

Damn Tornados

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Damn Tornados

by [Mad Maudlin](#)

Summary

Ron Weasley has no life. Draco Malfoy is dead. But he's got an offer Ron can't refuse: a chance to lead the lowly Chudley Cannons to a championship. The price? Oh, just his he immortal soul. And when Ron starts having second thoughts, what will Draco do to keep the bargain on the table?

Notes

This fic has been over a year and a half in the making. It started when I had the privilege of being stage manager for my high school's production of *Damn Yankees*: the parallels between the Washington Senators and the Chudley Cannons seemed obvious, Ron made the natural Joe, and everything else sort of fell into place around them. I've taken some liberties to accommodate JKR's universe, as well as my own musings about the play ♦ if Draco and Pansy recall *Good Omens* or *The Screwtape Letters* more than Applegate and Lola, blame a misapplied Catholic education. As for making it slash, well, let's just say I thought about this all a bit too hard after one too many late rehearsals; any time you start comparing musical theatre to *The Divine Comedy*, you need to take a break. Plus, there's not nearly enough H/R with plot.

This is not a songfic; that's not to say the songs aren't worth listening to, because they are, very much so, except for "Who's Got the Pain?" (strictly IMO). I recommend the soundtrack of the 1994 Broadway revival featuring Jerry Lewis as Applegate.

This fic is dedicated to all my buddies in Thespian Troupe #3300, plus Mrs. K and Mr. A; to Dee and Tas, who were respectively no help and loads of help at various times; and to the 2004 Boston Red Sox, because nobody likes a sore loser. There's always next year....

Chapter 1

"...passes the Quaffle to Harkins, Harkins to Samson, Samson's hit by a Bludger and the Cannons recover! Killjoy, Macelwrath, Killjoy, Funt, Macelwrath, the shot...wide of the goal, and Harkins recovers, narrowly misses a Bludger from Brajnikoff...Harkins, Samson, Lewis, intercepted by Funt...wait a moment...the Tornados' Seeker is going into a dive, I don't think this is a feint, MacGregor is following about a mile behind him, both Cannons Beaters are on the move...Jenkins has the Snitch! Tornados win it, four hundred twenty to seventy!"

Ron shut the wireless off and slumped back into his chair, running his hand through his hair and mumbling under his breath. "Eight hour game and it's all for nothing. Damn Tornados."

"Cheer up, Ronniekins," George said, patting his arm. "They made a good game of it, didn't they?"

"Last time they played the Tornados, they lost in thirty minutes," Fred added encouragingly.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Jenkins could've caught the Snitch a dozen times today. They were dragging it out on purpose, just because they could, to pad out their standings when they're already first in the bloody League."

George shrugged. "Maybe next time. You never know."

Ron made a derisive noise and left the kitchen. The twins merely shrugged at each other.

Sunday dinner at the Burrow had become a ritual by now, Molly Weasley's way of keeping tabs on her far-flung sons from week to week. Though he tried not to let on, Ron spent most of each week looking forward to it. It was nice to escape the cramped flat he shared with Harry and return home, if only for an evening or so. It made the other six days in the week very nearly bearable.

Oh, he knew he shouldn't complain. His dad had made a big effort to land him a job in the Ministry; the twins would get tired of the secretary jokes eventually. ("He's not a secretary, he's a clerical aide," Percy would tell them in exasperation, every time.) Yes, his flat was microscopic and had a lovely view of a filthy alley, but that was his own bloody fault if he'd just swallowed his pride to begin with, instead of insisting on paying half the rent, they could be living in a penthