“Blaise tries not to produce anything,” Harry said. “Especially on his own.”
“You understand me so well,” Blaise said. “I would much rather survive on other people’s carbohydrates. Though most anyone is free to sample mine, of course.” He smiled at Harry.

Harry felt himself blush, because Blaise looked the way he did, and because carbohydrates suddenly sounded like a much dirtier word than it ever should have, really. “You should have been a fungus,” he muttered.

Blaise just drank his cocktail. “I thought algae were fungi. I’m determined to live off others, if that’s what you mean.”

“Algae are bacteria,” Malfoy said, jabbing a sprout.

“It’s true,” said Hermione. “Cyanobacteria used to be considered algae. They’re quite interesting, really. They’re one of the oldest organisms, and—and . . . well, I think they’re cool,” she said weakly.

“They changed the composition of the atmosphere.” Malfoy jabbed another sprout. “We learned it in Herbology.”

“Yes, that’s right,” said Hermione.

“I never paid attention in Herbology,” said Blaise. “I don’t care for dirt at all.”

“I didn’t pay attention much either,” Harry said.

Malfoy kept on jabbing sprouts.

“I liked it,” said Hermione.

“You liked everything,” Harry pointed out.

“It’s no surprise,” Blaise told Hermione. “You excelled in every subject. But that can only be a very small part of your great success since school. I have been hearing such tremendous things about your sanctuary project.”

“Oh,” said Hermione, and blushed. These things just happened around Blaise. “It’s—it’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing,” said Malfoy, jabbing another sprout.

“Oh,” Hermione said again, flustered. “Well, Draco’s right; it’s not, of course. I mean, we have . . . three trolls there now who are learning to speak, and a small flock of fairies practising rudimentary spells. Nothing dangerous, of course, but they used to have quite beautiful magic. And we have three gnomes who have signed up for a gardening seminar—you know, so they can build their own places to live. They used to do that on their own, in the histories and . . .” She blushed again. “Draco volunteers. So does Harry.”

“What do volunteers do?” Blaise asked.

Harry was pretty sure Blaise was asking just to be polite, but it was actually something he really liked about Blaise. He might proclaim, in his amused, self-deprecating way, that he did everything for the sake of good form, but—well, his form was very good. He always seemed interested in other people and asked incisive questions about what they did.

Harry had not heard Blaise insult anyone since sixth year.

“I’m working with the fairies,” Harry said. “Defensive things, mainly, you know. Ways to protect
themselves.”

“I could see where that would be quite useful,” said Blaise.

“Yeah.” Harry drank his pint. “Wizards treat them like pests, but we can learn a lot from them, actually.”

“Draco, what do you do?” Blaise asked.

Putting down his fork, Malfoy pushed his plate away. “Recruiting. Mostly Giants and werewolves.” He grimaced. “I have connections.”

He meant, of course, that Giants and certain groups of werewolves had sided with Voldemort.

Blaise’s brow furrowed. “But those are Beings.” He glanced at Hermione. “I thought the sanctuary was for Beasts?”

“It is,” said Malfoy, “but we’re working on Beast and Being relations. Besides, Beings aren’t being treated equally, either. Look at house-elves.” He glanced at Hermione, then back at his plate.

“I want house-elves to found a town,” Hermione said. “Draco says it would be cruel to free them all, but for the ones who are freed—they have no way of life except for serving other people, and the liberated ones go back to service because they have no alternative. Wouldn’t it be amazing if they could build their own town—make their own clothes—”

Blaise shook his head. “And you do all of this in your spare time. It already is amazing.”

“Well.” Hermione blushed again. “I work full-time in non-profits.”

“All six of them,” said Malfoy.

“We can always use more hands.” Hermione looked at Blaise in her eager way. “You could volunteer for anything you wanted.”

Malfoy snorted.

“Would there be any work involved?” Blaise said.

“Oh, tons.” Hermione grinned. “There’s teaching and recruitment, of course, like Draco and Harry, and Ron . . .” Hesitating, she tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. “Well, he did planning, and layouts for the buildings. He picked the site actually, and there’s cleaning and supply restock, and—well, I imagine you’d be brilliant at something like PR—”

Blaise smiled kindly. “I never volunteer if there’s work to be done.”

“But . . .” Hermione looked startled. “That’s what volunteering is.”

Blaise’s smile was kinder still, and quite apologetic. “That’s why I never volunteer.”

“But . . .” Hermione trailed off again, frowning. “I thought you were on the Hogwarts Board of Directors.”

Harry was surprised. “You never told me that,” he said. Blaise just seemed so young.

“I didn’t volunteer,” said Blaise. “I was appointed.”
Hermione kept frowning. “But you don’t get paid.”

“Yes,” said Blaise, “but I do get to look very important.”

“But—”

“I don’t mean to disappoint you, Hermione,” Blaise said quietly. “I do my best to be a completely useless person.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “No, you’re not. You’re just lazy.” He turned on Blaise. “And I don’t see why, because if you would just make the effort, you could be so bloody—”

“Draco,” was all Blaise said.

Frowning, Malfoy turned back to his plate.

It sounded like a discussion that had happened many times before, but that wasn’t going to happen again tonight.

Blaise sighed a little. “Your project sounds delightful,” he told Hermione, “and you are a brilliant young witch. You are still attached to Mr Weasley, I presume?”

“I,” said Hermione, then stopped.

“I’m teaching Ron to play Go,” Malfoy said, filling the silence. He sounded quite smooth, not at all piqued, as he had been several moments before.

Harry thought that it was for Hermione’s sake.

“Is that so?” Blaise didn’t look at Hermione, giving her time to stare moodily at Malfoy’s plate.

“I would think Weasley would be quite good,” Blaise went on. “Go is so strategic.”

“You play?” Harry said, surprised.

“Blaise was the one who taught me,” Malfoy said.

Blaise smiled. “You were a brilliant student.”

“Yes.” Malfoy frowned. “Well. That was a long time ago.”

“I’ve been wanting to learn to play,” Harry said, because Malfoy was shifting uncomfortably, but he wasn’t looking at his plate. He was looking at Blaise. “It sounds interesting.”

“I could teach you,” Blaise said.

“Oh.” For some reason, Harry couldn’t stop himself from looking over in Malfoy’s direction, and for some other reason—or maybe the same reason—he couldn’t get his eyes past Malfoy’s plate.

Everyone found Malfoy’s plate fascinating, apparently, with its poor, murdered Brussels sprouts.

Harry turned back to Blaise. “Yeah,” he said. “That would be really cool.”

“Excellent,” said Blaise. “We must meet for gyokuro. I know an excellent tea shop; they keep a board behind the counter.”

“I don’t know what gyokuro is,” Harry said, and had to stop himself from glancing at Malfoy’s plate.
“Green tea,” Malfoy said. His voice was quite gentle.

Harry looked at Malfoy then, finally, and Malfoy looked back. His grey eyes looked very clear. His long, straight nose was actually a little too long, and there was already a line beside his mouth.

He wasn’t nearly as beautiful as Blaise.

Harry looked down at his pint. “Oh,” was all he said.

“I’m sure you’ll love it, Harry.” Blaise’s voice was encouraging. “It’s exquisite.”

“Okay,” Harry said.

“Did you see Wang’s statement on Yaxley’s renewed sentence?” Malfoy’s voice was back to normal. He turned toward Hermione.

“Yes,” Hermione said.

Malfoy drank his fizzy water. “You don’t think it a little harsh?”

Hermione looked at him in surprise. “Yaxley was a Death Eater.”

“I know,” Malfoy said.

“I just mean, he—he fought in both of the wars.” Hermione twirled her hair around a finger. “Don’t you think he deserves a full term?”

Shaking his head, Malfoy said. “I’m not saying he doesn’t deserve the sentence. The sentence is fine. I don’t want any of us—of them getting off easy. What I mean is, the way Wang talks about it.”

“She’s just—”

“I smell politics,” Blaise said, leaning in.

“You’re just like Pansy and Ron,” Harry said. “And everyone, come to think of it. They don’t like politics.”

“But you do,” Blaise said.

“Oh, no,” Harry reassured him. “I hate them.”

“You didn’t look like you hated them, just now.”

Harry laughed. “That’s what Pansy says.” He glanced at Hermione and Malfoy, who, as usual, were still in earnest conversation. “Hate is the wrong word, maybe. I just don’t know what to do with them. I can volunteer at the sanctuary; I can hunt dark wizards; I can teach defence spells. Those are the kinds of things I’m good at.”

Blaise dropped his slice of orange into the remains of his cocktail. “You sell yourself short.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do,” Blaise said. “Draco says you should be on the Wizengamot.”

Harry stared at him. “That’s Hermione.”
“I’m sure it was Draco. Before tonight, Hermione and I hadn’t spoken since Hogwarts.” Blaise drank the rest of his cocktail. “But that’s not true. Hermione and I never spoke at Hogwarts at all.”

Harry shook his head. “I meant—Draco says Hermione should be on the Wizengamot. Not me.”

“No,” Blaise slid his figtini glass to the side. “He thinks Hermione should be Minister. He thinks that you should be Chief Warlock, on the Wizengamot; he thinks that Mr Weasley should be Head Auror. He thinks that I should head the Department of International Magical Cooperation. This is his vision of the future. Two decades, he says.”

“That’s . . . ambitious,” said Harry.

“He’s always been ambitious,” said Blaise. “So have I, but not at all in the same way. He is high-minded, our Draco.”

“What’s he going to be?”

Blaise raised a brow. “Pardon?”

“You said he says Hermione should be Minister, and all those other things. What does Malfoy think he should be?”

There was something much like pity in Blaise’s eyes. “He thinks he should never, ever be forgiven for the things he’s done.”

Harry felt ill. “That’s not fair.”

“When has Draco ever been fair?”

“I meant—” Harry swallowed hard. “That’s not right.”

Blaise looked more pitying still. “When has Draco ever been right?”

Harry grit his teeth. “Lots of times.”

“I do apologize, Harry.” Blaise’s voice was soft. “I didn’t mean to offend.”


I want this world to be better, was what he was going to say, but he didn’t say it.

Instead he looked at Draco Malfoy.

Blaise looked at him for a while, his expression thoughtful. “I ran into Miss Ginerva Weasley the other day,” he said, his voice rather curious.

Harry pulled his eyes away. “Where?”

“A charity benefit. There were several Quidditch stars.”

Harry frowned. He still felt a little defensive. “Ginny hasn’t got a hook.”

Blaise raised a brow. “Excuse me?”

“She hasn’t got a hook. She isn’t dangling in the water, and she’s not a fish. She isn’t a plant, either.”

“This is excellent news.” Blaise gave him a self-deprecating smile. “I may pretend otherwise, but
really, I prefer primates.”

“She’s a woman,” Harry said.

Blaise’s lips twitched. “I think I heard her roar.”

“I’m just saying. You hurt her,” Harry took a gulp of lager, “and I’ll kill you.”

“How unpleasant.”

Suddenly, Harry grinned. “Yeah.”

Head tilted to one side, Blaise looked at him a little while. “Will you humour me? I’m confused about something.”

“Sure.”

Blaise pressed his lips together, and went on looking at him. At last he asked, “What on earth makes you think I stand a chance with Miss Weasley?”

Harry shrugged. “Didn’t say you did. I just said you better watch your back.”

Blaise started to open his mouth, and then stopped. It was the first time Harry had seen him look uncertain.

It was kind of awesome, actually.

“You’re not one for idle threats,” was all Blaise said.

“About Ginny I am.” Harry finished off his pint. “Don’t tell her I said so, though. She’ll kill me.”

“That sounds undignified.”

“Yeah.” Harry leered. “Ginny can be really undignified.”

Blaise smirked. “Why don’t you tell me all about it?”

Harry leered some more. “I’m sure you’d like that.”

Blaise smirked some more. “I have no doubt.”

“What would he like?” said Hermione, and the smirking and the leering stopped.

Hermione and Malfoy had been quiet for several moments, actually, and Malfoy was frowning at his plate again. Harry was beginning to suspect he didn’t like Brussels sprouts nearly as much as he claimed to.

“I would like to know how you achieved such beauty and grace, while at the same time commanding such wisdom and erudition,” Blaise told Hermione easily. “I find I can only ever manage three things at once. One always has to go.”

Hermione blushed. “That’s not what you were saying.”

“So then it falls to choosing what I should sacrifice,” said Blaise. “I generally discard the most unappealing one.”

“Wisdom isn’t unappealing,” Hermione said.
“How wise you are.” Blaise smiled. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Pansy’s right,” Harry said, laughing. “You’re an arse.”

“Does anyone want more drinks?” Malfoy stood up. He looked sort of tired. “I’m going to the bar.”

“I’ll go with you.” Harry started to get up, but Blaise put a light hand on his.

“Allow me,” he said, and turned to Malfoy.

Without really looking at either one of them, Malfoy turned and headed in the direction of the bar.

“I’m worried about him,” said Hermione, looking after them as well.

“How about Malfoy?”
Hermione nodded, tucking her hair again. “He’s still fighting with Pansy, and it’s because of me.”

Harry glanced toward the bar. “I think Malfoy and Pansy have their own problems.”


“Slytherins and Gryffindors,” Harry said.

Hermione nodded. “I mean, when you put it that way, it sounds so—so *childish*. We’re not at Hogwarts any more, you know? Those things shouldn’t matter. You want them not to matter.”

“They don’t matter,” Harry said.

“Sometimes they do, though.”

Harry shook his head. “Not if you work at it. You’re the one who always said that.”

Hermione turned to him with great big eyes. “I’ve always been good at saying things. You’re the one who’s good at doing things.”

Moving her hair a little, Harry put his hand on her shoulder. He knew that even though she was talking about Malfoy, she was also thinking about Ron.

She wasn’t having a very good time of it.

“I think you’re doing great,” Harry said.

“Oh, Harry.” Hermione smiled up at him. “I think you’re doing great, too.”

* * *

23 September, 2004

“How about meeting you here,” Malfoy said, stepping inside the lift at the Ministry.

“Hey, Malfoy,” Harry said.

“I just keep running into you. Are you following me?”

Harry just raised his brows. “Do you want me to?”
“I think you’ve done enough of that, don’t you?”

Harry searched his face, but he couldn’t find anything in it that looked like resentment over sixth year. The only thing he could see was a certain flavour of light-hearted teasing, which had been there quite often when they began this thing, but now came and went. Harry turned back to the lift door. “You liked it.”

“Hardly.” The lift dinged, and putting his nose into the air, Malfoy stepped out. “You just couldn’t stay away.”

“I was just trying to find out why you combed your hair that way,” Harry said, following Malfoy out.

Malfoy’s nose went farther into the air. “I was a punctilious child.”

“You mean you were a fussy child.”

“How can you even talk about my hair?”

Harry snorted, stopping beside the Fountain of the Brethren. “Just because I wasn’t punctiliously coiffed. Besides.” He glanced at Malfoy’s hair. It swept softly across Malfoy’s brow. “You’re not at all punctilious now.”

Malfoy’s eyes went slightly darker, hand tightening on the strap of his bag. He looked away. “Am too punctilious,” was all he said.

“I invited Neville.” Harry started walking toward the Floo, but stopped when Malfoy didn’t come up beside him. When he turned back, Malfoy had gone a shade paler.

“Longbottom?”

Harry smiled. “You do remember him, don’t you?”

Malfoy chewed the inside of his cheek. “I’ve suddenly remembered.” He turned back to the lift and paused.

Harry came back toward him. “What?”

Malfoy glanced at him. “I—I have to send an owl.”


“Nothing. I—” Malfoy glanced at Harry again. His knuckles were white on the strap. “I have to send an owl.”

Harry stepped closer. “What is it?”

Colour flared in Malfoy’s cheeks, hot and pink. He lifted his eyes to Harry’s. “I said it’s nothing.”

“You can tell me,” Harry said.

“No, I bloody well can’t!” Malfoy shouted, then looked appalled. “I—I have to go.” Whirling on his heel, he made it halfway to the lift. Then he stopped in the middle of the Atrium. He didn’t turn around.
Malfoy was a long slim line, looking like a string strung tightly between the floor and something a little over six feet off the ground. The string had just been strummed, and was waiting, now, to still.

Harry went over to him. “I didn’t mean you had to tell me,” Harry said, in case it was his fault. “I just meant that you could.”

“Greg was going to come tonight,” Malfoy said almost immediately. He still didn’t turn around. “I have to owl him to tell him not to.”

Harry just looked at him, the strong curve of Malfoy’s jaw, his hand clutched to his stupid strap as though it were a life line. “Why can’t he come?” Harry asked finally, when Malfoy just stood there.

“You weren’t there.” Malfoy turned to him slowly. “Seventh year at Hogwarts.”

Busy saving the world, Harry almost quipped, but didn’t.

Malfoy shook his hair out of his eyes. “Longbottom and Greg, they—they shouldn’t be in a room together.”

“Why?” Harry said again.

“Greg cast the Crucius Curse on Longbottom.”

“Oh,” was all Harry could think to say.

“More than once,” Malfoy said.

“Oh,” Harry said again, because he was still coming up blank.

“I’ll—I’ll go write that owl,” Malfoy said, and began to turn away.

“Wait,” Harry said.

Again, Malfoy didn’t turn around, but he did stop. “You weren’t there.”

“You don’t know what I was going to say.”

“Potter.” Malfoy did turn then. He looked miserable. “What could you possibly say?”

Harry looked at him again. As Malfoy had got older his bright white hair had been shot through with streaks the colour of dishwater, and his long, lean hands were a little bony. Harry wasn’t sure he’d ever seen anyone quite as good looking. Even Blaise Zabini.

“You were going to cast Crucius on me,” Harry said.

Malfoy went three shades paler.

Harry could hear the Fountain of the Brethren, the water splashing into the pool at the bottom.

“I didn’t manage it,” Malfoy said, his voice quite low.

“No,” Harry said. “Instead, I sliced you up in ribbons.”

Malfoy looked away. “That’s different.”

“There was blood everywhere,” Harry said. “I’d never seen that much blood. I watched people die; I watched them get murdered. But I’d never seen so much blood as I did then.” He stepped closer. “I
remember the way it smelled.”

Malfoy stepped away. “That’s different.”

“How is it different?” Harry pushed his glasses up. “Tell me how that’s any different.”

“Longbottom didn’t do anything,” Malfoy said. “Greg just did it because—”

“Because people picked on him,” Harry said. “They picked on him for being stupid and spoiled and fat.”

“That doesn’t make it—”

“No.” Harry stepped closer again. “Nothing is ever going to make what I did to you right.”

Stubbornly, Malfoy shook his head. “Longbottom didn’t do anything,” he said again. “I know what Greg’s been through better than you do, and that’s why—but Longbottom never did anything.” He lifted his eyes. “No, in fact, Longbottom did a lot of things. He took detentions for the younger ones; he protected people. He stood up instead of giving in. He only ever did the right thing. He didn’t deserve how I—how we treated him. He didn’t deserve any of it.”

Harry just looked at him. “Malfoy,” he said quietly, after a long moment, “you think you deserved it?”

Malfoy looked away, and Harry had his answer.

Harry wanted to touch him; he just didn’t know how or where he wanted to. He could take Malfoy’s hand, but that was—sort of intimate; he could pat Malfoy’s shoulder, but it wasn’t intimate enough. He thought about Malfoy’s elbows—he thought about them a lot, actually. He’d thought about them before, and how it was weird that he never saw Malfoy’s elbows, because Malfoy always wore long sleeves, and there was just that one time Malfoy had rolled one up.

What Harry really wanted to do was touch the side of Malfoy’s face. He wanted to cup Malfoy’s jaw in his hand and touch his hair with fingertips, brush his mouth with thumb, and make him understand.

“No one deserves that.” Harry shoved his hands deep down in his pockets, balling them into fists. “People deserve trials and sentencing. Sometimes they deserve prison; they may even deserve to be Kissed; who knows about that. But no one deserves to be cut up like that. No one, Malfoy. No matter what the reason.”

“Self-defence.”

“You think what I did was self-defence?”

Malfoy looked away again. “No.”

“You disable someone in self-defence. You stun someone or disarm them. You don’t do what I did. I was trying to hurt you.”

“I was a Death Eater,” Malfoy said. “I have the Mark, Potter.”

“No,” said Harry, suddenly frustrated. “Let me, for once. I was stupid. I was cruel. I never meant to hurt you the way I did, but I’m the one who fucked up. That time, it wasn’t you. You didn’t deserve it.”
“What do I deserve?” Malfoy’s voice was also frustrated. “You think, just because a few of us can get along at a pub, everything is mended now? You think it’s just that simple?” He shook his hair back again. “It’s not. I almost killed Ron Weasley!”

“It was an accident.”

“Because I was trying to kill someone else! It was murder I was doing, Potter, pure and simple.” Malfoy was nearly shaking. “Tell me, what do I deserve?”

The water fall of the Fountain of the Brethren sounded a lot like rain.

“A second chance,” Harry said.

Malfoy just shook his head. “It’s not going to work. You weren’t there seventh year.”

Harry thought about it some, then decided to risk it. “Remember when I was worried about Ron not getting along with you?”

“This is different.”

“You keep saying that,” Harry said, “but it’s actually not at all.”

“Yes, it is,” Malfoy said. “Ron is your friend. Greg is my responsibility.”

Harry wanted to touch him again, just then, but the way he wanted to do it, it wouldn’t be what Malfoy deserved. It would be something that couldn’t be earned at all, and Malfoy obviously didn’t understand that.

“Malfoy,” Harry said, “you’re not responsible for anyone but you.”

Malfoy looked away again, and Harry thought of the way Malfoy had clamped down on Greg’s arm when he’d begun arguing with Hermione. That hadn’t looked like responsibility. It had looked like reliability, like Malfoy was drawing strength by Greg just being there beside him. It had looked like Malfoy knew he was there, without even looking, knew Greg would always be there.

Harry hadn’t thought much about it at the time, but he thought about it now.

“You always think things are going to work out,” Malfoy said.

Harry frowned. “Not really, no.”

“That’s how you do the things you do.” Malfoy chewed the inside of his cheek. “You can just . . . leap the way you do because you think everything will be all right, and to hell with failure.”

Shrugging, Harry said, “Mostly I just don’t think at all.”

Malfoy just stood there.

“Hey,” Harry said. “That was funny. I made a joke. You can laugh; it’s okay.”

“I’m thinking about it,” Malfoy said, frowning.

“Don’t strain yourself.”

“I’m thinking I better go send that owl.”
“What about Neville?” Harry said. “He knows you’re going to be there. He agreed to it. You said it yourself; he’s a good person—”

“It’s more complicated than that.”

“It doesn’t have to be. Please,” Harry said. “Trust me.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes in exasperation. “This isn’t an issue of trust, Potter.”

“Yes, it is. Trust me.” Harry stepped closer. “Trust this.”

Malfoy was wavering.

Harry reached out.

Stepping away, Malfoy said, “At least owl Longbottom.”

Harry pushed his glasses up.

“At least warn him,” Malfoy said. “Then he can choose.” When Harry just stood there looking at him, he added, “Please.”

“Okay,” Harry said.

Malfoy looked over toward the Floo. “I’ve got to—I’ve got to speak to Greg. I’ll see you at the pub.”

“Okay,” Harry said, and went to send the owl.

*  

When Harry got to the pub, Malfoy, Greg, and Hermione were there, but Neville wasn’t there yet.

When he did get there, he said, “Hello Harry, Hermione.” He turned slightly toward Malfoy and started to say, “Mal—” And then he saw Greg, and went very still. “—foy.”

Malfoy lurched out of his seat—just like he would have done for Hermione, or Luna, or any girl who wasn’t Pansy, except far less gracefully. He swallowed hard. “Longbottom.” His eyes were wide, as though with surprise.

“Yeah,” Neville said, and just kept looking at Greg.

“Hey, Longbottom,” Greg said, barely looking up, and started in on Malfoy’s fried onion.

“Goyle,” Neville said, and then didn’t say anything else.

Harry had invited Neville on a whim. Neville had been asking how things were going with Malfoy and the rest; he knew that Harry, Hermione and Ron had been going to the pub. Neville had said he thought it was great that Malfoy was trying to redeem himself, and that Harry could forgive him.

Harry had wanted to correct him, because that wasn’t how it happened, not at all, but he guessed that was how it looked to others. Maybe that was even how it looked to Malfoy. Harry had never thought about it that way.

The way Harry thought about it, they were all just going to the pub. When he’d asked Neville to come, it was for that reason—so that he could see it wasn’t Gryffindors and Slytherins, like Hermione had said.
It was just people.

Neville had hesitated. He’d said he didn’t know, that Malfoy had been a bit of a prat in school, but he’d said it in a teasing, slightly rueful way. Harry had said it would be different, and Neville had said okay.

At the time, he hadn't known that Greg was going to be there.

“You didn’t get my owl,” Harry said, slow realization dawning.

Neville was just looking at Greg, who was decimating Malfoy’s onion. “What?” he said, jerking his attention back to Harry.

“My owl.” Harry glanced at Malfoy, who was hovering, as Malfoy sometimes did. “Sorry,” Harry said, turning back to Neville. “I owled you to let you know Greg was coming along. I guess it didn’t get you.”

“I was in a cave in Devon,” Neville said. He looked at Harry blankly. “There was lichen.”

“Sorry,” Harry said. “Do you— you wanna sit down?”

Neville looked around the table, gaze lingering on Greg.

Meanwhile Malfoy looked like he was manfully trying to resist pulling Neville’s chair out for him.

Abruptly, Neville pulled out the chair and sat down. Malfoy sat down too, and Greg went on eating onion.

“There are some lichen with incredible magical properties,” Hermione said, her voice encouraging. “And Draco and I had an interesting conversation about cyanobacteria the other day.”

Neville looked at her, then turned to Malfoy slightly. “Did you?”

“It’s bacteria,” Malfoy said, then bit his lip.

“Cyanobacteria is bacteria.” Neville didn’t sound mean; he still just sounded sort of blank. And what he’d said wasn’t an insult, when Harry thought about it. It was just that it sort of seemed insulting, because it was Neville, and Neville wasn’t sarcastic with people, hardly ever. “That’s fascinating.”

“Yes,” said Malfoy.

“I like plants you can eat,” Greg said, and heaped the rest of Malfoy’s onion on his plate. “Except for vegetables. I don’t like those.”

“Onions are vegetables,” Hermione said. Her voice was still encouraging. “You like those.”

“Don’t be daft,” said Greg. “Onions aren’t vegetables.”

“What lichen was it?” Malfoy said.

“Map lichen.” Neville wasn’t looking at him. He was looking at Greg.

“But map lichen is relatively common,” Hermione said.

Neville turned back to her. “It was growing an actual map. In Chudleigh Cavern. We’re thinking it could be used in way-finding potions or . . . charms.” His attention wandering from Hermione, it
settled on Greg once more.

“Longbottom,” Malfoy said.

“What?” Neville’s attention snapped to Malfoy. His voice was a little brusque.


“Yes.” Visibly, Neville made an effort to be less short. “That’s a good idea. Do you . . . there are lovers’ talismans, which can always lead you back to the one you’re looking for.”

Malfoy said carefully, “It might even work in a compass.”

“Can you eat lichen?” Greg said, a hunk of onion in his hand.

“I can’t do this.” It was sudden and abrupt, the sound of Neville’s chair scraping against the floor. “I’m sorry Harry, Hermione. Sorry Malfoy.”

“Hey,” Greg said. “All I said was, ‘can you eat lichen?’”

“I know,” said Neville. “I’m sorry to you, too.”

“Hey, Neville,” Harry said, catching his hand.

“Is there anything wrong with eating lichen?” Greg said.

“No,” Hermione soothed, “it’s acceptable in many cultures.”

“Harry,” Neville said, “let go.”

“But—”

Neville pulled out of his grasp, and began to walk away.

“Hey.” Harry stood up as well, and suddenly Malfoy was there.

“Don’t,” he said.

“But—”

“I said you didn’t know what you were doing,” Malfoy said.

Greg’s voice was rising. “I didn’t say anything about his grandmother or his stupid toad or anything. Draco said if I didn’t—”

“Neville’s just upset,” Hermione said.

“But Draco said—”

“He was just taken off guard,” Harry told Malfoy. Neville was nearing the door of the pub. “I’ll just go talk to him.”

Malfoy got in his way again. “Potter—”

“He just didn’t get the owl,” Harry said. “It’ll be okay.”

“I’ll go,” Malfoy said.
Sitting at the table, Hermione looked up from patting Greg’s hand. “Draco, that might not be such a good idea.”

“He said no one would get mad at me,” Greg said.

“No,” Malfoy looked at Greg, who looked fat, dumb, and very, very unhappy. “This is my fault. I’ll sort it.”

“It’s not,” Harry began.

“Don’t you dare, Potter,” Malfoy said. Whirling around, he went after Neville.

Harry started after him.

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione said, “don’t.”

“I’m just going to talk to him,” Harry said.
Hermione tucked her hair behind her ear. “Draco wants to make amends.”

“I talked about stupid plants,” Greg said. “What’s his problem, anyway?”

Harry looked at Hermione, pleading. “I told him he could trust me.”

“He wants to do it by himself,” Hermione said.

“He wants to do everything by himself!” Harry’s voice rose in frustration. Realizing he was doing it, he brought it back down again. “It doesn’t have to be this way.”

“Harry—”

“It doesn’t.” Harry headed toward the door.

“Why is everyone mad at me?” Greg was saying, as he left.

Hermione was likely patting him again. “They’re not; of course, they’re not.”

It was night, but it was not quite quiet; the light in the bookshop was still on and Horkin’s Haberdasher was hopping. The pub was a low murmur, spilling mullioned yellow light, and Malfoy had caught Neville just on the edge of the foot path. Malfoy’s face looked long and pinched, sickly in the oil glow of the street-lamp.

Hermione said they were nineteenth century, the street-lamps, and that the wizarding world really should stop using oil as fuel.

Set an example, she kept saying.

“Potter said—”

“Potter,” Neville said. “Malfoy, you can’t even call him by his first name!”

“Harry.” Malfoy’s voice was so low Harry barely heard it. “Harry thinks we can make it work.”

“I know what Harry thinks,” said Neville. “I know how Harry thinks. He thinks that just because something is right, it can be done. He’s always been that way.”

“No,” Malfoy said.
The only time Harry had seen Malfoy look like that, so completely open and horribly naked, was the time he’d rolled up his sleeve to show Hermione what he understood about atonement.

“He thinks that because something is right, people should try,” Malfoy said.

“I know you’re trying,” Neville said. “I can’t tell you just how damn optimistic it makes me feel. But bloody hell, Malfoy, you don’t think I’m trying too?”

“I know, but please, you’ve got to understand,” Malfoy said, and Harry realized he was seeing Draco Malfoy beg.

He’d seen Malfoy beg before. He’d seen him cower in front of Voldemort and he’d seen him say he didn’t know, right to Harry’s puffed up face.

But Harry felt like he hadn’t seen this. He hadn’t seen this, and it was—it was a violation to watch; it was disrespectful to Malfoy; it was shameful and offensive and unkind, Malfoy had once said, to watch, and Harry couldn’t stop.

“Greg’s always been—”

“I understand Gregory Goyle,” Neville said, and it was not without gentleness.

Harry forced himself to step out onto the pavement. “No, you don’t,” he said.

“Harry.” Neville turned toward him.

“You don’t.” Harry said again. “He didn’t know any better. He’s been made fun of his whole life, and he—”

“Harry,” Neville said again, very quietly. “Look at who you’re talking to.”

You weren’t, Harry wanted to say, but of course, Neville had been.

Harry looked at him—Neville, who’d grown up fit: sharp straight brows and sharp straight shoulders, sandy-coloured hair that was thick and wavy, a full strong mouth and long long legs.

Neville, who was smart and brave and a better poster child for the war than Harry ever could be, because Harry got angry and hexed reporters, and Neville only ever could be kind, when he wasn’t slaying monsters. Neville Longbottom always had been the real hero, and no one had ever known it until the end, because he’d been round and clumsy and forgetful, and everyone had laughed.

“He can be forgiven,” Harry said instead.

“Harry.” Neville sounded like Hermione, when she got sad, and didn’t know how to break something to him. “I’ve forgiven everything. I did it years ago. I had to, or I’d have never made it.”

“Then why—”

“It’s just not that simple, Harry.” Neville’s eyes were full of pity. “I know you want it to be, but it isn’t.”

The murmur from the pub grew suddenly, and all three of them looked over toward the door, where Hermione and Greg had just stepped out of the pub.

“I don’t understand,” Harry said, turning back to Neville. “If we just—”

Neville’s voice was still quiet. “Do you have nightmares, Harry?”
Harry glanced at Malfoy, who looked so desolate there, under the street-lamp. Turning back to Neville, Harry said, “Yes.”

“Do you ever see faces in them?”

The face Harry saw most was Ginny’s.

It had started during seventh year, and just never really stopped. It had been the worst when they were together; he could never save her, ever. Nothing was enough.

Sometimes it was Hermione though, and sometimes it was Ron. Sometimes it was Luna, Lupin, or Dumbledore. More than once, it had been Snape.

Lately there had been Malfoy, and lots and lots of fire, and falling through a veil.

When Harry didn’t answer, Neville said, “I see faces in mine.”

He looked at Greg, and then back at Harry.

Back before he’d dreamed of Ginny, Harry had always dreamed of Voldemort.

“It’s taken me years,” Neville said, “to hear Hannah call out, and not to think she’s being tortured.”

“Neville,” Harry said.

Neville gave him his self-deprecating little smile. “It just needs more time, Harry. That’s all.”

“I get what he’s saying.” Greg said. “He’s saying he sees me in his nightmares.” He thought about it a while. “Man, that’s wicked cool.”

“I’m sorry,” Neville said, and Disapparated with a pop.

Harry looked at the spot where he had been, and it seemed like forever before he could lift his eyes. And yet, he couldn’t not lift them; it was as though his gaze was dragged by force, like a magnet, to where Draco Malfoy stood.

He looked pale and little in the light.

“That was an awful thing to say,” Hermione told Greg.

“Hey.” Greg just shrugged. “I was thinking positive.”

Malfoy’s shoulders slumped.

“Nightmares aren’t positive at all,” Hermione said.

“Sure they are.” Greg looked down at her. “I mean, not if you're having them, but if you’re in people’s nightmares it must mean you’re real tough. You know, like a head honcho.”

“Oh, Greg,” said Hermione. “How can you say such things?”

“Because they’re true,” Greg said angrily. He glared at Hermione, and then at Harry, and then at Malfoy. Looking at all of their faces seemed to make him angrier, and he turned back to Hermione. “I can’t help it if Longbum is a pussy.”

A wave of frustration rolled over Harry, and it felt a lot like fury. “Don’t call him that.”
“Hey.” Scowling, Greg stepped toward him. “You can’t tell me what to do.”

“What, you only listen to Malfoy, is that it?”

Greg stepped closer. “I don’t take orders from Malfoy. I don’t take orders from anyone!”

Harry grit his teeth. “Maybe you should.”

Greg’s chin jutted out. “I can do things for myself.”

“Maybe you really can’t, if you’re going to act like an idiot,” Harry said.

“If you touch one hair on his head—”

“Oh, Draco, no,” Hermione said.

“—I will cut your eyes out, and replace them with your balls.” Though Malfoy hadn’t come any closer, and hadn’t raised his voice, Harry could hear him perfectly. His tone cut through the night air like a cold, sharp knife.

His wand was in his hand.

Only then did Harry realize he’d stepped toward Greg. He stepped back. “Malfoy, I—”

“You what?” Malfoy’s voice was cool and steady.

“I wasn’t going to touch any of Greg’s hair,” Harry said. “Not the one’s on his head or anywhere. You know that.”

“Do I? How?” Malfoy tilted his head. “Because I trust you?”

Harry had said that to him, in the Atrium. He’d made Malfoy do it; he’d been pig-headed and an arse, and he hadn’t listened. But if Malfoy would just—

“Calm down,” Harry said. “Did you even hear the things he was saying?”

“I heard them. Greg may say anything he pleases.”

“Damn straight,” Greg said.

Harry stepped toward Malfoy. “Draco—”

“Malfoy,” Malfoy said.

Harry stopped as though he’d been slapped in the face.

Putting away his wand, Malfoy walked over to Greg and took his arm. “Come on, Greg.”

Greg looked disappointed. “You’re not going to do that thing you said with his balls?”

Malfoy smiled a little at him. “Greg, do I ever do any of the things I say I’m going to do with people’s balls?”

“I dunno,” said Greg. “You’re the poof.”

“Draco,” Hermione said, “wait.”
“Granger,” said Malfoy, “for once just mind your own business.”

“Oh.” Hermione bit her lip, her eyes filling with tears.

“Cheer up,” Malfoy said. “Potter here says everything is going to be all right.”

“You don’t have to drag me,” Greg said, because Malfoy was dragging him.

“Come along.” Malfoy put his arm around Greg, looked at Harry, and Disapparated them both.

“Well,” Harry told the air. “That went well.”

* * *
Chapter 6

30 September, 2004

When Harry saw Malfoy at the Ministry, Malfoy looked the other way.
A couple of times, Harry headed to SO to catch Malfoy after work, but his desk was always empty.
Harry rode the lift alone.

* *

Just Pansy and Blaise were at the pub that night, a week after the incident with Neville and Greg.
“You haven’t come here in a while,” Harry said to Pansy.
“I wasn’t wanted,” Pansy said.
“That’s not true,” Harry said.

Pansy looked bored. “You don’t count.”
Harry supposed he should feel offended, but he didn’t, really, because it was Pansy. She didn’t mean it the way it sounded, even when she deliberately made it sound that way. “Why not?”

“Pansy doesn’t like a fuss,” Blaise said.

“You mean Hermione,” Harry said.
Pansy sipped her Bloody Fairy. “Blaise means everyone who isn’t you.”

Harry wanted to ask about Malfoy, and found he couldn’t.

“Oh, hello,” said Luna.

“Luna,” Blaise said, standing. “How lovely it is to see you.”
Luna gave him her hand and he kissed it, just as though this were ordinary and they did it all the time, which apparently they did. Blaise slid her chair out for her and she sat down.

“Draco said you’re usually here on Thursdays,” Luna said. “He said that I could visit.”

“Hello, Luna,” Pansy said.

“Hello, Pansy; hello, Harry.” Luna looked around. “Where’s Draco?”

“Curlsed up in a corner somewhere,” Pansy said.

“I don’t like it when he does that.” Luna took one of the cocktail menus from the centre of the table.

Harry coughed. “Does he—does Malfoy curl up often?”

“Only when he thinks the world is ending,” Pansy said. “That was once a month at Hogwarts.”

“He’s become less morbid since,” said Blaise, “but only just.”
Luna put the menu back. “I think I’ll have the spinach.”

Immediately, Blaise stood. “I’ll order for you. May I fetch anything for anyone else?”

He went to go get drinks and spinach, and Pansy said, “How’s Jorge?”

“Everyone keeps asking,” Luna said. “That was months ago.”

“Oh.” Pansy sipped her drink. “Who are we on now?”

“His name is Sven,” said Luna. “He’s two metres tall.”

“Why is Malfoy curled in a corner?” Harry asked, because he couldn’t help himself.

Pansy turned to him, unblinking. “I thought you put him there.”

“Is he . . .” Harry trailed off, and tried again. “Is he going to be okay?”

“Draco always was a wasting heroine,” Pansy said.

Luna looked at Harry with interested eyes. “Why did you put Draco in a corner?”

“I.” Harry swallowed. “I called Greg an idiot.”

“That would do it.” Pansy threw back the rest of her drink.

“Oh,” said Luna. “How sad.”

“I’ve tried to apologize,” Harry said.

Luna still looked interested. “To Greg?”

“To both of them.” Harry had owled Greg, and never had a response. Malfoy wouldn’t look at him in the Ministry, so Harry knew he didn’t want to see him. If it went on like this, he’d make it a point to see them both—he knew he could, but he didn’t want to force them into something they weren’t ready for.

It was what had got him in this mess to begin with.

“Draco can’t accept apologies,” Pansy said.

Harry swallowed. “Can’t he?”

“He’s too busy on his fainting couch with his smelling salts.” Pansy hitched a shoulder slightly, her equivalent of a shrug. “Best just to leave him be until he comes to his senses.”

“Will he . . .” Harry swallowed again. “Will he come to his senses?”

“He’ll rally,” Pansy said. “He always does. He has to; that’s what heroines do.”

“Malfoy’s not a heroine,” Harry felt the need to say.

“Draco would look very pretty as a heroine,” Luna mused.

Pansy smirked at her, a little. “Especially the corset.”

Then they sat and thought about Malfoy as a heroine, for a little while.
“What are we doing?” Blaise asked, distributing Pansy’s drink and his own figtini. “The spinach is on its way,” he said, sitting down.

“We’re imagining Draco in a corset,” Luna said. “Thank you.”

“An excellent past time. I’ve whiled away many delightful hours engaged in just such an activity.” Blaise smiled. “While we are on the subject, Luna, how is Jorge?”

“We’re past Jorge.” Pansy started in on her next Bloody Fairy. “We’re on to Sven.”

Blaise started in on his own drink. “I knew a Sven. Heir to Nimbus Racing Broom.”

“Oh.” When Luna reached for Blaise’s drink, he pushed it closer to her. “Is that what he does? I haven’t bothered to find out.”

“So it is that Sven. However did you manage to land him?” Blaise asked. “I’ve been intending to for years.”

“Er,” said Harry. “Are you talking about fishing?”

Luna looked at him in confusion. “We’re talking about sex.”

Retrieving his drink, Blaise took a sip. “I just love a woman who’s concise.”

“I’m sure we didn’t mention fish at all.” Luna still looked confused.

“You didn’t,” Harry said. “Blaise says he prefers primates anyway.”

“Oh,” said Luna. “Primates are lovely for certain activities, though they’re not as essential as some people seem to think.” She turned to Blaise. “Are you still in love with Ginny?”

Blaise was taken completely off guard.

It was almost as awesome as the last time, except Harry couldn’t quite believe it, not really. It was too preposterous, the idea of Blaise being in love with Ginny, and then he had to decide whether it was preposterous because Blaise was Blaise, or whether it was because Blaise was a Slytherin.

It had to be because Blaise was Blaise, Harry decided eventually. Pansy and Ron was preposterous too, but Hermione thought it could happen, apparently. And Hermione was insightful and very clever, so if she thought that it could happen, it probably could.

Nothing was outside the realm of possibility, and suddenly, Harry felt a ray of hope.

He didn’t know why he felt it or where it came from, but he didn’t question it too hard, because he needed it. Lately he’d mostly felt like punching things, and that never ended well.

“That’s a trick question,” Blaise said at last, softly. “My dear girl, I refuse to answer, on the grounds that it may compromise everything I stand for.”

“I’m sorry,” Luna said. “I thought you knew.”

“Blaise knows everything,” Pansy said, “except about himself.”

Blaise looked very sad. “I try so very hard never to know anything at all.”

“You should ask her out,” Harry said, “if you like her.”
“But Harry, how can I?” Blaise looked sadder still. “I abhor practicality in practically every incarnation.”

Harry shrugged. “Then you’re out of luck, I guess.”

Blaise looked saddest of all. “My one virtue.” He sighed. “I shall resign myself to revelling in other people’s good fortune.” Turning to Luna, he said, “Sven is a very fine specimen of primate.”

“I met him in a banquet hall,” Luna said.

“I always do like a banquet hall,” Blaise said, “unless there are banquets going on in them.”

“I don’t know if there was a banquet going on,” said Luna. “I was giving a talk on Widgety Flingbats.”

“Beautiful animals, Widgety Flingbats,” said Blaise.

“Widgety Flingbats don’t exist,” said Luna.

“But they don’t exist so beautifully.” Blaise didn’t look at all disturbed.

“They’ve been extinct half a million years,” said Luna, “but there are fossil remains in Arkansas.”

“Beautiful place, Arkansas,” said Blaise. “It does exist, doesn’t it?”

Harry leaned across the table toward Pansy. “Is Malfoy going to be all right?”

Blaise and Luna went on talking about Arkansas and Sven, while Pansy said, “He isn’t slitting his wrists, if that’s what you mean. He just acts like he’s going to.”

When Malfoy had been asking Neville to give them a chance, he’d looked as though he would have done it, if it would have helped at all.

“He’s very disappointed,” Pansy went on.

Harry swallowed hard. “I fucked up.”

Pansy rolled her eyes. “It’s not you he’s disappointed in.”

“Greg?” Startled, Harry pulled back a little. But—"

“Don’t be a blockhead. He’s disappointed in himself.”

“Oh,” Harry said.

Pansy stirred her drink. “Did he threaten your balls?”

“Er,” Harry said, a little embarrassed. “Yes.”

“I thought as much. I’d give it another week.”

Harry frowned. “Is that how long it usually takes?”

“No.” Pansy raised a brow. “It’s been months and he still hasn’t forgiven me for propositioning his precious girlfriend’s boyfriend. But as for you, he’s ashamed of himself, and very guilty; besides, he admires you very much.”
“He . . .” Harry had to swallow again. “He does?”

“Don’t play coy.” Pansy looked at him expressionlessly. “If you told Draco he could fly, he’d jump off a cliff.”

“You’re angry,” Harry said, surprised.

Pansy looked at him with boredom. “Couldn’t you tell?”

“No.”

“Then maybe you didn’t know about Draco, so listen up. Don’t tell Draco he can do things he can’t. Don’t make him promises you can’t keep. Don’t lead him on, because Draco will believe you. Just because it’s you.”

Harry suddenly felt as blank as Pansy’s face. “I haven’t been,” he said. “Leading him on.”

“Yes, you have been. Hermione has been. Even Ronald has been leading him on, in his utterly artless way, and if any of you ruin it for him, I will crush you like the ants you are.”

“Are you still angry?” Harry pushed his glasses up. “Just, it’s hard to tell.”

“Funny.”

“I’m not going to ruin it.”

“Pity.” Pansy looked bored. “The idea of crushing you gave me pleasure.”

“That, I could tell.”

Inclining her head, Pansy regarded him for a while. At last she blinked, slowly. When she was done with that, she stirred her drink, moving a bit more like a normal person. “Have I told you about the time a peacock chased Draco around the Manor?” she asked at last.

Harry shook his head. “Is it as good as it sounds?”

“It’s better,” Pansy said, and smiled.

* * *

5 October, 2004

“Potter.”

“Malfoy.” Harry turned and lurched out of the chair at his desk so quickly that he almost stumbled.

He might be turning into Malfoy, just a little bit.

It was just that Malfoy was here, at his desk, and it hadn’t been another week yet, which was how long Pansy had said to wait; it had only been five days.

While Harry searched for the right thing to say, Malfoy looked away. “May we go somewhere . . . else?” he said.

“Sure,” Harry said. “There’s . . .” It was just before five, and there could be people in the lounge. “There’s records,” he said.
“All right,” was all that Malfoy said.

Harry walked out of his cubicle and Malfoy followed. They had to walk down the corridor, and by Robards’ office, past the conference room, around the corner. Malfoy didn’t try to say anything. He didn’t even really try walking beside Harry; he was just following, and Harry had to resist turning around again and again to make sure he was still there. At last he reached the door, and there was the records room.

Malfoy came in; Harry shut the door, and Malfoy said, “I’m sorry that I threatened you. I’m sorry that I was unpleasant to Hermione.”

Harry’s chest felt tight. “Malfoy,” he said, and couldn’t say anything more.

“I’ve already talked to Hermione about it. We’re . . . she’s all right. I’m sorry that Greg said those things.”

“Malfoy.” Harry’s voice croaked.

“I read the owl you sent to him. He wanted to know what to do with it. I told him to apologize to you. He will.” Malfoy frowned down at the scrolls on the shelf beside Harry’s thigh. “You were right. He does do what I tell him to.”

“Please stop,” Harry said.

“All right,” Malfoy said, and looked at the scrolls.

There were a lot more records down below in Archives; these were just the case files from the past couple years or so, but there were enough scrolls to fill the little room. Harry almost never went in it. It smelled like books.

“I’m sorry I said what I did to Greg,” he said. “I would never have lifted a hand.”

Malfoy pursed his mouth. “I know. I get . . . stupid, sometimes.”

“Protective.”

Malfoy grimaced. “If I were Blaise, I’d say that was a pretty word.”

“You’re not Blaise.”

“Then I’ll just say that it’s too pretty for what I am.”

The records room wasn’t a dark closet. Not at all. But the light wasn’t the brightest, and it softened Malfoy somewhat, made all his angles seem less harsh.

They should go to lunch again, Harry thought. He wanted to see Malfoy more in sunlight.

“Luna thinks you’re pretty,” Harry said.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “Potter, Luna thinks Nargles are pretty.”

Now that he had his eyes, Harry held them. “I’m sorry about what happened with Neville.”

For a moment, Malfoy held his gaze, but then he dropped it. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Yes, it was.”
“No.” Malfoy sounded annoyed. “It was Greg’s, and it was mine. It was about things we did, and we need to pay for them.”

“For how long?”

Malfoy rolled his eyes again. “Not getting to share a pint with Longbottom and gossip about the old days is a small price to pay, believe me.”

Harry just looked at him. Malfoy looked a little pale, drawn about the eyes. There were shadows under them. “I made a promise I couldn’t keep,” Harry said. “I’m sorry.”

“Morgana’s tits.”

Harry wasn’t sure he’d ever really heard him swear before.

“Potter, you’ve been talking to Pansy, haven’t you?”

“Yes?” Harry said.

“When am I going to convince anyone that you can’t listen to anything she says?”

Harry tilted his head. “She did tell me this great story about you and a peacock.”

“I don’t follow people blindly.” Malfoy shook his hair back. “I mean, I did, but I don’t any more. If I do something, it’s because I think it’s right.” He paused. “Or because I’m a stupid arse, but it isn’t because I can’t think for myself. I wanted to try with Longbottom because—because I wanted to try, Potter. Not because you said so, no matter what Pansy said. And no matter how big your head is.”

“Oh.” Harry thought about it a little while. “She said she’d crush me like an ant.”

“Yes, well.” Malfoy’s mouth was an unhappy little line. “She’s always wanted to say that to you.”

“I like that she said it.”

“Well, that’s . . .” Malfoy looked at the scrolls again. “. . . kinky.”

“She said it because she cares about you.” Harry studied the curve of Malfoy’s neck. It was quite long, his neck. “I like that.”

“Yes, she’s just a barrel of laughs, that Pansy.”

Harry wanted to tell him not to be so hard on her, but he didn’t. He was pretty sure he’d learned his lesson, where Malfoy’s friends were concerned—at least for now. Instead he looked at Malfoy’s neck some more. “Does this mean you’ll come on Thursday?”

“Yes, about that.” Malfoy swallowed. “I was wondering . . .”

He seemed to be having trouble speaking, so Harry said, “You don’t have to.”

“I was wondering if you might like to go tonight.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “I was just—”

“That’s all right,” Malfoy said quickly.

“It’s nothing,” Harry said, but that wasn’t true. He already had dinner plans. “Pansy.”
“Ah.” Malfoy nodded.

“Come with me,” Harry said.

“Blaise?” Malfoy asked.

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “I assume so.”

Malfoy looked at him then, something indiscernible in his eyes. “I think you should go alone,” he said. “Have fun.”

“We could just go to the pub.”

“No,” Malfoy said. “I’m tired anyway.”

Harry couldn’t help himself. “Are you going to be mad at her forever?”

“Only until she stops being a cow.” Malfoy sighed. “You should know, this is how we are, Potter. She and I . . . we bicker.”

“I don’t know anyone who’s like that.”

Malfoy smiled a little. “No, I suppose you don’t.” The smile fell away. “Sometimes I wonder how people like you and Blaise can stand to be around people like us.”

“I’m just trying to figure out what you two are even bickering about.”

“I don’t know either.” Malfoy put his hands in his pockets. “I think it started, though, when she dipped my pigtails in a well of ink.”

“You had pigtails, Malfoy?”

“Oh, yes. Pansy’s always worn the trousers, in our family.”

Malfoy didn’t even seem to notice what he’d said, that he used that word just as if it were as true as blood could be.

Harry’s chest went tight again, and he suddenly realized he was in a dark closet with Draco Malfoy, and Harry’s hands were beginning to sweat, and this had the potential to end very, very badly.

Malfoy didn’t seem aware of the danger, even a tiny bit. “Well, Potter,” he said, “have a good time.” He started opening the door.

“You’ll be at the pub,” Harry said. “Thursday?”

“Yes,” Malfoy said. “And tell that filthy bint I said hello.”

*  

“Malfoy says he misses you,” Harry said.

“That’s why you’re so happy,” Pansy said.

“I’m not happy that he misses you,” said Harry.

“You’re happy you made up.”
Harry came into the room, because it wasn’t like Pansy was going to ask. She called it a drawing-room; Harry guessed that was all right, since he didn’t know what else to call it, and whenever he came to Pansy’s, he kept thinking about Petunia’s specials on the BBC.

Pansy’s parents’ town-house was in Chelsea, sandwiched magically between the other houses on the row. Unlike Grimmauld Place, the Muggles had corrected the numbers long ago; there were two number threes. Her parents never stayed there out of season—whatever Pansy meant by that—so she set up there the rest of the year. Pansy’s life seemed one long exercise of being wherever her parents weren’t. When they came to town, she went to her family’s estate in Surrey, or she stayed with Malfoy.

Malfoy didn’t live in his parents’ house, or in a house at all. He had a flat in Hammersmith. Pansy seemed to find something about it distasteful, even though she once roomed with him for four months straight. Harry didn’t know what was wrong with it; he had never been to Malfoy’s flat.

He’d been to Pansy’s quite a few times, though.

Pansy was in an over-stuffed wing-back chair, her legs tucked up under her somehow, lost in folds of heavy robes. When she wasn’t in a formal setting—she seemed to think a pub was a formal setting—Pansy was always perching places, and yet, somehow, she managed to make it look like lounging.

“Did he come crawling?” she said, sounding not at all interested.

Harry thought it might mean that she was very interested. He looked at the vases on Pansy’s parents shelves. They looked like they were all from Japan. “I don’t think he does that.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about,” Pansy said. “But I’m talking about Draco.”

“I am, too.” Harry turned to her. “I think he used to do that. Maybe he did it all the time. But now—I don’t think Draco Malfoy crawls to anyone.”

Pansy looked at him, her eyes as black as always and unreadable. “You’ve never seen him without any clothes on,” she said at last.

“No.” Harry turned back to the vases, steadfastly not thinking about Malfoy crawling without any clothes on.

There was another pause. “You’re defending him. To me.”

Harry turned back. “You sound surprised.” He smiled, because getting Pansy to sound anything was pretty much a victory.

“I didn’t know,” Pansy said blankly.

Harry just shrugged. “Now you do.”

The door clicked, and Squeak, one of Pansy’s house-elves, came inside. “Mr Blaise Zabini and Mr Theodore Nott,” said the elf.

They did things like that here, with misters, and announcements, and elves. It was really weird, but Harry was kind of getting used to it.

“Theodore?” Pansy stood. “What are you waiting for?” she asked Squeak, seeming more angry than she had when she’d told Harry she’d crush him like an ant. “Show them in.”
Squeak disappeared, and Blaise and Nott walked in, Nott coming up to kiss her hand.

Harry never could figure out about the hand-kissing; Malfoy never kissed anyone’s hands, and Blaise never kissed Pansy’s. He’d kissed Luna’s, though, and Blaise hardly ever stood for Pansy when she left the table or entered a room, either. Maybe it had something to do with what Malfoy had said about Pansy not being a lady, except that Pansy had stood this time, when Blaise and Nott had come in, and she never stood for anyone.

Come to think of it, she looked rather flushed.

“I hope you don’t mind, Pansy,” Blaise said. “I thought that Teddy could use some company.”

“I believe it was Blaise who required company,” Nott said. “Good evening, Pansy.”

“Hi,” Pansy said.

Nott was lanky, angular, and very thin. Dark brown hair hung rather flat and long on either side of his face, but his eyes were surprisingly large and soft, with straight black brows slanting over them. He was neither handsome nor particularly bad-looking, though his height was striking.

Harry couldn’t really remember what Nott looked like at school. He couldn’t even remember if they had ever spoken more than two words to each other.

“Hello, Harry,” Blaise said.

“That’s Harry,” Pansy told Nott.

Nott came over to him, extending his hand. “Good evening, Mr Potter.”

Harry shook it, just as if they were meeting for the first time. He supposed they actually were. “It’s Harry,” he said.

“Call me Teddy,” Teddy said. “You did an admirable job killing Voldemort.”

“Er,” said Harry, “Thanks?”

“Don’t tease him,” Blaise told Teddy.

Pansy reseated herself, curling up her legs. “Harry’s very shy about it.”

“I wasn’t teasing,” Teddy said.

“I’m not shy about it,” Harry said.

Teddy looked at him. “Sometimes they say things they don’t mean.”

“You noticed that?” Harry asked.

“I wonder how you did it,” said Teddy.

“What?”

Blaise walked over to what Pansy called the sideboard, where there was what Pansy called a decanter with something she called port inside. To Harry it looked a lot like a table with a pitcher with wine in it, but what did he know. “I told you,” Blaise said, taking off the glass stopper and pouring out some wine, “he’s shy about it.”
“I wonder how you killed Voldemort,” said Teddy.

“I never talk about killing anyone before supper,” Blaise went on. “Completely ruins my appetite.”

“I was merely curious,” said Teddy. “If you can’t say, that’s understandable.”

“I can’t say,” Harry said.

“Pity,” Teddy said, and went to go sit across from Pansy.

He didn’t seem at all dangerous. Harry had never thought about him much before—he’d never been a part of Malfoy’s gang. His father had been a Death Eater; Harry knew that much, but Nott—Teddy—had pretty much kept to himself in school. Harry didn’t really know what that meant.

“He’s not plotting to become evil,” Pansy said.

“I wasn’t thinking that,” Harry said.

Blaise brought Pansy the glass of wine. She sipped it. “Yes, you were.”

Teddy looked at Harry with mild curiosity. “I don’t see a point in being evil. Do you?”

“There’s all kinds of point,” Harry said. “Just never any good ones.”


“Teddy’s always making sense,” Blaise said. “I try to make up for it, but there’s only so much I can do. Would you like a drink, Harry?”

“No,” Harry said, “I’m not thirsty either. You do realize, this makes you evil, Blaise.”

“That’s a false causality,” Teddy said.

“That’s okay.” Blaise sat down, lounging elegantly. He never really sat any other way. “Harry can think I’m evil if he likes. It makes me seem rather dashing, doesn’t it?”

“It certainly makes you interesting,” Pansy said, “which is new.”

“So, Teddy,” Harry said. “What do you do?” It was the sort of thing you said when you were getting reacquainted, or never really knew someone in the first place. The trouble with Pansy and Blaise was that they never really did anything.

“I’m studying,” Teddy said. “At Endor.”

“That’s a good one,” Harry said, even though it was really the only wizarding university he knew. Hermione had gone there, so it must be good. “What do you study?”

“Applied arithmancy with a focus on quantum thaumaturgy,” said Teddy, “but I have an interest in astro sorcery as well.”

Harry sort of wanted to tell him he’d just made that up.

“Teddy’s our swot,” Blaise said.

Harry said, “I thought Malfoy was the swot.”

Blaise laughed, then looked at Harry. “I’m sorry.”
Harry frowned. “Malfoy’s clever.”

“Harry’s gone and got prickly,” Pansy said lazily. “I think Draco may be rubbing off on him.”

“Draco’s very clever,” Blaise said kindly. “But he was never a swot. He was a little too busy with . . . other things.” He looked at Harry thoughtfully. “He was our fearless leader, if that makes you feel any better.”

“He didn’t lead you,” Harry pointed out.

“Well, I was never really part of the group,” said Blaise.

Pansy looked at her nails. “We’ve already established I was the Ron Weasley.”

Blaise looked thoughtful again. “I like to think of myself as the Luna Lovegood of the crowd.”

“You’re batty enough,” Pansy told him.


“Miss Granger is a very clever witch.” Teddy didn’t seem to mind not being Hermione. “I’ve heard about her Magical Beast Sanctuary. Have you seen it?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I work there.”

Frowning, Teddy said, “I had read in the papers you were an Auror.”


“I’ve read that the idea is to teach trolls to speak, and gnomes earth magic,” said Teddy.

“Not so much earth magic for gnomes,” said Harry. “I mean, maybe one day. Hermione’s really big on creatures regaining lost arts, but she’s starting small. She wants gnomes to be able to grow their own gardens—you know, places they would prefer to live.”

“Interesting,” said Teddy. “What does she plan on doing with centaurs and merpeople?”

“Nothing, really.” Harry pushed up his glasses. “I mean, they seem content where they are. Okay, that’s not true,” because so did house-elves. “Hermione wants to improve their relationships with other Beasts and Beings. Same with werewolves and Giants. Even vampires, goblins, and Hags. She thinks there should be more . . . I don’t know. She talks a lot about idea sharing and . . . cultural exchange.”

“Yes,” said Teddy. “Only think of the economic consequences.” His eyes were lit up and warm, a little bit like chocolate. “It’s a fascinating thought experiment.”

Harry recoiled. “It’s not a thought experiment.”

“Naturally, it’s more than a mental exercise.” Teddy looked surprised. “I only meant that it’s an innovative way to test certain theories of a free enterprise system—combined with a marked cultural isolationism—against a more socialist approach.”

“It’s not a socialist approach,” Harry said.

“I told you he’s become prickly,” Pansy said.
Teddy tilted his head. “I only meant a more collaborative form of commerce,” he said. “I didn’t mean anything political by it.”

“I didn’t mean anything political by it either!” Harry clenched his jaw. He never meant to get frustrated. It just happened, the feeling of wanting to punch someone. “It’s not politics; it’s what’s right!”

“Harry doesn’t talk politics.” Pansy sipped her wine. “He says that he gets angry.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” Blaise said.

Teddy was looking at Harry, head still tilted. “You’re upset,” he said. He sounded curious about that, too.

“No.” Harry unclenched his jaw. “Sorry.”

“Harry is only trying to make up for the excessive lack of passion in this room,” Blaise told Teddy.

“I see,” Teddy said.

Pansy was still looking at her nails. “I’m not sure if even in a rage, he could completely compensate.”

“You care,” Harry said.

Eyeing him lazily, Pansy said, “About what?”

Harry turned to Blaise. “So do you.”

“Good heavens,” said Blaise. “You all care,” Harry said.

Pansy yawned. “And here I was certain I didn’t invite Draco.”

“Perhaps you should have,” Blaise said. “He and Harry could have cared together. Or is he still caring all by himself?”

“No,” said Pansy. “He’s caring with Harry and Hermione again. I don’t know what I would have done with another week of him moping about.”

“This is excellent news,” Blaise said smoothly. “Now we may all go to Luna’s soiree.”

He had probably been anxious to change the subject, since Harry still sort of wanted to punch things. It was probably for the better, because he sort of wanted to punch things even more when they talked about Malfoy that way, like Malfoy feeling miserable because of something Harry had done didn’t matter very much.

“Since I can see you’re dying to tell us,” Pansy told Blaise, “pretend I asked, ‘what soiree?’”

“I’m not dying,” said Blaise. “That would be unbecoming. Luna is celebrating Phoenix Day.”

Teddy quirked a brow. “Phoenix Day?”

“Yes,” said Blaise. “It is a Muggle holiday.”

Harry scowled. “I’ve never heard of it.”
Disappointed, Blaise said, “But I was sure she said it was Muggle. Here I thought that we were going be very culturally diverse.”

“What did she say about it?” said Teddy.

“I believe invitations are forthcoming.” Blaise shrugged. “She said that Muggles set off fireworks.”

“Oh,” said Harry. “Is it for the beginning of November?”

“Some time around then.”

“I can see how she got confused,” Harry said.

Blaise brightened. “Then it is Muggle?”

“Well,” said Harry. “Sort of. The fireworks will be, anyway.”

“I certainly hope not.” Pansy put her drink aside. “Muggle fireworks would be insipid.”

“That’s true,” said Harry. “Compared to wizard fireworks.”

Pansy turned to Blaise. “Do you remember the fireworks at Madam Valinsky’s masque ball?”

Blaise did remember. While they went on about it, Teddy set his drink down and came to stand closer to Harry. “My apologies for offending you earlier,” he said. “I tend to be more interested in abstracts than actions. Pansy tells me it’s not conducive to living in the real world.”

“Okay.” Harry glanced at Pansy and Blaise, who were nattering on about ballrooms and the length of skirts. He turned back to Teddy. “Here’s an abstract for you, since you’re smart. Do you believe in conscience?”

Teddy quirked his brow again. “Do you mean, an innate understanding of and urge toward right versus wrong?”

Harry shoved his hands in his pockets. “Yeah.”

Teddy blinked. “No.”

“Then why do people think they have one?”

His brow furrowing as he considered his reply, Teddy said at last, “Society breaks down if everyone thieves, murders, rapes, and pillages, and society benefits most individuals.” He shrugged. “People have developed conscience to benefit themselves.”

Harry glanced at Pansy and Blaise again. When he caught Pansy’s eye, she blushed. In her slow and slothful way, she turned back to Blaise, but the colour stayed on her cheeks. Harry turned back to Teddy. “Then people do have it.”

“Many people do. Some learn it. Some never do. It’s just like social cues, or a will to live. These things aren’t moral imperatives. They’re not even magic. They’re survival instincts.”

“Where does magic fit in?”

“Magic is a survival instinct too.” Teddy shrugged again. “People developed a sense of sight to better interact with their world. Lesser creatures don’t have eyes. People also developed a sense of magic.”
Harry’s hands fisted in his pockets. “You think Muggles are lesser creatures.”

Tilting his head, Teddy said, “I’m speaking theoretically. You asked me what I thought.”

“Yeah.” Harry loosened his hands, glancing at Pansy and Blaise again. Now Pansy looked completely blank, and Blaise looked utterly at ease. “So, what do you do with people who don’t have that survival instinct? A conscience, I mean.”

“Put them where they won’t hurt anybody, I suppose.”

“You mean, you kill them?”

“No,” Teddy said. “Just because someone’s detrimental in certain ways doesn’t mean he can’t be useful in others. Just look at Muggles.”

“So, Muggles and psychopaths. Basically the same?”

“You’re talking about sociopaths, and I didn’t say they were the same as Muggles. What I was going to say is that you should help them. And if you can’t help them, you protect them, because they might be helpful to you.”

“Okay,” said Harry. “What should I have done with Voldemort?”

Teddy’s eyes were wide and brown, his lashes long. There were actually tiny freckles all over his face, but they were so light, Harry hadn’t seen them until he stood this close. “The Janus Thickey ward hasn’t got high enough security,” he said. “They say there’s a wizard hospital off the west coast of America, for the criminally insane.”

“You’re saying Voldemort shouldn’t have been killed.”

Teddy’s brow rose. “Does that make me a Death Eater?”

“No.” Harry rubbed his forehead. “That makes you more humane than me.”

Teddy’s other brow rose as well. “I’m not trying to be humane. I’m trying to be logical. Voldemort had a great deal of knowledge that might have proved very beneficial to the world, had it been used in a more reasonable way.”

“Yeah.” Harry looked at Pansy and Blaise again. “Maybe it doesn’t even matter what you’re trying to do. Maybe it just matters what you do.”

“I prefer not to do anything at all,” said Teddy. “I just think about doing things. If Voldemort had beaten you, I’d have probably been very interested in the effect of a dictatorship on wizarding economic trends. I’d have probably drawn up charts. I’d have probably been fascinated by it. I may even have been Voldemort’s accountant.”

“But Voldemort didn’t beat me,” Harry said. “You’re doing astrosorcery, not economics. The world’s a different place.”

Teddy looked rather solemn. “Are you sure? I haven’t changed at all.”

“I’m sure, because I’ve changed a lot.” Harry wasn’t looking at Teddy. He was looking at Pansy and Blaise.

* * *
5 November, 2004

“Hey,” Malfoy said, stepping into the lift at the Ministry.

“Hi,” Harry said. Malfoy hadn’t come around to his cubicle since the incident with Neville and Greg. He’d sort of kept his distance, Harry thought—not as though he were still angry, but as though he was afraid things could go pear-shaped again. Malfoy was very careful about some things, Harry had noticed. He treated them as fragile, even though they weren’t.

“What is this a celebration of, again?” Malfoy said.

“Phoenix Day,” Harry said.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “Oh, yes. That explains everything.”

Harry grinned. “It’s Guy Fawkes. He tried to blow up Parliament.”

“Muggles celebrate someone trying to blow up their government?”

“Only once a year,” Harry said. “Dumbledore must have known about it. He was always funny.”

“Oh,” Malfoy said.

“Stop worrying,” Harry told him.

“I’m not worrying.”

Once the doors to the lift opened, they stepped out. “Yes, you are,” Harry said.

“No, I’m not.”

“You hold on to things too tight when you worry,” Harry said. “Give me that.”

Frowning down at the bottle of champagne he was holding, Malfoy gave it over. “I don’t hold on too tight.”

“Yes, you do.”

They walked toward the Floo. “She invited everyone,” Malfoy said.

“IT’s Luna,” Harry said, carrying Malfoy’s champagne. “She invited her friends.”

Malfoy stopped. “Don’t you ever . . .”

Stopping also, Harry turned back to him. “No,” he said. “Not really.”

Malfoy wasn’t in a suit, because they were going to a party, and it wasn’t formal. Maybe he’d changed. He could not have been wearing a black polo-neck all day.

No one would have got any work done.

“Okay,” Harry said, unable, really, to take his eyes off the stark line where the neck of Malfoy’s jumper ended and Malfoy’s skin began. “Maybe I do. About some things.”
Brushing hair back from his brow, Malfoy said, “The great Harry Potter, afraid of something?”

“Not afraid,” Harry said. “Just cautious.”

Malfoy smiled slightly, his faint, elusive smile. “The great Harry Potter, cautious?”

Harry turned away. “There are some things worth taking time for.”

They walked toward the Floo. “Blaise is going to be there,” Malfoy said, after a moment.

Harry smirked. “I’ll ask him to save you a dance.”

“You’ve never seen me dance, Potter.” Malfoy turned haughty.

“Yeah.” Harry just kept smirking. “I bet you waltz divinely.”

“As it so happens,” Malfoy turned haughtier, “I do.”

Harry just laughed. “You people are weird.”

If Malfoy got any more haughty his nose was going to get stuck in the ceiling somewhere. “You’re just uncivilized.”

Harry snorted. “Oh, yes, please, Malfoy. Tame me.”

Malfoy’s nose came down. He looked away. “Maybe you should ask Blaise.”

Harry just laughed again. “Ottery St Catchpole,” he told the Floo.

* 

Luna moved around a lot, studying and observing creatures all over the world. When she stayed in England, she usually stayed above a fossil shop in Lyme. On hols, she stayed with her father in his house. Apparently Phoenix Day was a holiday, according to Luna. She had only invented it this year.

For the occasion, Luna had spelled a magic terrace that covered the whole yard. The Snargaluff and Dirigible plums were nowhere to be seen, though the crab-apple trees still stood on either side of the front door, lit with fairy lights. Magic stoves kept the terrace warm, and there were so many floating lanterns that it was almost bright, though the shadows caught and danced.

The kitchen had been expanded, though the wrought-iron stair case still spiralled up the middle, and tables had been added to hold food and drinks.

“Spinach,” Malfoy said, and looked delighted.

“Onion,” Greg said, and looked delighted.

“Alcohol,” Pansy said, and didn’t look delighted, but probably would have if she could.

“The pub caters,” Luna said.

Xenophilius had invited an older wizard and two witches Harry didn’t recognize; they sat in the kitchen for most of the evening, speaking of Snorkacks and Blibbering Humdingers. Sven, Luna’s new boyfriend, hadn’t come.
“I wouldn’t call him my boyfriend,” Luna said.

“Oh,” Harry said. “Er, what would you call him?”

“A fling. I think this needs more cheese.” Luna wandered off to refill the fondue.

Blaise had brought Teddy, and made a point of reintroducing him to Hermione, who shook his hand.

“Applied arithmancy,” Hermione said. “I was eyeing that program.”

“But you are more pragmatic,” Teddy said. “What was your degree?”

“Muggle Relations,” said Hermione. “What an utter crock. Endor wouldn’t know Muggle culture if Cambridge came and sat on it.”

Teddy quirked a brow. “Cambridge?”

“It’s a Muggle uni,” Hermione said. “I wrote my dissertation on it.”

“Abstract?”

“Oh, that the wizarding world has a thousand and one things to learn about education.”

“Interesting,” said Teddy. “Such as?”

“The House system at Hogwarts, for one thing,” Hermione said. “Regarding Endor specifically, they’re stuck in this Renaissance ‘classics’ approach, instead of focusing on new research and—and, sorry. Sometimes I get carried away.”

“You’re referring to the emphasis on medieval works of magic and art, are you not?”

Hermione twirled her hair around a finger. “Yes. In the Muggle world, they were doing the same thing—only, it was Greeks and Romans, but of course Greek and Roman times were a golden age for Muggles, whereas for the wizarding world, it’s the Middle Ages.”

Teddy raised a brow again. “You don’t think the Middle Ages have much to teach us?”

“Of course I do. Look at Merlin. Look at Morgana. But that’s another thing, even if we are going to focus on medieval wizardry, why is it all western?”

“Ah,” said Teddy. “Sheherazade?”

“Among others. Sun Wukong in , Kintarō in Japan. Don’t even get me started on the Native American shamans Renaissance wizards got busy decimating.”

“But I would like to get you started,” Teddy said.

Harry walked over to Pansy, who was standing alone on the patio, arms folded up in her voluminous sleeves. Her robes, burgundy and black, covered almost every inch of her, except her pale face. Her black hair glinted in the lanterns, and she looked exceedingly bored. “I don’t think you should be jealous,” Harry said.

Pansy looked away from Teddy and Hermione. “You use foreign words.”

Harry smiled. “Okay, do you steal Malfoy’s jokes, or does he steal yours?”
“Nothing is original.” Pansy sounded even more indifferent than usual.

“Even turnabout,” Harry suggested.

Pansy went back to looking at Teddy and Hermione. “It isn’t turnabout. Hermione isn’t that clever.”

“You once said she was very clever.”

“I was wrong.”

Harry thought he’d go find Malfoy, because even though Malfoy thought Pansy was a cow, he wouldn’t like to see her upset like this. When Harry looked around, though, he didn’t see him. Wandering off the patio, he went around to the side of the house, where the vegetable garden lived.

Malfoy was standing beside a pumpkin patch, full of preposterously sized pumpkins. Two of Luna’s magic lanterns bobbed beside him, and he was talking quietly. His hands moved expressively, as they always did. He looked pink with pleasure, lit up from within; in the light of the lanterns, he was almost gold against the austere darkness of his clothing.

Beside him stood Neville.

Harry watched them for a little while; Neville said something, and Malfoy smiled. Neville went on, and Malfoy nodded. Whenever Neville spoke, Malfoy stood there quietly with his listening expression, as though every word that Neville spoke was worth a thousand Galleons. Neville looked calm and affable and very Neville-like, strong and friendly, just as though he talked to Malfoy in a pumpkin patch every other day.

Harry walked up to them. “Hey,” he said to Neville. “I didn’t know you were here yet.”

“Mostly I’ve been talking to Draco,” Neville said.

Malfoy beamed. “Did you know that Neville’s raised another species of Datura?”

“No,” Harry said.

“Tell him, Neville. It’s really amazing.”

Neville looked at Malfoy strangely, then turned to Harry. “Er. It’s really only interesting if you’re a fan of herbology.”

“But I’ve been looking for a substitute for jimsonweed for ages,” Malfoy said. “Angel’s trumpet doesn’t work the same way with henbane and nightshade.”

“I told him he better not be brewing anything lethal,” Neville said, but he didn’t sound concerned.

“Malfoy’s the potions expert for Specialist Ops,” Harry said.

“I know,” Neville said. “He’s said SO needs an herbology consultant.”

Harry was surprised. “You’re going to be a hit wizard?”

Now it was him Neville looked at strangely. “Are you mental?” he asked, after a moment.

“I think Neville’s better in research. He’s found a new way of growing cowslip. Isn’t that remarkable? Cowslip!”
Malfroy was completely capable about getting excited over ingredients for potions, only he usually didn’t get this excited. Maybe it was just having someone to share the passion with, or maybe it was the fact that it was Neville in particular he was sharing with.

“Cowslip is pretty insane,” was all Harry said.

Malfroy looked at him for a moment in confusion, and then there came that small, absent smile, that sometimes seemed to happen without Malfroy really noticing it. “You don’t know what I’m talking about.” He turned to Neville, smile growing wider. “He doesn’t know what we’re talking about.”

“I know what cowslip is,” Harry said.

“I told you,” Neville said to Malfroy. “Harry’s pants at herbology.”

Malfroy looked perfectly happy that Harry was pants at herbology. “You’re teaching the seminar for gnomes at the sanctuary, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” Neville said. “You’ve been doing some pretty good work there yourself, I’ve heard.”

Malfroy was going to float away, if he wasn’t careful. “I’ve been thinking about briar.”

“What?” Neville said.

“Gnomes have taken up in wizarding gardens due to predation in the wild, yeah? They’re going to need protection—at least until Hermione gets her wood-working and earth magic projects off the ground. What better than briar?”

“There’s an idea,” Neville said. “I’ve been focusing on pests. Gnomes don’t have insect or weed-killer potions, either.”

“Oh. I hadn’t thought of that.” Malfroy chewed the inside of his cheek. “Do we need to brew up stores for them, or . . . ?”

Neville shook his head. “The idea is self-sufficiency, right? I’ve been looking into plants that are hardy and insect resistant. What I want to focus on really—where the gnomes are concerned, anyway—is certain plants they could mix themselves, without really having to brew, that could deter weeds and pests.”

“Only, don’t say pests.” Malfroy gave him a wry smile. “Hermione doesn’t like it.”

Neville smiled back. “Insects and species of sprites.”

“Pixies aren’t sprites,” Malfroy said absentely, chewing on his cheeks. “They’re another genus of fey. I hadn’t thought about it that way. Gnomes mixing their own—you’re thinking a sort of pot-pourri?”

Neville shrugged. “Salmagundi, if you will.”

Malfroy’s eyes widened slightly.

Don’t talk like that to him, Harry wanted to say.

Neville was right; he was mental.

Harry swallowed hard. “I’ll go check on Pansy.”

“No thanks,” Malfroy said absentely, then focused on Neville. “So, you’re thinking cypress, naturally.
What else?"

Harry went back around the house, but instead of finding Pansy, found Ginny. “Hi,” he told her.

“What?” she said. “Good, you’re here. Tell Ron he’s an imbecile.”

“Ron,” Harry said, “you’re an imbecile.”

“Gibson is a-bloody-mazing,” Ron said, “and if you weren’t on the Harpies—”

“I wouldn’t be on the Cannons,” Ginny said, “not even if they bloody paid me.”

“I thought they did pay you,” Greg said.

“There’s no amount in the world that’d be enough,” said Ginny.

“How about a million Galleons?” said Greg.

“Manning can’t even get his hands on that, because no one will invest,” Ginny said. “And if he did, I’d still say no.”

“Manning?” Harry said. “I thought Dorkins managed the Cannons.”

Ron glared. “You’re all against me.”

“We can’t help it you like a stupid team,” Greg said.

Ginny looked pleased. “Yes, Greg, thank you.”

“I just said I thought Dorkins managed the Cannons,” Harry said. “I didn’t say Clark couldn’t catch a Quaffle if you handed her one.”

Greg snorted. “Well, she couldn’t.”

“Clark’s not even the issue,” said Ginny. “It’s Gudgeon—”

Greg grunted, which was sort of like the snort, only louder. “I could catch the Snitch better than that butterfingers.”

“Harry,” Ron moaned. “Manning’s managing the Cannons now; don’t you see? That’s why it’s all going to change; we’ve got Shen; we’ve got bloody Bashar—”

“Did Dorkins finally check in at Janus Thickey, then?” Harry asked innocently.

Greg sort of snorgrunted. “Never recovered from that win in ’99.”

Ginny laughed, large and loud. She always threw her head back when she did that; her throat was milky white, and her hair red like fire. Harry had always loved to hear her laugh.

She’d done it far more often after they’d broken up.

“Greg,” Ginny slapped him heavily on the back. “You’re all right.”

“I am?” Greg looked at her in surprise.

It was no wonder, really; her freckled face flushed in amusement, her wide mouth stretched wider still in a grin. Harry supposed that not many girls who looked like Ginny had ever slapped Greg on
the back before. He might as well get used to it; Ginny slapped everyone she liked on the back, and when she didn’t like them, she sometimes punched them in the face.

“Who do you favour for next season?” she asked Greg

“Tornadoes,” Greg said.

“Here’s what’s wrong with the Tornadoes,” Ginny said.

“Don’t understand what’s so wrong with the bloody Cannons,” Ron said, but Ginny went on talking to Greg right over him. “Ginny used to be good people.”

“You mean she’s consorting with the enemy?” Harry asked.

“Greg’s not an enemy,” said Ron. “He’s just a bloody goon.”

“Hey,” said Greg. “I heard that.”

“Shut your gob,” Ginny told Ron. “You’re just jealous about how some people can think straight, when it comes to Quidditch.”

“Bloody Malfoy supports Tornadoes,” Ron said. “That’s the only reason Greg does.”

“Draco supports the Tornadoes because I support Tornadoes.” Greg’s chin jutted out. “I’m the Quidditch expert of the family.”

There was that word again. Harry’s chest went tight, even without Malfoy saying it.

“Expert.” Ron snorgrunted, but it wasn’t nearly as impressive as Greg.

“Come along, Greg,” Ginny said. “Let’s leave Wonny-kins alone to cry.” She squeezed Harry’s arm. “Come find me later, yeah? It’s been a while since I’ve seen you.”

“That went well,” Harry said, when Ginny and Greg moved away a little.

“Well?” Ron moaned. “Harry, my sister’s practically a traitor.”

Harry tried to break it to him gently. “Ginny hasn’t liked the Cannons since her third year, Ron.”

“Everyone’s against me.” Ron was acting mournful, but then his eyes wandered over across the patio. The acting stopped, and he turned away. “Maybe I’ll go get something to drink.”

On the other side of the terrace, Hermione was still deep in conversation with Teddy Nott.

“I’ll go with you,” Harry said.

In the kitchen, they were waylaid by Xenophilius, who wanted to introduce them to his witch friend Helga, who’d seen a camel-backed turtle off the coast of Africa. Neither Harry nor Ron had any interest in camel-backed turtles, but for some reason Xenophilius thought they did. By the time they went back outside, someone had got the music started.

The cylinder for the gramophone, Harry later found, was under one of the crab-apple trees, but it had eight horns. Some were in the trees and a couple were wrapped around the floating lanterns. How exactly they amplified the music when they weren’t even attached to the gramophone was confusing, but Harry had never really tried to make magic make sense, particularly when it came to Luna. Honestly Harry thought that some of the horns might have been alive.
“This is bloody brilliant,” Ginny said.

“This?” said Ron, appalled. “You listen to N’spelled? Shove off. You’re not my sister any more.”

Ginny shrugged. “I can’t help it if you have no taste. Anyone wanna dance?”

“Dancing is for pussies,” said Greg.

Ginny frowned at him. “What kind of dances you been dancing?”

“Minuets, mainly,” said Greg.

Ginny did Greg’s snorgrunt. “Pure-bloods.”

Greg frowned at her. “Thought you were a pure-blood.”

“No,” said Ginny. “I’m a blood traitor. It’s different. Come on and dance with me.”

Greg looked shocked. “Well,” he said, “if you want me so bad.”

Ginny pulled him out onto the terrace. She’d always been gorgeous, but she’d only got more so in the last several years. Flat-chested, slim-hipped, her limbs were long and toned, her eyes large and brown, and her smile absolutely devastating. She’d always been a good dancer, too—the grace and strength she’d learned in Quidditch looking lethal on a dance floor. She could even make Greg look good.

Harry thought she might be the prettiest person he’d ever seen, except for maybe Blaise, except that Ginny was more beautiful, because she was dancing with Greg, who was big and clumsy and not beautiful at all.

“Now there’s a sight.” Malfoy had come up somewhere beside him.

Harry looked around; Neville was talking to Luna. “Yeah,” Harry said, and reminded himself to look back at Ginny instead of staring at Malfoy.

“Did you put her up to that?” Malfoy said.

“No.” Harry shrugged. “Ginny’s just like this.”

“Greg’s always hated dancing.” Malfoy’s voice was wondering. “He’s rotten at minuets.”

Greg was still no good at dancing, in Harry's opinion, but he appeared to be having a good time, moving his hips to the music with Ginny. Harry turned to Malfoy. “You and Neville seemed to be getting on all right.”

“Potter, did you know there are approximately 12,000 species of moss?” Malfoy smiled. “No. Of course you didn’t. Neville’s a bloody genius with plants.”

Harry went back to looking at Ginny. “Plus, he has a large vocabulary.”

“Yeah.” Malfoy sounded happy.

They looked back out at the terrace. After several moments, Pansy joined them, watching Greg and Ginny dance without any expression. “Is he having spasms?” she asked eventually.

Malfoy rounded on her. “Why do you have to be such an arse?”
Pansy kept looking at Ginny and Greg. “It’s my nature.”

“Fine,” Malfoy said. “Can you be someone else for five minutes while I introduce you to Neville?”

“I believe I know Longbottom,” Pansy said.

“You believe wrong.” Malfoy took her arm—less in a polite way and more in the way he dragged Greg around—then paused. “Potter,” he said, looking back, “will you come?”

Harry came.

They went over to where Neville was talking to Luna. “Hi Luna,” Malfoy said, letting go of Pansy’s arm. “Neville, here’s Pansy.”

“Hello, Parkinson,” Neville said.

Pansy looked at him with boredom. “Sorry I called you Longbum all those years.”

“Er,” said Neville. “That’s okay.”

The song on the gramophone ended, and there was a moment of silence in which Harry tried to think of something to say. Then a new song began, and Luna said, “I’m glad people are dancing.”

Pansy looked back at Greg and Ginny, who were already moving to the next number. “Is that what they’re calling it?”

Neville frowned. “What would you call it?”

“Primal thrusting,” Pansy said.

Surprised, Neville laughed. “Ginny’s always been an amazing dancer.”

Slowly turning back to look at him, Pansy said, “I’m having horrible flashbacks to the fourth year Yule Ball.”

“Oh,” said Neville. “So, I’ve thought of something to apologize to you for.”

Pansy raised a brow. “Yes?”

“Sorry you had to go to the Yule Ball with Malfoy,” Neville said.

“Don’t be a ponce,” Malfoy said, looking terribly pleased.

“Would you like to dance, Draco?” Luna said.

“What?” Malfoy stopped looking pleased. “No.”

Neville turned to Harry. “I’m pretty sure they thought it was going to be a cotillion, the Yule Ball. That’s how come they all stood around looking so awkward. Pure-bloods don’t know what to do with themselves without a quadrille.”

“You’re pretty much speaking another language,” Harry told him.

“Don’t worry about it,” Neville said, laughing again. “I don’t know it either. Kept tripping over my own feet. Gran said I was impossible, and refused to teach me.” He shrugged.

“Malfoy says he’s a wonderful dancer,” Harry said.
“Not to this.” Malfoy looked horrified.

“Come on, Draco,” Luna said. “I can teach you. I know lots of dances.”

Horrified turned to mortified. “Absolutely not,” said Malfoy.

Harry grinned at him. “Afraid, Malfoy?”

“I’m not afraid.” Malfoy drew himself up. “I’m just . . .” His shoulders sagged a little. “Abstaining.”

Harry smirked. “Is that what they’re calling it these days?”

Glaring, Malfoy straightened his shoulders again. “Luna, I’m sure there’s someone else who’d like to dance. Potter, for instance.”

“Sure.” Harry turned to Luna. “I’m not afraid.”

“Or even abstaining,” Luna agreed.

Neville turned to Pansy as Harry and Luna moved out farther onto the patio. “I suppose you’re a lost cause,” Neville said.

“You wouldn’t catch me dead,” said Pansy. There was a pause. “Why don’t you ask Hermione?”

Harry wasn’t a great dancer, but he wasn’t bad, either. He’d learned a lot dancing with Ginny for the two years they’d gone out, but he wasn’t nearly as good as she was. Still, it was fun, and Luna was right; she was fantastic.

Harry would have thought she would dance . . . ethereally; he would have thought that she would move kind of hazily, as in water, or a dream. But though she was just as graceful as he might have imagined, she gave herself utterly to the music, which was poppish and—well, just the slightest bit raunchy. She closed her eyes and moved her hips, and when she moved it was nimble and quick, and utterly in time.

The song ended, then Ron cut in for the next one; Neville was still dancing with Hermione.

Malfoy stood stiffly at the edge of the terrace, looking—for the first time since Hogwarts—just a little bit pointy. Pansy stood just as gracefully as she always did by his side, but the distance between them and the utter lack of movement made them both look awkward. Not paying much attention to the dancing, Teddy was holding a drink and talking to Blaise, who kept stealing glances at Ginny.

Harry went over to them. “Hey,” he said, a little breathless from the dancing. “Are you sad this isn’t a cotillion?”

It was a new word he’d learned; he was trying it out. Harry guessed he’d better go back to reading the thesaurus, if Neville was going to start coming to the pub.

“We’re not sad,” said Pansy. “We’re bored. Aren’t we, Draco?”

“Pansy’s bored,” said Blaise. “Teddy’s bored. Draco and I are embarrassed.”

Harry looked at him in surprise. “Why?”

“Draco’s embarrassed that he’s been asked to dance,” said Blaise. “I’m embarrassed because I haven’t been.”
“I’m not embarrassed,” Malfoy said, sounding about as stiff as he looked. “This just isn’t my kind of dancing.”

“It’s my kind of dancing,” Harry said. Grinning, he turned to Blaise. “Wanna dance?”

“This isn’t my kind of dancing either.” Blaise put out his hand. “But I can learn.”

Harry took his hand. “Good.” They went back out onto the terrace, and Teddy went in to refill his drink.

Blaise, of course, was Blaise—exquisite and perfect and devastatingly attractive in everything he did, even when it came to shaking his arse and doing something with his arms. Harry never could figure out what to do with his arms. But then Blaise put his hands on Harry’s waist, and Harry put his hands on Blaise’s shoulders, which was what Ron and Luna were doing, and Ginny and Greg. Hermione and Neville were mostly just laughing.

On the edge of the terrace, Malfoy and Pansy stood woodenly, watching. Eventually, Pansy tilted her head, saying something to Malfoy. Malfoy looked back out on the dance floor, nodded once.

Harry turned back to Blaise, and smiled.

“I don’t think algae dance like this at all,” Harry said.

“Sometimes being human is all right,” said Blaise. “We have all these interlocking parts.”

Harry laughed. “You say that to Ginny, she’ll punch you in the eye.”

Blaise laughed as well. “Eyes and fists don’t interlock as well as some other parts; doesn’t she know?”

Grinning, Harry said, “Not Ginny.”

“If I tell her she’s an exquisite specimen of ape, what will she do then?”

“Probably punch you in the other eye.”

Blaise smiled. “I love a lady who appreciates symmetry.”

Harry shook his head. “You’re crazy.”

Glancing Ginny’s way, Blaise said, “Does she appreciate crazy?”

“You’ll have to ask her.”

Blaise looked like he was sighing, but Harry couldn’t hear it over the music.

“What?”

Blaise leaned in. “I prefer to be shown.”

Harry just laughed again, and the music ended.

“Hey,” said Greg. “Where’s the next song?”

Malfoy was standing over by the crab-apple tree.

Harry looked around. Hermione was moving over to the side, and Ginny was going over to talk to
Neville. Ron looked like he was going over to talk to Hermione, but Luna went too, and Ron hesitated.

Greg was still standing in the middle of the dance floor. “Hey, you tosser,” he shouted at Malfoy, “put it back on!”

Pansy walked out to the middle of the terrace.

“We will,” Malfoy said, and set the crank spinning on the gramophone’s cylinder with his wand. “Just as soon as this one’s done.”

The music was something with strings and horns and nothing like N’spelled, or the Pixie Sisters, or anything Ron or even Ginny would approve of.

Walking out in middle of the terrace as well, Malfoy stopped by Pansy. “Pansy,” he said, putting out his hand.

“Draco,” she said, and took it.

They began to dance.

First they walked one way, Pansy smoothly, gracefully, Malfoy erect and proper. Then they turned and walked the other way, and something strange began to happen. Pansy spun, and began to glide, then when Malfoy took her hand again, they stepped on air.

The wand movement was part of the dance, only Harry didn’t catch it the first time. They stepped higher on the air, as though on an invisible staircase, and Pansy spun around, her wine-coloured robe flaring out. Malfoy caught her, and they walked back down to the ground.

It wasn’t fast, but it was intricate, incredibly complex. They didn’t make it look that way, though. They made it beautiful, like two people perfectly attuned to each other, each move anticipated by the other, met with unhurried expectation, and above all, grace. It was less like waltzing, Harry realized, and a little bit more like something else Harry had seen Petunia watch: it was like figure skating, magic lending all the elegance and ease of ice.

Malfoy and Pansy were standing, hands linked, arms’ length apart, and Pansy dipped back—back and back and back—she dipped down so far, it was only Malfoy’s arm, holding her up, and he let go.

Someone gasped—it was Hermione, Harry later realized; they were all standing on the edge of the terrace, watching—only, it didn’t register just then. Pansy was falling, and then Malfoy was there, a metre and a half from where he had been, catching her easily, as though she weighed nothing. It was a long moment before Harry realized Malfoy had Apparated.

Harry couldn’t take his eyes off of them. He’d never seen all Pansy’s lazy, feline way of moving bent to such liquid, flowing purpose. He’d never seen Malfoy’s tall form look quite so lithe and fluid; a narrow, tensile strength that was capable of holding nearly all her weight, and bringing her back up again with no sign at all of effort. That was the word for it—effortless.

Malfoy just looked so . . . capable, at ease, like he was born to do a thing, and was doing it; he looked so powerful, all that graceful strength, like he could go on and on forever, but it wasn’t why Harry couldn’t look away. It wasn’t that at all.

It was that when they had begun, he had looked blank and bored—polite; Harry was pretty certain it was the way you were supposed to look, when you danced this way, when you could create
something this beautiful, and pretend like it was nothing. And yet, as they went on, Pansy had begun her little smirk, and Malfoy had begun to smile.

By the time that Malfoy bowed, and Pansy dipped in a low curtsy, he was grinning at her and Pansy—Pansy was smiling back.

Then the music ended, and taking Pansy’s hand, Malfoy led her off the floor.

Hermione clapped and clapped. “That was so beautiful,” she said.

“I don’t see what’s so great about it,” Greg said.

Harry could feel that he was grinning also; he didn’t know why, but he didn’t think he could have stopped it had he tried. “That was brilliant,” he told them.

Malfoy glowed, his breathing quick, cheeks pink with exertion. “Thanks,” he said, and turned his incandescent smile onto Harry.

“Where did you learn to do that?” Hermione looked like she was wiping tears from the corners of her eyes.

Malfoy looked surprised. “Mum, of course.”

“A dancing instructor,” Pansy said.

“But those spells,” Hermione said. “And silent Apparition! I didn’t know that could be done!”

Teddy had come back outside at some point, and joined them on the sidelines. “It’s quite simple, really,” he told Hermione.

She turned her shining eyes on him. “But how did she glide like that?”

“A promenade spell,” Teddy said. “If you’re interested, I can show you.”

Hermione shook her head. “Oh, no, I’m terrible at dancing. Did you see me earlier? I have no rhythm.”

“You’re a bright witch. You’ll learn.” Teddy put out his hand.

When Hermione took it, Pansy pulled her own hand from Malfoy’s.

“One forgets how dull waltzing is,” she said.

“Pansy,” Malfoy said, and reached for her.

“I’ve always hated balls.” Pansy turned around and walked away.

Malfoy looked as though he might go after her, but just then Ginny stepped toward them. “I was going to tell you two how good that was,” she said. “Where’s she going?”

Malfoy sighed. “To have a sulk.”

“What’s she sulking for?” Ginny said. “Was she scarred for life by dancing, too?”

“Were you scarred for life by dancing?” Harry said, mostly so Malfoy didn’t have to explain. He figured it was something about Pansy and Hermione, and maybe something more about the way that
Pansy blushed when Teddy came into a room. “Was it me? I never thought I was that bad.”

“You dance fine,” said Ginny. “It was my childhood that scarred me.”

Blaise, who’d been talking to Luna, joined them in time to hear Ginny’s comment. “Scars are very attractive,” he told her.

Ginny winked at Harry. “Yes, I know.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably. Beside him, Malfoy stopped looking out in the direction Pansy had gone, attention snapping back to the conversation at hand.

Blaise looked at Ginny sadly. “I’ve tried to acquire scars, but nothing seems to stick.”

“What were you saying about your childhood?” Malfoy asked Ginny.


“Also,” said Blaise, “do scars require pain? I don’t approve of pain at all.”

Harry frowned. “You mean your mum made your brothers teach you dancing? You never told me that.”

“No,” said Ginny. “Dad made them. Can you believe it?”

“Do you think a scar breaks the skin?” said Blaise. “I hate to break anything. Especially anything that is perfect—or at least, anything that’s extremely valuable.”

“Ron never told me he had to teach you dancing,” Harry said. “I didn’t even know Ron danced.”

“I’ve got this image of Mr Weasley dancing.” Malfoy sounded kind of morbidly fascinated. “I can’t seem to shake it.”

“Great,” said Ginny. “Now I’ve gone and scarred you.”

“It truly is a pity I’m so flawless,” Blaise said sadly. “Even Draco has more scars than me.”

A cold feeling spilled over Harry, and he turned to Malfoy. “Do you,” his eyes dropped from Malfoy’s face to Malfoy’s chest, his abdomen, “do you have—”

“Draco,” Blaise interrupted smoothly, “I’m wondering if you’ll direct a slight scratching hex my way. Maybe one across one cheek?”

Malfoy didn’t look at Harry. His voice was sort of flat. “I’ll direct one across your whole face, if you like, Blaise.”

“Malfoy,” Harry began again.

“Don’t think I won’t do it,” Malfoy said.

Blaise turned to Ginny. “Miss Weasley, will I be dashing, with a modicum of maiming?”

“I think you’ll be crazy,” Ginny told Blaise.

“But I hear you’re fond of violence,” Blaise went on. He was putting on quite a show, really, and Harry couldn’t figure out whether it was for Ginny’s sake, or for the sake of protecting Malfoy’s
scars. “Harry here tells me you enjoy a lovely bruise.”

Ginny’s brows rose, but she looked amused. “Harry, did you tell him about that time we—”

“Nope,” Harry said, and looked as innocent as he could, which was pretty much not innocent at all.

Malfroy’s brows rose as well. “Potter,” he began.

“What Blaise is trying to say, Ginny,” Harry said, “is he would like to wizard waltz with you.”

Ginny’s brows went up again. “Is that what you were trying to say?” she asked Blaise.

“Well,” said Blaise, “either that, or I thought you might hex me, if Draco refuses to provide me with facial lacerations. I hear you inflict pain in such delightful ways.”

Ginny began to look devious. “Harry, did you tell him about that other time we—”

“Nope,” Harry said again, even more quickly. “I’m sure it was Malfroy. Must’ve told Blaise about your Bat Bogey Hex.”

“Oh, yeah.” Ginny turned to Malfroy. “Sorry about that, Malfroy.”

“Er,” said Malfroy. “It’s Draco. Hey, can you tell me about that ‘other’ time you and Potter—”

“Nope.” It was Ginny, this time. She grinned. “Zabini wants to dance.”

“When you say want,” said Blaise.

“He’s dying to,” Ginny said. She turned to Blaise. “I can tell. Aren’t you?”

“When you say dying,” said Blaise.

“Come on, Zabini,” Ginny said, and took his hand.

“When you say Zabini,” Blaise said, “you really should say Blaise.” He allowed himself to be pulled out onto the floor, where Teddy was attempting to teach Hermione a wizard waltz.

When Malfroy turned to Harry, his eyes were heavy-lidded, and darker than usual. “So, Potter,” he said, in a low voice very much like a purr.

“Nope,” Harry said.

Malfroy smirked. “You don’t know what I was going to say.”

“I suppose not,” Harry said. “But I know I’m going to say nope.”

“Are you,” Malfroy said, and moved a little closer.

“If it’s about that other time with Ginny, then, nope.”

Malfroy’s eyes went darker still. “She said—”

“If you wanted to waltz, Draco,” Luna said, “you could have just said.” She’d come up with Neville, who’d been talking to Ron.

Harry looked around.
Ron was standing alone, staring at the middle of the terrace—where Hermione was tripping on her own feet, and Teddy, smirking slightly, caught her. Hermione laughed, and Teddy steadied her with his hand on her elbow.

“You two looked good, Draco,” Neville said.

“Thanks,” Malfoy said, glowing again.

“I suppose we all dance a little differently,” said Luna. “Will you dance with me if I do it your way, Draco?”

Malfoy looked surprised. “I,” he said, and then for some reason, looked at Harry.

Harry looked at Ron, who was gritting his teeth. Suddenly Ron turned, and stalked away.

“I’ve got to go,” Harry said.

Malfoy turned to Luna. “Of course,” he said, and took her hand.

Harry went to go catch up with Ron.

Around the side of the house, Pansy was sitting by the pumpkin patch on a stone bench, looking nothing other than completely bored. The two lanterns that had been there early bobbed a little distance from her head.

Just as Ron started to step into her line of sight, Harry pulled him back.

“What?” said Ron.

Harry cast a quick muffling charm. “Don’t do anything stupid,” he said.

Ron frowned. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You know what I’m talking about,” Harry said.

Ron shook him off. “Harry, she’s dancing with him.”

“She was dancing with Neville earlier.” Harry pushed up his glasses. “Ron, you’re not seriously jealous of Teddy Nott.”

Huffing a sigh, Ron scratched the back of his neck. “Yeah. No. Fucking hell. I don’t know. She won’t—she won’t even bloody talk to me. We’ve been fighting for months.”

“That’s not all her fault,” Harry pointed out.

“It mostly is.”

“No, it’s not.”

Ron scowled. “Yeah. Well. She bloody started it. I never did anything with Parkinson.”

“Hermione knows that.”

“Does she? Because if she does, then why are we still fighting? We’re practically broken up. Did she tell you that?”

Rubbing his forehead, Harry said, “Did you tell her that?”
Ron shoved his hands in his pockets. “Well, we are.”

“If you want to break up,” Harry said, “then break up. Just don’t do anything you’ll regret.” Especially not with Pansy, he wanted to add, and didn’t.

“I’m not doing anything I regret.”

“Yeah?” Harry raised his brows.

“I can be friends with Parkinson. Hermione can be friends with Draco, can’t she? Fucking hell, she can even be friends with Nott. But can I be friends with Parkinson? Oh, no, can’t have that. Why? Because she’s bloody hot? That’s not fair.”

“Maybe it’s because you think she’s hot.”

“That’s rich. Like she doesn’t think Nott is hot, with his big brain.”


“It’s Parkinson,” Ron said. “Not a bloody dragon.” He waved away the muffling charm and walked over to Pansy, and Harry let him go.

When he came back into the front yard, Hermione was learning to wizard waltz with Teddy, Ginny was waltzing with Blaise, and Malfoy was waltzing with Luna. The music was a lot like classical music, only a little more medieval sounding, with lutes and harpsichords, and something that must have been like pan pipes. It was the sort of music that could cast spells, and really, the dancing could have too.

Blaise and Ginny would have been like magic even if they weren’t using spells to glide across the patio; he bent her back and twirled her, and she fell into his arms over and over. Still, there was power in the way she danced; in that way, it reminded Harry of tango. She used her legs and arms and everything, and it used to be that whenever he saw her this way, or saw her playing Quidditch, he didn’t understand why they’d ever broken up to begin with.

They were, perhaps, the most beautiful people Harry had ever seen, and the dance was twenty times what Malfoy’s and Pansy’s had been, and they were better at it. Next to Blaise and Ginny’s, Malfoy’s and Pansy’s waltzing had been rather elementary, and at least a little stilted, now that Harry saw how it was supposed to be. Malfoy and Luna were the same way—proficient, but a lot more like water from a pump—pretty, catching light and flowing, but nothing like the wild beauty of water flowing in a stream.

Harry wondered, then, why he still couldn’t take his eyes off Malfoy.

“Hey,” Neville said.

Swallowing, Harry forced himself to look away. “Hey,” he said.

“Happy Phoenix Day,” said Neville.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Are you sure you don’t know how to . . . do that?” Harry waved his hand out at the terrace, so he didn’t have to look back out there.

Neville laughed. “Are you asking me to dance?”

Harry smiled at him. “Yeah.”
Still laughing, Neville said, “You don’t like your toes?”

“Toes,” Harry said. “Who needs ‘em?”

“I’m sorry,” Neville said. When Harry looked at him inquiringly, he explained, “About last time. At the pub. I’m sorry I reacted the way I did.”

Harry shook his head. “I should’ve made sure you got the owl. I wasn’t—Malfoy kept telling me. I didn’t listen.”

“Yeah,” said Neville. “Draco.”

Harry looked at his feet.

“He’s really trying,” Neville said, “isn’t he.”

“Yes.”

When Harry looked up, Neville was frowning at something Harry couldn’t see.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said. “I know you’re trying, too.”

Neville shook his head. “I still can’t even look him in the eye.”

Harry looked around for Greg.

Sighing, Neville said, “He’s in the kitchen. Here we’re all here—Luna and her Phoenix Day, as if that wasn’t just some excuse to get everyone together—and I can’t even . . . I can’t even share the bloody spinach with him.”

Harry smiled crookedly. “I’m not sure Luna is that calculating.”

“Don’t be so sure. She should’ve been in Slytherin.” Neville thought about it a while. “Lots of people should’ve been. They want something bad enough, they go out and get it. But I just can’t seem to . . .” He shook his head again.

“Neville, it’s not like you’re holding a grudge,” Harry said. “It’s not like you’re a bad person just because you can’t forget that . . .” Harry knew he had to say it; he had to say it, or he’d be lying to himself, and Neville, and even to everyone—to Malfoy—and that wasn’t fair. “Because you can’t forget that someone tortured you, or tortured someone you love. If you were Bellatrix, right now—I couldn’t forgive you.”

“It’s not forgiveness.” Neville ran a hand through his hair. “It’s just the forgetting part that’s hard.”

Harry looked at him a while, Neville’s strong, kind face; his large, capable hands. “Malfoy says, don’t forget. He says we shouldn’t forget, so that it can’t happen again, and that’s how we make the world a better place.”

Neville looked startled, then smiled a little, wryly. “Harry,” he said. “Do you even realize how many times Malfoy has said to me, ‘Potter says’?”

“Oh.” Harry desperately wanted to ask how many, but just then the music ended, and Malfoy and Luna came up.

“Luna says it’s time for fireworks,” Malfoy said.
“Great,” said Neville. “Who’s going to set them off?”

“You,” said Luna.

“Uh.” Neville went a shade paler. “I don’t know anything about—”

“Come on, Longbottom.” Malfoy gave him a goading smile. “Don’t tell me you’re afraid of a little magic gun powder.”

“Well, yes,” said Neville. “In fact, I’m terrified.”

“Although I generally don’t approve of animal cruelty,” said Luna, “I did think it remarkably brave of you to kill that snake.”

“What does that have to do with,” Neville began, then switched tacks. “Anyway, Harry here—”

“No way,” Harry said, mostly just because it was funny.

“Come along, Neville.” Malfoy used the voice he used with friends, when he fully expected that they would follow him. He really was high-handed.

It lifted Harry’s heart, to hear him speak that way to Neville.

“I will help you set the fireworks,” Malfoy went on, “since Harry Potter here is too much of a coward.”

“Yep,” said Harry. “That’s me.”

“Pyrotechnics really bring people together,” Luna said, as they trooped off toward the house.

“Explosions and dying bring people together too,” Neville said.

“I like you a lot,” Malfoy said, “but I’m not ready to die with you just yet.”

Wizard fireworks were different from Muggle fireworks because after they exploded, the sparks took on a life of their own. Sometimes the explosions formed pictures—animals, which ran through the crowd after bursting in the air, or bouquets of flowers, which fell into single stems. It seemed you could reach right out and touch them, before they burst into smaller, disappearing sparks before your eyes. Other times the explosions were just shapes and patterns that zigged and zagged among the spectators, or else shot up higher, as though to join the stars.

Luna had mostly picked firecrackers that exploded into the shapes of fantastic beasts. Blaise waved his wand at some of them as they ran through the little party, and made them wizard waltz down on the terrace. Xenophilius had brought his friends outside, and the rest of the party guests lounged on the lawn or in conjured chairs, except for Malfoy, Neville, and Luna, who were setting off the fireworks, and Pansy and Ron, who were missing.

Greg and Blaise sat on either side of Ginny, who didn’t seem to mind that either of them were flirting with her dreadfully in their individually disastrous ways. Mostly she just laughed and laughed, and called them tossers both.

Hermione sat with Teddy, and they talked about the stars and astrosorcery. Harry sat with them for Ron’s sake, and mostly looked at Malfoy.

Malfoy didn’t actually seem to be much help setting off the fireworks. Luna, for that matter, didn’t seemed to be much help either, but they oohed and ahhed the most at all the explosions, and made
much of Neville’s bravery.

 Mostly Neville just grunted, set off fireworks, and said, “Why does it gotta be me? Least you could’ve invited Seamus.”

 When Pansy came back from the vegetable garden, Harry couldn’t read anything in her face. That was no surprise, but anyway, it hadn’t been very long, and it wasn’t like they would . . . in Luna’s pumpkin patch, but then Harry remembered that they were wizards, weren’t they, and they could Apparate. It wasn’t like her clothes were out of place or anything like that, though.

 Of course, she was a witch, and she was Pansy. It wasn’t like there was a strand of hair out of place. There never was.

 There was no sign of Ron.

 Harry assumed Pansy would sit with Blaise, or maybe him and Teddy, but she didn’t. Instead she went to go stand next to Malfoy, who turned his happy smile on her and gave up on the fireworks.

 Ron came a little while later, plopping down next to his sister.

 Harry watched the stars explode, and thought about Ron, and about Hermione. He thought about the nights they’d had to camp, and how big and empty the sky had looked then, how cold. He hadn’t known, then, that things would be all right.

 Harry guessed he still didn’t know, but he guessed that was all right too.

 In the shadowed darkness beyond the terrace, Pansy put her hand out.

 Malfoy took it. He looked like he was holding tight.

    * * *
11 November, 2004

“Hey Potter,” Malfoy said, stepping onto the lift at the Ministry.

“What’s wrong?” Harry said.

“What?” Malfoy pushed back his hair. “Nothing’s wrong.”

“Right.”

Malfoy turned back to look at the lift doors. “I was rotten at Occlumency.”

“Me too,” Harry said.

Malfoy chewed the inside of his cheek. “Not because I wasn’t good at it, though.”

Harry pushed his glasses up. “You do realize what you just said makes no sense.”

The lift dinged, and they stepped out. “I was good at Occlumency,” Malfoy said, “but everything was always there to read right on my face.”

Harry could feel his lips twitching into a smile. They kept doing that, lately. “So,” he said, as they walked by the Fountain of the Brethren. “What’s wrong?”

“Pansy’s coming.”

“That’s . . . that’s good, right?” Stopping by the Fountain, Harry frowned. “You guys made up.” Finally, he didn’t add.

Malfoy smiled faintly, as if he could hear it regardless. “Yes, we made up.”

“Why, exactly?”

“Why did we make up?” Malfoy’s smile became more definite. “Because we were dancing and—and we used to have to. Dance together. And when we did, we’d be so angry that our parents were making us that . . . that it actually was all right, dancing with her. I haven’t danced with Pansy since we were sixteen.”

“But you looked really good.”

Malfoy’s smile was teasing. “Thanks, Potter.”

“I mean, Pansy looked good too. I mean,” Harry said weakly, “the dancing looked good. It was good.”

Malfoy’s smile was smirking, now. “Yes, Potter, but did you think it was good?”

“Whatever, Malfoy.” Harry would’ve punched him on the arm, if he were Ron.

“It’s Hermione,” Malfoy said.

“What?”
“She’s—I invited her. I mean, she usually comes on Thursdays. When we’re not . . . she usually comes.”

Malfoy meant he didn’t know if Hermione would still come, now that Pansy was coming too.

“I don’t want her not to come,” Malfoy said, after a long moment.

Malfoy just sounded so—Pansy had said it once; he sounded earnest, and Harry realized he wanted Malfoy to have what he wanted, and that it wasn’t just for Pansy’s and Hermione’s sake. He wondered how much had happened—how much Pansy and Greg and Crabbe and even Blaise had done—out of a deep and fundamental need to not let Draco Malfoy be disappointed.

Harry would have wondered where that deep and fundamental need came from—after all, Malfoy wasn’t god-like like Dumbledore or even awe-inspiring, like Voldemort—but the question, at its heart, would have been dishonest. People didn’t want to disappoint Malfoy because they looked at him, saw what Harry was seeing now, and couldn’t help themselves.

“I can’t say it’ll be all right,” Harry said at last.

Malfoy brushed the hair out of his eyes. “It wasn’t your fault, last time. With Neville.”

“It was, though,” Harry said. “I said it would be all right, and I had no way of knowing. You were right.”

“No.”

They could stand and argue this all day, but Harry wasn’t going to.

Malfoy was looking down, chewing his cheek, hair falling across his brow again. In moments like this, Harry could smell him, but he still couldn’t figure out whether Malfoy ever wore cologne or not. Mostly, he just smelled clean.

“Why did you go into the Forbidden Forest?” Malfoy looked up.

Harry knew what he was talking about, despite the sudden change of subject, but he said, “What?” anyway, just to buy time.

“When Voldemort,” the name was still a struggle for Malfoy to say, “asked you to be brought to him. You went. Why?”

Harry didn’t think that Malfoy was asking him the same question Theodore Nott had, about how Voldemort died. Even if he was, Harry didn’t really feel like explaining Horcruxes just then. “I had to,” was all he said.

It seemed to be the answer Malfoy was looking for. He nodded. “I said you do the things you do because you think everything’s going to be okay,” he said, “but you don’t. Do you.” It was not a question. He held Harry’s eyes. “You have no idea what’s going to happen. You just do what you do because—because it’s the best thing to do. You always do your best.”

“Not always.” Malfoy was just staring at him, and Harry couldn’t quite figure out whether he approved or not. “But . . . I try,” he said at last.

Malfoy’s eyes drifted from Harry’s own—down to Harry’s neck. His mouth—or possibly his chin. They’d done that before. They’d been doing it more and more, lately.
Harry thought then that Malfoy did approve, after all, and that if his eyes drifted that way again, something was going to happen.

Something might happen now.

Harry licked his lips. “Malfoy—”

Malfoy drew in a noisy breath of air. “Except in potions.”

Harry forgot what he had been about to say. “What?”

Malfoy wasn’t looking at him. “You tried your best, except in potions. You were absolutely, without a doubt, atrocious.”

“Except when I was cheating,” Harry pointed out. “I did my very best at that.”

Malfoy looked at him again then, his little smile starting at the corner of his mouth. “Tosh, Potter. You probably stumbled on that book by luck.”

“Well.” Harry tried to put his nose in the air, like Malfoy. “But once I found it, I did my very best to be a fraud.”

Malfoy’s smile widened. “I believe your efforts in that direction have mostly proven unsuccessful.”

Harry brought his nose down. “Honestly, I didn’t try as hard as I could have to be a charlatan.”

Malfoy laughed. It was a dry, husky sound that seemed to fill the Atrium, or Harry’s ears at least, and Harry’s chest went tight. “Come on, Potter. Let’s go get a pint.”

“All right,” Harry said.

* *

When Harry and Malfoy got to the pub, Pansy was already sitting at a table. Hermione arrived ten minutes later.

Malfoy lurched out of his chair in his Malfoy-ish way, and took Hermione’s coat. Harry didn’t know when Hermione had started letting Malfoy take her coat without even making a fuss about it. It didn’t seem very Hermione, but Malfoy seemed to like doing things like that.

“I’m glad you could join us,” Pansy said. “It’s always interesting to see Draco all aflutter.”

“How are you, Hermione?” Harry said, because even if Pansy was being a git, Malfoy was agitated, a bit, and Hermione had on her big doe eyes.

“Oh, I’m—I’m doing all right,” Hermione said. “How are you, Harry?”

“Great,” Harry said. “We closed a case today.”

“That’s nice.” Hermione wasn’t paying much attention. Sitting down, she turned to Pansy nervously. “And—and Pansy, how are you?”

“Between bouts of detachment and dispassion, I’ve been experiencing dullness.” Pansy looked at her nails. “Is this normal?”

“Pansy used up a month’s worth of energy on Phoenix Day,” Malfoy said in an encouraging way.
“You should see me at Christmas,” Pansy said.

“Oh. Er.” Hermione tucked her hair behind her ear. “Do you dance at Christmas?”

“No.” Pansy lost interest in her nails. “I lose the will to live.”

“I thought—I thought you danced beautifully with Draco.” Hermione went to tuck her hair again and found that it was already tucked. “At Luna’s, I mean. I mean—you looked lovely.”

Slowly, Pansy lifted her eyes. “And you danced with Theodore Nott.”

There was a big long silence. Harry thought of a thousand things to say—is that what they’re calling it?; I danced with Blaise; Malfoy looked good too; Hermione doesn’t like Teddy like that; and, Hermione, I’m almost ninety percent certain Pansy didn’t have sex with Ron in the pumpkin patch, so you can rest assured—

But none of them seemed right.

And so the silence stretched, and Harry couldn’t see Malfoy’s hands. He thought that he might be holding onto Pansy’s leg, when Hermione burst out, “Ron told me what you said.”

Pansy’s eyes narrowed. “Did he.”

“Yes,” said Hermione, “and I want to say—I want to say thank you, and you’re right, and I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. You told me—you told me something once; I mean, about yourself, and you said you thought I’d understand, and I thought I did, but I didn’t really, and—and maybe I still don’t. In fact I’m certain I still don’t, but I judged you on it, and thought it meant that I knew who you were and how you would act, and I—I wasn’t fair to you, and—and I’m sorry.”

“You people say you’re sorry a lot,” Pansy said.

Malfoy didn’t really move, but Harry could tell for certain, now; his hand was on Pansy’s leg.

Pansy blinked. “I forgive you.”

“Oh,” said Hermione, with her shining eyes, “I’m—I’m so glad. I hope—I hope we can . . . we can be friends.”

Harry wasn’t sure what Pansy had said to Ron. He was fairly certain she hadn’t apologized or admitted to wronging Hermione, or anything like that; it just wasn’t Pansy. Maybe she’d told Ron it wasn’t worth it, or to go back to his girlfriend. Maybe she had just helped Ron see it wasn’t over yet with Hermione. Whatever it was, Harry thought that Pansy had probably done it for Malfoy, not Hermione or Ron at all.

Under the table, Malfoy let Pansy go.

“You know, Hermione,” Pansy said after a moment, “the world isn’t a fair place.”

“I know.” Hermione tucked her hair again. “But that doesn’t mean that I should treat you unfairly.”

Pansy just kept look at her with her black and lazy eyes. “It doesn’t mean that you should treat me fairly, either.”

“But . . .” Hermione looked a little helpless. “I want to.”

Raising a slow brow, Pansy said, “Is the idea that I’ll reciprocate?”
Hermione shook her head. “That isn’t it at all.”

Pansy’s brow stayed up. “Then why bother?”

Malfoy’s hand was tight around his fizzy water.

“Oh!” Hermione looked surprised. “Because—because I’ll feel so much better.”

“You are a bizarre and incomprehensible creature. Don’t get your shorts in a twist, Draco.” Pansy rolled her eyes without even looking at him, then said, “I won’t do anything with Ronald.”


“Unlike you, I expect something in return. In return, you won’t suspect that either of us are doing anything, and so everything will be pleasant. Everything will be convenient, because that’s the way I want it.”

“I want it that way, too.” Hermione smiled.

“Watch out,” Harry said. “Now that you’re best friends and everything, all Hermione’s going to want to talk about is hair, make-up, and boys.”

“That’s all right.” Pansy looked bored. “That’s all Draco ever talks about.”

“You never talk to me about boys,” Hermione said, hurt.

“Would you like me to?” Malfoy leered.

“I want to hear Malfoy talk about make-up.” Harry smirked at him. “Greg told me how you wanted an earring in fourth year.”

Pink with embarrassment, Malfoy muttered, “That little traitor.”

Harry leered in lieu of Malfoy. “I think you’d look dashing with an earring.”

Malfoy looked away. “You’re spending too much time around Blaise.”

“You’re spending too much time around Greg,” Pansy told Harry. “I see he’s taken my place as your informant on Draco.”

“You all can inform on Malfoy any time you want,” Harry said magnanimously.

Malfoy looked sad. “No one ever informs on Potter.”

“Poor Draco,” Hermione said. “It’s okay. I’ll inform on Harry, if you like.”

Malfoy perked up. “Will you?”

“Hermione,” Harry said.

“It’s okay, Harry,” Hermione said, looking brave. “Someone has to. Did you know, Harry didn’t even know what a Portkey was until fourth year?”

Harry put his hand over his face. He could feel himself turning red. “How was I supposed to know?”

“Potter,” Malfoy said, sounding utterly delighted, “there are these things called books. They have words. I highly recommend you try one.”
Harry groaned.

“He didn’t know what a Pensieve was until fourth year either,” said Hermione.

Harry glared at her. “I wasn’t raised in the wizarding world!”

“Right,” Hermione said, happily, “because my parents are so magical.”

“Well,” said Harry. “you could have told me about Portkeys and Pensieves, only maybe you missed the ‘p’ section of reciting Hogwarts: A History.”

“To think that I wasted all that time telling stories of Draco’s dungarees,” Pansy said.

“Yes,” Harry said. “Malfoy’s dungarees. Let’s go back to those.”

“Here’s another thing about Harry,” said Hermione. “He never listened when his friends tried to give him information, or suggested that maybe he should pay attention in class.”

Malfoy was nodding. “He was just bragging a little while ago about what a miserable little cheat he was in potions.”

“Hey!” Harry couldn’t help feeling betrayed. “That’s not what I—I wasn’t bragging. We were . . .”

Malfoy beamed at him. “We were what, Potter?” he said sweetly.

“Teasing,” Harry said.

Malfoy blinked his eyes, and his lashes were blonde and very long, sweeping low. “Is that what we were doing,” he murmured.

“Honestly,” Hermione went on, “I don’t think Harry even knew what the Wizengamot was before fifth year.”

“I like you,” Pansy said.

“Fifth year,” Harry said, “when I was put on trial.”

Pansy turned to Malfoy. “I like her.”

“I was attacked by Dementors,” Harry said. “I had to cast a Patronus.”

“Yes, yes,” said Pansy. “Your life was very hard, and you’re a hero. Now, Hermione, tell us. Did you have to explain the birds and the bees to Harry, or did he have to figure it out on his own?”

Hermione slid sly eyes Harry’s way. “I didn’t have to explain the birds and the bees to him,” she said.

“Yes,” Harry said. “Thanks.”

“But I did have to explain the bees and the bees,” Hermione went on.

Harry put his hand over his face again. “Why?” he said. “Why, why?”

“That’s okay,” Malfoy told him soothingly. “I’ll explain the bees and the bees to you, if you’re still confused.”

Harry wanted to bat his eyelashes and say something very clever and—and teasing, the way Malfoy
just had, except that he couldn’t; he was too embarrassed. “I don’t understand why I’m even friends with you people,” he moaned.

“I’ve been working on a theory,” Pansy said, “and now I believe I have enough proof: it’s because we all had miserable childhoods. Now, Hermione,” she said, turning to her, “tell us all about your childhood. Leave out none of the gory details.”

“I didn’t have a bad childhood,” Hermione said.

“But your parents were—”

Harry waited. He was sure Malfoy waited; even Hermione probably waited, but none of them should have, because there wasn’t even a pause, and Pansy went right on talking as though she never could have said anything worse than:

“—dentists. Of course you had a terrible childhood.”

“Well.” Hermione tucked her hair behind her ear. “Let me tell you all about this horrible, Muggle thing called orthodontics.”

* * *

17 November, 2004

“Potter!”

Harry dropped his fork. He’d just sat down to dinner alone in Grimmauld Place. It was where he usually ate, when he wasn’t with Ron and Hermione, or at the Burrow, or at the pub.

It was a Wednesday night, so there was no pub. Harry had just been trying to decide whether to fall asleep to the wireless after dinner or whether he was in the mood for a fly, when he heard his name.

Rushing over to the hearth, Harry dropped to his knees. “Malfoy?” he said stupidly, because of course it was Malfoy.

Just, Malfoy had never called him on the Floo before.

“Potter.” Malfoy’s face, green with Floo fire, looked panicked. “There’s a hydra. It’s in the sanctuary.”

Harry closed his eyes, then opened them. It was the half second he needed. “I’m coming. Have you got hold of Hermione?”

“I’m calling her next,” Malfoy said. “I’ll meet you there.”

“It’s a hydra,” Harry said. “We need more than just us three.”

“I know,” Malfoy said. “I’ll get Ron and Neville; Luna—”

“Remind Hermione about the coins,” said Harry. “She’ll get the rest. If you get Kingsley, I’ve got—I can get us more.”

“Right,” Malfoy said. “That’s good thinking. I’ll see you there.”

Malfoy started pulling out, and Harry flailed, just a little. “Malfoy.”
“Yeah?”

“You take care.”

“You too,” Malfoy said, and was gone.

Standing, Harry reached for a handful of powder above the hearth. “The first Number Three, Redcliffe Road,” he told the Floo, and put his head in.

When she answered the Floo, Pansy looked bored. When Harry explained the situation, Pansy looked bored. When Harry said, “Will you help?” Pansy looked bored, and said, “Why should I?”

“Because it’s Malfoy,” Harry said, “and Hermione’s sanctuary, and a hydra.”

“There is that,” Pansy said, looking still more bored.

“You said he was waiting for a chance to prove himself,” Harry said.

“This requires trousers.” Standing up, Pansy walked away from the hearth.

It might have meant she was coming. It also might have meant she was getting ready for bed. Harry really had no idea what Pansy’s pyjamas were like.

Harry grabbed another handful of powder. “Sixty-five Mindnar Row, High Dugon, Somersetshire.”

“Hey Harry,” Greg said, when he answered the Floo. “So, it’s good you’ve called.”

“Hi, Greg,” Harry said. “You wanna fight a hydra?”

“Huh?” Greg said.

“A hydra,” Harry said. “It’s sort of like a dragon. Except with a whole lot of heads.”

“I know what a hydra is.” Greg frowned. “I’m not stupid.”

“Sure,” said Harry. “So, you wanna fight it?”

“Look,” said Greg. “I’ve been thinking about that girl Weasley.”

“You could cast fireballs at it,” Harry said.

Greg was still frowning. “Won’t people get mad?”

“I don’t think anyone will get mad. I think people will be really happy actually. They’ll probably think you’re a hero.”

The frown was turning into a scowl, which was a little more promising. “What about being ethical?”

“Trust me, in this instance, it’s totally ethical to do a whole bunch of unethical things, if they’re all aimed at a hydra,” Harry said.

Greg was scowling even less. “Will there be a lot of gore?” he said.

“Oh,” said Harry, “I think there’ll be gore everywhere.”

“Well,” Greg said, “okay.”
The next place Harry tried was a mansion in Greater Manchester. When he put his head into the Floo, he saw that there was a party going on. “Mrs Zabini?” he asked the woman who answered. She was very beautiful.

“Me?” The woman laughed, a tinkling sound. “I’m Miss Poole. Would you like to talk to Gloria? Of course you would. Everyone does.”


The woman laughed again. “Of course you do,” she said. “Everyone does.” Then she wandered away, hips swaying in her silver gown.

When Blaise finally came up, he was holding a glass of champagne. “Why, Harry. To what do we owe this pleasure?”

“It’s Hermione’s sanctuary,” Harry said. “It’s under attack.”

Blaise put down his champagne. “I’m so sorry to hear that.” He truly did look sorry.

“It’s a hydra,” Harry said. “We’re going to fight it.”

“Ah,” said Blaise.

“Will you come?”

Blaise looked sad. “It’s a hydra,” he said, “so you need as many hands as possible.”

“Yeah. Will you come?”

Blaise looked sadder still. “I have a party, Harry.”

“I know,” said Harry. “I thought you might like to look very important, though.”

“Ah,” Blaise said again.

“Will you come?” Harry said again.

“You know I don’t like violence,” Blaise said, very gently.

“No,” said Harry. “I don’t.” Blaise raised his brows, and Harry said, “You seemed to like it quite a lot when you were talking to Ginny.”

“Yes, but I was speaking of very pleasant violence. You are speaking of painful violence. You’re also speaking of exertion. I only like very pleasant exertion, Harry.”

“Ginny might be there,” Harry said. “She gets hot for heroics. I should know.”

“Yes.” Blaise looked at him thoughtfully, still rather melancholy. “You’ve thought of ways to get to each of us, haven’t you?”

“What?”

“You’ve tried to understand what I think is important,” Blaise said, “and you’re attempting to manipulate me, using what I value.”

“I’m not attempting to manipulate you,” Harry said. “I need your help.”
"I admire the effort," Blaise said. "I can’t tell you how much I appreciate that you’ve thought of me, in this hour of crisis. But Harry, I am an essentially selfish being. I’ve told you that. I’ve told Draco that. But neither of you cares to believe it, and so you don’t."

"I don’t care if you’re selfish," Harry said. "I don’t really care what the fuck you are. I just care if you help. Blaise," he said, "help."

Blaise just sighed. "I’ll think about it, Harry."

Harry said okay.

*

Blaise didn’t come.

Malfoy, Hermione, Ron, Neville, Luna, Ginny, Hannah Abbot, Dean Thomas, Padma Patil, Cho Chang, George and Angelina Weasley, Gregory Goyle, they all came.

Pansy Parkinson came in trousers.

They were soft and black and form fitting, and she wore a tunic over them, almost to her knees. It was red, and her hair was done up tight in a bun near the nape of her neck, and she was stunningly fast, dressed like that. Harry never thought she could be, she always seemed so lethargic, but when she was fighting her spells were sharp and quick, incisive, and Harry was just a little bit afraid of her.

Harry had never seen Draco Malfoy fight a battle. He wasn’t sure Malfoy had ever actually fought a battle. He had seen Hermione and Ron fight battles, and even though it had been well over five years, they were still stronger than a lot of the others. He had seen Neville and Luna fight, but it had been a while since he had trained Hannah, Dean, Padma, and Cho. It had, perhaps, been a bit too long, but they were good at hanging back.

Even at his most modest, which Harry usually was without really trying, he couldn’t really deny that he was the best fighter they had there.

Malfoy, however, was not half bad.

Harry didn’t really think of him as a fighter, even though he was a hit wizard. When Harry pictured Malfoy at his job, he pictured him pouring brightly coloured potions into other brightly coloured potions, and centrifuging things. He pictured Malfoy in a laboratory, smelling like chemicals, maybe wearing a white coat, his slender, clever hands doing intricate, clever things with test tubes and phials.

Sometimes Harry imagined latex gloves and wondered whether they used them in the wizarding world at all. He sort of hoped they did.

Malfoy didn’t fight like Ron or George, rushing in and reacting to things. Harry felt like he could practically see Malfoy thinking, see him forcing himself forward. But Malfoy did go forward—he used a lot of defensive spells and waited for openings; sometimes he waited too long, but when he acted, he no longer hesitated. He was fast and single-minded and really, sort of savage, and each time, Harry would begin to worry he’d go too far, before Malfoy pulled back again.

Harry himself wasn’t actually at his peak. His focus seemed to be split.

It should have looked incongruous, Draco Malfoy being brave, but somehow, it really wasn’t. When Harry thought about it later, he realized that Malfoy had always put himself out there, at Hogwarts. Of course, Malfoy had only put himself out there when he’d thought there had been no risk to himself—he’d done that when he’d dressed as a Dementor to scare Harry; he’d done that when he’d
swaggered up to Buckbeak. But Malfoy was sort of the same, now; he waited for his openings, and then he took them.

The only difference between now and then was Malfoy’s timing.

Malfoy would have had to go through pretty rigorous training to be a hit wizard. Harry remembered being surprised when he’d first heard Malfoy was in Specialist Ops; hit wizards needed to pass all the tests and training Aurors did and then some. He had thought SO must be pretty desperate for a potions expert.

Now Harry mostly just thought that Malfoy must have worked really hard.

Part of Auror training was fighting a hydra; it was one of the final tests. Of course, it wasn’t a real hydra. Those were rare; the hydra used in training was an illusion constructed some time in the 1970s. Illusions that complex were a lot of spell-work, and there was a fondness for the old beast anyway. It looked just a little like it was made out of clay, movements jerky like stop-motion animation, but it had still been tricky to defeat the simulation. The challenge was supposed to be about teamwork—fighting hydras took coordination.

The challenge was, naturally, all the heads. If you cut one off, two grew in its place. If you Killing Cursed a head, it fell off, and two grew in its place. If you killed a brain in any way, the head rotted, shrivelled in on itself, and fell off, and two grew in its place. In order to kill a hydra, you had to stab its heart, which was somewhere in its body, which was somewhere behind a writhing mass of heads. The idea was that enough people would distract the heads so that someone could move into the center; everyone would cover him until he could get to the heart.

It was going to be particularly difficult with this hydra, because someone had cast anti-Apparition wards on it.

Hydras were shaped kind of like Harry had always imagined brontosauruses. They had a big, long sloping tail, a big stocky body, and clumsy, flat-footed legs. Where a dinosaur’s long, slender neck should have been, there was—well, a lot of long slender necks. Hydras in legends could have a hundred, which meant they had survived many battles. Baby hydras were born with three.

This one had about thirty-five. Each head had a set of fangs about a foot long, protruding from pointy snouts a little like dragons' noses, with eyes set further back that bulged and seemed to suck you in, like tar pits. The heads were each about as long as Luna, and three times as wide. The hydra was covered in obsidian coloured scales.

Harry and the rest would not have stood a chance, if it hadn’t been for the trolls.

The gardens had been the first to be trampled by the hydra, and even though some of the gnomes tried to fight, mostly they were just throwing mud at the hydra’s thick long tail. They were also slinging mud at each other, and a lot of them were curled up crying.

But the hydra was headed for the little town—or rather great big town, filled with great big huts, that Hermione had encouraged the trolls to build. Before this, trolls had never had places to live; they were mostly nomads. Hermione was trying to teach them the benefits of civilization.

Beyond the troll village was the mushroom ring, where the fairies lived. The fairies themselves were whirling about in confusion. Harry wanted to remind them about the defensive spells he’d taught them, but he was a little busy at the time.

The trolls, though, had lumbered out of their huts, and were waving big sticks and clubs at the hydra
It was a bit of a trick to convince the trolls not to bash the heads, since that would only multiply the problem. It was also a bit of a trick to convince the trolls not to bash the heads of the humans trying to help them, but Hermione was doing a pretty good job instructing them.

As a hydra head dove toward one of the huts, a troll thundered over and began thrwacking it, on the way knocking Neville to the ground. A second head twisted around to get at Neville as Neville scrambled to find his wand. Harry was too far away to help, and too close to the hydra to Apparate.

He wasn’t going to get there in time.

“Take that, and that, and that!” said Greg. Jumping in front of Neville, he had shot a fireball in the head’s eye. “Did you see?” he said excitedly to Neville. He probably didn’t notice who it was. “I’ll kill it!”

Neville got off the ground. “Let’s not kill it,” he suggested.

“Well, no,” said Greg. “I wasn’t going to go.” Thoughtfully, he cast a fireball at the hydra’s other eye. “But that would mean more skulls.”

Feeling hot breath blast over his head, Harry whirled. He’d been watching Neville too long, and a hydra head was hanging directly over him. It’s big, black maw was opening, and Harry could smell the reek of flesh, dead fish, and blood—

Then there was a goat.

It was a silver goat—a Patronus, Harry eventually registered—and it was running straight into the hydra’s open mouth.

The head recoiled for a moment, shook itself, then focused back on Harry. Diving, it pushed right through the Patronus, which puffed into a silver cloud, but now Harry was ready.

“Pay attention!” the silver cloud bleated, and then disappeared.

It sort of sounded like Malfoy.

“Was that a Patronus?” Hermione asked. She was casting spells at another hydra head behind Harry, coming closer.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “They don’t really do much, though. Just confuse it for a little while.”

Hermione cast another spell. “We need a—”

“Watch out!” said Ron, and pulled her out of the way of another sinuously diving head.

“Ron!” she said, surprised. “Where did you come from?”

“From watching you.” Pressing up against her side, Ron cast a slashing hex at the head. “You think I’m letting you out of my sight?”

“Oh, Ron!” Hermione cast a nostril clogging spell at another head diving at Harry, and it was sort of like old times, Hermione and Ron shoulder to shoulder, and at his back.

Meanwhile, the fairies seemed to be rallying around Malfoy’s head. Harry wasn’t sure why they would listen to Malfoy, when they wouldn’t listen to him. Maybe it was that Malfoy had more patience, or was more organized. Maybe it was that Malfoy was better at planning out what to do than doing it, or maybe it had something to do with what Malfoy had said about identifying with
fairies, and understanding where they came from.

Distracted, Harry tried to focus on the hydra head in front of him. He still couldn’t see a way to get to the heart.

“That was bloody awesome!” Ginny shouted overhead.

She was on a broom, flicking fireballs with her wand at the hydra. Greg was shooting them from the ground, while Ginny redirected them, like Bludgers. Harry had never really pictured Ginny as a Beater, but she seemed to be doing all right.

Angelina zoomed by on her own broom, crossing paths with Ginny, flicking another fireball with her wand.

It was turning into a game of Quidditch, basically. A game of fireball Quidditch, with fireball Quaffles and hydra eyes for hoops.

“Hey, Greg!” Ginny yelled. “Keep ’em coming!”

“What do you think I’m doing?” Greg shouted back, looking very pleased.

“I’ve got a plan!” said Ron, which was exactly what Harry had been waiting to hear. Instead of saying more, though, Ron moved over toward Malfoy.

Even though hydras had to be stabbed in the heart, Harry hadn’t really thought to bring something to stab it with. It wasn’t like they’d prepared for this contingency. Though Ginny, Angelina, and George had had the presence of mind to bring brooms, it wasn’t like they’d exactly dressed for the occasion.

Except Pansy.

Who for some reason had a katana.

Later, when Harry thought about it, he figured it wasn’t that weird that Pansy had a katana. There were all those ceramics on the mantel in Pansy’s parents’ house in Chelsea, the ones with the white backgrounds and delicate colour paintings, and now that he thought about it, there were weapons in black leather scabbards with tassels hanging above that shelf. He’d just thought it was some weird pure-blood thing, family heirlooms maybe, or antiques from a long journey. He hadn’t really thought of them as weapons.

It was Ron’s plan, and Pansy’s sword, and Malfoy marshalling the fairies that spelled the hydra’s doom. The hydra heads were mostly ignoring the fairies, who could still appear and disappear—they weren’t human, after all; it wasn’t the same as Apparition. Whoever had cast the wards hadn’t counted on that, and they hadn’t counted on the fact that Malfoy had brought the Aurors and hit wizards, and with them, there were enough people and trolls to distract the hydra heads for a little while.

In the end, it sounded like a very bad joke: how many fairies does it take to shove a sword through the thick hide of a hydra?

The answer was around forty or so.

As it turned out, a dead hydra was a lot like a dead basilisk, actually: it was big, messy, and smelly, and oily black blood was everywhere.
“Oh, Ron!” Hermione said, flying at him. “You were bloody brilliant! You were amazing!”

Ron caught her, a flurry of robes and wild, frizzy hair. “I keep trying to tell you that,” he said.

“Oh!” Hermione said, and kissed him.

Pansy was removing her katana from the carnage with a curled lip. “Daddy’s going to kill me.”

Apathetically, she looked at the black goo oozing off her sword.

“Aren’t you going to tell me I was amazing?” Malfoy looked about like he had in the pumpkin patch when he’d been talking to Neville—that was, he was lit up with incandescent triumph, except that this particular triumph had a rather unhealthy dose of smugness. “Look!” he said, jerking down the neck of his robes. “I have battle wounds.”

Horrified, Harry rushed over.

Just under Malfoy’s collarbone was a thin, shallow scratch.

“I’m practically a martyr,” Malfoy said.

“Are you okay?” Harry didn’t care if it was just a little scrape. He wanted to touch Malfoy all over, to make sure he was all there.

“I don’t know.” Malfoy looked ecstatic. “I feel kind of woozy. St Mungo’s might need to . . . Actually.” He looked calculatingly at Harry. “Maybe all it really needs is a bandage.”

Malfoy was ridiculous, and Harry still wanted to touch him all over.

“I couldn’t possibly bandage it myself, though,” Malfoy went on. “My battle wound is in such an awkward place. Salve will need to be rubbed in of course. All over. Gently, though; I feel sort of faint. And then the dressing will need to be changed in an hour or so, and salve rubbed in again, of course, and—hey!” He glared at Pansy. “Why did you do that?”

Pansy’s wand was out, and Malfoy’s scratch was gone.

Pansy turned to Harry with disinterest. “He tried the salve thing on me when that hypogriff scratched him.”

Malfoy deflated a little.

“Are you hurt anywhere else?” Harry said, coming closer. “I could—”

“Can someone tell me,” said Kingsley Shacklebolt, “how a hydra ended up in Sussex?”

Malfoy turned. “I think it might have been political,” he said.

“Oh?” Kingsley raised his brows, looking stern.

Walking through the mess of necks and heads toward Kingsley, Malfoy didn’t seem intimidated. Harry went with him. “The sanctuary is a contentious issue,” Malfoy said, and began explaining about Wang, Meagre, and the rest. Malfoy seemed to suspect former Death Eaters.

Kingsley nodded along. “All right,” he said, when Malfoy finished with his theories. “Tell me what happened here. From the beginning.”

Malfoy had been coming here for his night of volunteering, when he’d seen the hydra. It had already
got through the protection wards that Ron had set around the sanctuary, which was one reason Malfoy thought the hydra had been sabotage. Then he described how he’d Apparated to his flat and called Harry on the Floo. “And then I called Hermione, and she rounded up the rest,” Malfoy said. “And then you.”

“I called Pansy and Greg,” Harry said.

Malfoy went very still. “You did?” he said, his voice low.

“I called Blaise,” Harry said, “but he was at a party.”

Nodding again, Kingsley asked a couple questions. He had been promoted to the head of Specialist Ops after the war, and Robards had been moved up to Head Auror. Harry didn’t really know what Kingsley thought of Malfoy, but Harry wanted to tell him how he’d fought. He managed to stop himself, but only just.


He moved off to question some of the other Aurors and hit wizards, and to try to figure out what happened. Harry watched him go.

“I won’t tell him how I had to save your life,” Malfoy said, still preening.

“Okay,” Harry said. “I won’t tell him that your Patronus is a goat.”

Malfoy lifted his nose. “Shacklebolt already knows.”

Harry would have moved closer again, only Neville came up just then, and said, “What’s he doing, exactly?”

Harry looked around. The trolls were putting thatched roofs back on their little huts, and the fairies were picking on the gnomes, who were trying to put their gardens to rights. Most of the humans were standing around talking—except for Greg, who was trying to saw off a hydra head.

“Er,” said Harry. “I think he wants to keep the skull.”


Malfoy watched Greg for a moment. “I’ll go talk to him,” he said, which really meant he was going to go help him, because Greg was having a little trouble sawing through the spine with his rudimentary cutting spells.

“I’m not sure,” Harry said, in answer to Neville’s question.

They both watched Malfoy and Greg for a while.

“He saved my life,” Neville said finally.

“Yeah,” was all Harry said.

Neville didn’t take his eyes off Greg. “You should tell him he can use my maggot moss.”

“Er . . .” Harry pushed his glasses up. “I’m sure he’ll appreciate it?”

Neville turned back to Harry. “It’ll rot the flesh right off. Give it a week, those skulls will be
completely stripped.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “Well—well, that’s good of you, Neville.”

Neville hesitated. “I’ll—I’ll give it to you, yeah? Then you can give it to him.”

“Sure,” Harry said.

“That was bracing,” Ginny said, landing right near Harry. Neville moved off to talk to Dean and Hannah.

“I guess you could say that,” Harry said.

“Good show.” Ginny slammed him on the back.

Harry laughed. “You weren’t so bad yourself. Good idea, those Cirrus 9000s.”

“Now, if only we could be as killer against the Magpies.”

Harry pushed his glasses up again. “You do know you’re kind of obsessed, right?”

“I’m not obsessed.” Ginny frowned magnificently. “It’s just bloody Morgan. We should have Angelina on the team. If we could just get past the Magpies Chasers, I could clean up with their stupid Seeker. I just—okay. I’m a little obsessed.”

She smiled at Harry, and Harry smiled at her until her smile faded, and she wasn’t looking at him any more. She was looking over his shoulder. Turning, Harry saw Neville laughing with Dean.

“Excuse me, Harry,” Ginny said. “I have a man to snog.”

Harry tugged his fringe. “I thought you and Dean broke up?”

“Yeah, but Harry,” Ginny said, “heroism gets me horny. You know that.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, and had to laugh a little, as Ginny swaggered over toward Dean.

“I’m rather tardy, I see,” a voice said behind Harry.

Neither of them were going to pretend that the tardiness wasn’t on purpose. “You could still help,” Harry pointed out. “There’s a lot of clean up.”

Blaise glanced over to Ginny, who was tugging Dean’s elbow. “My window of opportunity appears to be closing,” he said. “Closing . . . shut.”

Ginny was kissing Dean.

“There’s plenty of opportunity,” Harry went on. “If you don’t like a mess, there’s PR, like Hermione said. Malfoy thinks this was a political maneuver. We could use a good spin on it.”

“You really are a lot like Draco.” Blaise looked apologetic. “He’s very persistent.”

Harry grinned. “His Patronus is a goat.”

“Really?” Blaise’s brows rose. “I suppose that makes sense.” Tilting his head, he watched Harry for a little while. “Aren’t you disappointed in me?”

Harry shrugged. “I’ve decided to stop worrying about why people do the things they do, and just
focus on what they do.”

Blaise looked thoughtful. “Interesting.”

“I’ll be disappointed, though,” Harry said, “if you don’t come to the pub with us.”

Blaise looked a little humbled, and for once, it didn’t seem to be a part of the mask he wore, but something he really felt. “I believe I can work it into my schedule,” he said. “If you want me.”

“Sure,” Harry said. “Everyone’s invited. Except the trolls.”

“I should imagine Hermione might object to not inviting trolls,” Blaise pointed out.

Harry looked around for Hermione. “I don’t think she will,” he said.

Over a pile of hydra guts, Hermione was snogging Ron quite senseless.

*
At the pub, Greg tried to buy Ginny a drink.

“Thanks,” Ginny said, “but Dean’s getting it.”

“Thomas?” Greg snorted. “Hey, so Weasley—”

“Ginny.”

“What?”

Ginny smiled. “It’s Ginny. There are too many Weasleys.”

Greg snorted again. “Right. So. Ginny. You’re really sort of athletic, and I gotta say even with all those freckles, you’re not half bad looking.”

Ginny’s smile grew wider. “Thanks, Greg.”

“Will you stop interrupting?” Greg grunted. “What I gotta say, is—”

“Hey Ginny.” Coming up with her drink, Dean put it in front of her, then leaned in, kissing her temple.

“—You’re going out with him?” Greg said. Dean looked surprised, but Greg didn’t wait for an answer. “What’s he have that I don’t have?”

There were a whole lot of things that Ginny could have said right then, but smiling rather gently, she only said, “Well, Dean’s an artist. I like artists. Plus, he knows lots of Muggle things, and I think Muggle things are interesting. Also, he’s got sort of crazy hair, and I love sort of crazy hair.”

“My hair could be crazy,” Greg muttered.

“That’s cool,” said Ginny. “Why don’t you go for a Mohican?”

“Because that would be dumb.”

Ginny shrugged. “Dean’s gonna get dreads.”

“I am?” said Dean.

Ginny turned to him, her lips twitching. “It’d be pretty hot.”

“I’m getting dreads,” Dean told Greg.


“You didn’t tell him we have a history,” Dean pointed out.

Ginny raised a brow. “We have a history?”

“So.” Dean put his arms around her. “We’re going out?”

Rolling her eyes, Ginny said, “Is that your way of asking me?”
Dean shrugged, arms still around her. “I just do what you tell me.”

“We’re going out.” Ginny tilted her head back to kiss him.

“Come along,” Blaise told Greg, dragging him along the bar. “We know when we’re not wanted.”

“Bloody women,” Greg said again.

Blaise waved his hand grandly. “Let us drown our sorrows. Bartender, pip pip!”

“I don’t ever even know what you’re saying,” Greg groused.

“I try not to think about it,” Blaise said.

A large part of the group that had fought the hydra had come to the pub, at least for a little while. They got a rather large table, which was actually two or three tables pushed together. For the most part, they were the only ones really at the pub, as it was later than the general meal hour, and just a Wednesday night. It was almost this big, weird Gryffindor and Slytherin reunion, with a smattering of Ravenclaw thrown in.

They basically had to get an entire vat of the spinach dip.

Malfoy spent a lot of the evening telling almost anyone who would listen that he’d been almost mortally wounded, and had only survived through sheer force of will. Harry spent a lot of the evening telling almost anyone who would listen that Malfoy’s Patronus was a goat.

“I like goats,” said Luna.

“Aberforth says the same thing,” George said, leering.

“They’re very friendly,” Luna said.

“I said,” said George, “Aberforth says the same thing.”

Busy with her spinach, Luna was ignoring him. “And they get along great with other animals.”

George rolled his eyes. “This is just too easy.”

“What’s your Patronus?” Malfoy asked George, probably to get off the subject of goats and Aberforth’s preferences.

George frowned down at the table. Angelina put her hand on his arm. “It’s a baboon,” she said.

Malfoy had no way of knowing why it made George sad that his Patronus was a baboon, but from the look on his face, he probably guessed. “You should see Pansy’s,” he said, in a light way, obviously giving George a change of subject.

Pansy, however, was not amused. “He should not.”

Malfoy looked extremely smug and happy, the way he’d looked all evening. “Yes, he should.”

“What’s your Patronus, Pansy?” Harry asked.

“I know what it is,” said Ron. Hermione looked at him in surprise, and then tried to hide it. Ron just grinned at her. “It’s a ferret!”
“That’s—” Harry swallowed, glancing quickly at Malfoy. “That’s not a bad Patronus. I think ferrets are . . .” He didn’t steal a glance at Malfoy, that time. “—They’re quite cute, actually.”

“Of course they’re cute.” Malfoy preened.

Pansy looked exceedingly bored with everyone. “It’s not a ferret.”

Malfoy preened some more. “It’s much better.”

“He’s impossible.” Pansy looked around apathetically at everyone. “You all do realize what you’ve done? You’ve gone and made him impossible.”

“I’ve always been impossible.” Malfoy couldn’t possibly preen more. “Your Patronus has been the same since fifth year.”

“What’s your Patronus, Pansy?” Harry asked again.

Slowly, she turned her eerie eyes on him. “It’s a dragon. If you must know.”

“Draco is a constellation, Potter.” Malfoy turned to him excitedly. “It’s the dragon constellation. It’s circumpolar. That means it’s visible all year round. In China, they have a different zodiac than the Greek one, you know; it’s not based on the constellations, but every year they celebrate a different animal and—and you know all this. Don’t you.”

“Yeah, Malfoy.” Harry knew he was smiling, but he couldn’t really help it. “But you can tell me anyway.”

Malfoy scowled. “How am I supposed to know when you actually paid attention in class?”

“When it was easy,” Harry said easily. He glanced at Pansy. “Anyway, you could cast a Patronus fifth year?”

Malfoy looked disgruntled. “Of course, you would call a Patronus easy.”

“I just meant,” Harry began.

“You just meant you thought you and your little fan club were the only ones learning advanced charms in fifth year,” Pansy said.

“What?” George said. “Did Umbridge have special classes for special stooges?”

Harry stiffened a moment after Malfoy did, beside him, but Pansy just said in her easy, lethargic way, “No, Draco did.”

Harry turned to him. “You taught people to do Patronus charms?”

“No.” Malfoy looked uncomfortable. “Snape tried to teach me, and—”

“And he whinged so much about it,” Pansy said. “I had to help him.”

Why did you whinge, Harry desperately wanted to ask him, because he was almost certain Malfoy hadn’t been able to cast one at that age, which was why he didn’t ask.

So George asked, “Why’d he whinge? Couldn’t cast one?”

Pansy turned her cool, sharp gaze on him again. “Snape was the one whinging,” was all she said.
“No, he wasn’t.”

Harry wished everyone would just shut up; couldn’t they see they’d made Malfoy unhappy, and Malfoy wasn’t supposed to be unhappy this evening. He had finally won—

But Malfoy just forged on, “Snape was the best teacher at Hogwarts.”

George snorted. “Bullfeathers. Lupin was the best professor. Everyone knows that.”

“No,” said Hermione, because talk about school was just about the only thing that probably could have made her surface from excessively snogging Ron, “everyone knows it was McGonagall.”

“Don’t even get me started on Hooch,” said Ginny.

“Start in on Hooch, baby,” Dean told her.


Dean winked. His arms were still around her. “You’re cute when you rant and rave.”

“So, Hooch,” Ginny said. “I grant you, fantastic flier. And great hair, now that I think about it. But what is even the system for Quidditch at Hogwarts? On what plane does that make sense? Has she ever heard of, I don’t know, something called a coach? And how is it all right that team captains can just pick whoever they choose? Plus, the inequality in terms of equipment.”

She kept talking, mostly to Dean, though Cho and Padma were at her end of the table. Cho nodded along, because apparently she had opinions about the fairness of Quidditch at Hogwarts too, though Padma was mostly just polite. Dean said, “Yes,” a lot, and “you’re right, that’s so wrong,” and, “whatever you say, baby.”

Malfoy frowned around at everyone. “Snape was the best professor.”

“Snape was a greasy git,” George said. For once, it didn’t sound unkind.

“But,” said Malfoy. “But he was a hero. He was involved in—in espionage.”

“Watch out,” Pansy said, smirking, “Draco isn’t cute when he rants and raves.”

Harry had a decidedly different opinion about that, but figured this wasn’t the place to voice it.

“Pansy,” Malfoy said, “You tell them.”

Pansy sipped her drink. “I can’t tell them.”

Malfoy looked utterly betrayed. “But,” he said again, “but, Snape was our head of House!”

“He was bad at that,” said Pansy. “And Weasley is right; he was a greasy git. If we’re going to pick a great professor, we may as well pick a hot one.”

Ron scratched the back of his neck. “We had hot professors?”

“You all seem to be forgetting the fellow who was obviously our very best professor.” Blaise had pulled Greg over from their wallowing at the bar. Everyone looked up at him. “Best in every way,” Blaise went on. “Best dressed, best looking, best dental hygiene—”

“Oh, God,” said Hermione. “You don’t seriously mean—”
“I do,” Blaise said, with a flourish. “My fellow alumni, it hardly seems possible, and yet, woefully, it is so: you’ve forgotten Professor Gilderoy Lockhart.”

There was a collective groan, and Blaise toasted them all with his figtini.

“So that guy’s crazy,” said Angelina, turning to Pansy. “I want to know who you thought the hot professor was, because if it wasn’t Lupin—sorry, where were your eyes?”

“Hey,” George said, trying to look offended.

Angelina turned to him. “I thought that was why you liked him?”

“It was,” said George. “Lupin was just so—you know. So scruffy and unassuming. Scholarly, gentle, good-hearted, well-muscled—”

Angelina narrowed her eyes at him. “Don’t get carried away, sweetie.”

“I just meant,” George went on, putting his arm around her and squeezing her, “you weren’t supposed to be into him.”

Rolling her eyes, Angelina pushed at him. “I was in my fifth year. Besides, I obviously don’t go for unassuming, well-muscled, gentle, good-hearted, scholarly—”

“Hey!” George said again. “I’m muscled perfectly!”

Pansy raised a brow. “Is there proof of this?”

“Girl,” Angelina said, laughing, “you’re quick!”

Pansy looked at her in her aloof, jaded way, which Harry had come to learn meant that she was rather interested. “I’m sorry I made fun of your hair at Hogwarts,” she said.

“I’m sorry I made fun of your face at Hogwarts,” Angelina said.

“Snape was an excellent teacher,” Malfoy went on. “He was incredibly intelligent, and even if—”

“—if his manner was gruff, he was—he was dedicated to imparting knowledge.”

“Snape was a great bloke,” Harry said. “I agree. Pants at teaching, though.”

“He might have had his favourites,” Malfoy said, pushing his hair back from his brow, “but he tried to teach everyone.” He pursed his lips at Harry. “Even those who never paid attention in class.”

Harry just shrugged. “You’re not teaching at all if you’re making people feel like crap,” he said. “Then they can’t learn anything. Hermione told me that when I first started teaching the DA.”

“Hermione,” Malfoy said, in an appealing way.

“Sorry, Draco.” Hermione twirled her hair around a finger. “Snape was really awful to me, even if he was one of the best at his subjects.”

Malfoy looked a little crestfallen.

For all that he was so . . . well, thoughtful, about the things he and his friends had done wrong, and about atonement, he seemed to have this huge mental block where Snape was concerned. That was all right.
Harry sort of thought that was cute, too.

“And umpiring!” Ginny was saying. “It’s bad enough professionally, but honestly, the violence Hooch allowed, and with school children, no less—”

“Hey,” said Hermione, “it’s like you’re speaking English.”

“I know, right?” said Ginny. “There should have been penalties for that shite. Slytherin should completely have lost to Ravenclaw in ‘94, but who was umpire? Hooch. That was who, and when you think about that foul that Flint—”

“That was an awesome foul,” Greg said. He looked dreamy.

“This is why our love is doomed,” said Ginny. “Doomed!”

“You’re speaking another language again,” Hermione told her.

“Honestly, if you think Marcus should have been penalized for that foul, you can shag Thomas all you want,” Greg said.

“Hear that?” Dean said, leaning in toward Ginny’s ear. “You can shag me all you want.”

“But Hooch,” said Ginny.

“I liked Hagrid,” Greg said, turning back to the other end of the table.

Blaise looked sad. “You and I had such a rapport earlier this evening.”

“Hagrid didn’t have any rapports,” said Greg. “I don’t like rapports anyway.”

“Hagrid was an excellent teacher,” said Luna, “though I was disappointed in the scope of the curriculum.”

“Luna,” said George, “you were also disappointed the hydra had to die.”

“There will be a wake this Saturday,” said Luna.

Malfoy frowned. “What’s a wake?”

“It’s another Muggle ritual,” said Luna. “Don’t forget your pyjamas.”

“I like everyone here,” Harry announced. “But I want you all to know, Lupin was still the best professor.”

“It was Firenze,” Pansy told Angelina.

Angelina’s eyes widened in surprise, and then she began to grin. “Oh, yeah. You’re spot on, there.”

“What?” George asked.

“Oh,” said Hermione, also looking rather surprised. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right, Pansy. That’s true.”

“What?” Ron also asked.

“What did she say?” Padma called down, from the other end of the table.

“Oh,” said Cho. “Well, that’s true.”

“Pavarti hated him,” Padma said, “but he really was quite stunning, wasn’t he?”

“I’d tap that,” Ginny said, and threw back the rest of her pint.

“I don’t understand what’s happening,” said Ron.

“Let me explain it to you,” said Blaise. “Firenze was very well endowed.”

Angelina leered. “What was he hung like?”

Blaise regarded her blandly. “I was referring to his brain.”

“At least goats are friendly with humans.” George was kind of moaning. “Did you ladies learn nothing from the example of Aberforth?”

“You were good friends with him, Harry,” Blaise said. “Was he as . . . invigorating as we all imagine?”

Harry turned beet red. “We were friends.”

Blaise smiled in a kind, very encouraging way. “Sometimes friends can be very friendly.”

“I found him very invigorating,” said Luna. When everyone looked at her, she turned to Harry. “I told you primates aren’t always required. Could you please pass the spinach?”

The table roared, and another round of conversations started up again. The next time Harry got up to buy more drinks, Blaise snagged him.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said,” he said.

“Firenze and I had a relationship of mutual respect.” Harry tried to speak with dignity. He knew Firenze wasn’t actually what Blaise was talking about.

Blaise smiled, a little ruefully. “I wonder what that’s like.”

Harry dropped his teasing tone. “I respect you, Blaise.”

“What do you? I can’t imagine why.”

Harry just shrugged. “You’re never cruel.” He didn't feel it was necessary to add, 'any more'.

Inclining his head, Blaise looked at him thoughtfully for a little while. “When you said you wanted a good spin on your hydra incident, what did you mean?”

Harry thought about it. “Malfoy says he thinks it was former Death Eaters. I think he's probably on the right track—whether it's an actual follower of Voldemort or just some new fanatic, it's a nutter extremist, is what it is. They weren't trying to make some political statement about how the sanctuary is impractical for the wizarding world in the long run; they just trying to ruin the sanctuary, full stop.”

“All right.” Blaise nodded, glancing over at the bartender, who was busy getting drinks for Cho. “So, you don’t think it’s political, after all?”

Harry shook his head. “I didn't say that. Bertram Meagre—he's not a warmonger. Him and his kind, they'd never instigate something like this; they're just these narrow-minded idiots who don't want the
world they know to change. But the dark wizards I put away—lunatics like Rabastan Lestrange—they just think they're doing what all the pure-bloods want. They think they're carrying out some kind of purist agenda. So, Malfoy's right, it's political. It's just not everyone's politics."

Looking at him curiously, Blaise said, “What's your spin, then?”

Harry pushed his glasses up. “Well, the last thing someone like Meagre wants is to be associated with fanatics. Stinks of Voldemort. Makes him look bad.”

“Why, Harry. You deviant.” Blaise's mouth curved up into a smile. “You mean to hang the hydra on Meagre?”

Harry shrugged uncomfortably. “Not on him in particular. Just, work on associating Meagre's kind of thinking with things like the hydra. Because Meagre's kind of thinking can lead there, even though that's not where he's meaning to go.”

“Yes,” Blaise mused, “and meanwhile, make poor, civilian Hermione Granger look the victim of Death Eater violence, her and her poor, innocent dependants only just saved by the side of light and right—Harry Potter at the helm—swooping in to save the day.”


Blaise’s gaze had turned calculating. “Why don’t you spin it yourself?”

“What?” Harry pushed up his glasses. “Because, I’ve told you, I’m no good at—”

“Shite,” Blaise said quietly. “You know that’s shite. You were good at it. Just now.”

Harry shook his head. “That’s just not really my thing.”

Blaise’s gaze turned calculating. “Fighting hydras is not my thing. Freelance PR is certainly not my career of choice. And yet, you seem to think these fitting tasks for me.”

Tugging his fringe, Harry began, “Because you could make a difference—”

Blaise’s brow remained raised. “You couldn't?”

No one had told Harry—at least, not in a long time—that what he was doing wasn't good enough. It took Harry by surprise.

“In shaping our own futures, we shape the future of the world,” Blaise said. “That’s what Draco says. What shape are you going to make it?”

Harry had heard Malfoy say that. He'd heard it now many times, and yet, he hadn't thought of it as applying to him specifically. He'd saved the world, hadn't he; he was catching dark wizards, wasn't he; he was doing what he knew how to do—and yet, he could be better. Malfoy thought he could be better, and when Harry thought of the better world he'd always wished existed, now he thought of Malfoy.

“Oh,” Harry said, and felt like everything had just snapped into aching focus.

“Yes,” Blaise said. “Oh.”

“I—” Harry's mouth was dry. “I hadn't thought about it that way.”

“Perhaps you should.” Blaise's smile was very understanding.
Harry licked his lips. “Do you think he . . .” He trailed off, because Blaise had already told him what Malfoy thought that he should do.

“Hi.”

“Malfoy.” Harry swallowed hard. Malfoy was looking between him and Blaise uncertainly, and Harry had forgotten about the drinks. He glanced toward the bartender. “Sorry. I was going to get your fizzy water.”

“That’s okay.” Malfoy glanced between him and Blaise again. “Is—is everything okay?”

“We were just discussing politics,” Blaise said smoothly.

“Oh.”

Harry knew Malfoy couldn’t help it. He didn’t mean to look hurt; he just did. He probably didn’t even know he did.

“Okay,” said Malfoy. “I can leave you alone.”

“That’s okay,” Harry said quickly.

“I just wanted Harry’s opinion,” Blaise said. “I’m trying to decide whether I should do something.”

“Oh,” Malfoy said again.

Blaise looked at him kindly. “The appropriate response, Draco, was, ‘you? Do something?’”

“Oh.”

“Please don’t go,” Harry said to Malfoy.

“I’ve decided to ask Miss Chang about it also.” Blaise’s voice remained smooth. “Thanks, Harry. Have a good evening.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, and didn’t even really watch him leave. Malfoy was still standing uncertainly at the bar. “Er,” said Harry, trying to think of anything to say, anything at all that would convince Malfoy to look up at him. “Blaise was trying to convince me to go into politics.”

Malfoy didn’t look up. “You don’t have to listen to Blaise.”

“I know,” Harry said. “But maybe he’s right.”

Malfoy’s eyelashes were visible just above his cheeks, golden and some might have said they should have been darker, but Harry thought that they were perfect. The curve of Malfoy’s jaw, the slant of Malfoy’s throat, that was perfect, too. Malfoy looked up, licked his lips. “I thought you weren’t interested,” he said.

I’m interested! Harry wanted to say. I’m more than interested!, but he wouldn’t have been talking about politics. He swallowed hard. “I want to make a difference.”

Malfoy’s eyes drifted down again. This time, they definitely focused on Harry’s mouth.

This time, Harry was definitely going to do something about it.

“Malfoy,” he said, and came closer.
Malfoy stepped back. “Potter. Can I—can I talk to you?”

Harry made himself stand still. “You’re talking to me.”

Malfoy looked away, but then, as though drawn there, his eyes were back on Harry’s mouth. “Alone?”

“We’re alone,” Harry said, and this time did come closer.

Malfoy did a neat little side-step. “I mean, out—outside. Please.”

“Yes,” Harry said.

Malfoy turned, looking rigid and uncertain and very, very determined, and Harry’s chest was so tight, he could barely breathe. He knew what Malfoy wanted to talk about; he knew why they were going outside. He sort of wanted to do it right here, but he didn’t want to embarrass Malfoy that way, but still, Harry felt like rejoicing. He felt like dancing.

He felt like he’d won, and it had nothing at all to do with fighting or dying or the hydra; it just had to do with human beings, and life. Turning, he went to follow Malfoy out of the pub.

“Did you get the drinks?” Luna said.

“No.” Harry glanced at Malfoy going on ahead of him. “You get them.”

“Oh,” said Luna. “Where are you going?”

“I think Malfoy’s going to ask me if I want to have dessert with him,” Harry said.

“Oh.” Luna looked thoughtful. “Have you done with the in-between?”

“I hope so,” Harry said. “I’m going to say yes.”

“That’s very nice,” said Luna. “I think I might have the mousse.”

Harry laughed, and went outside.

Under the street-lamp, Harry thought that Draco Malfoy looked like the shape of his future.

* 

End Notes

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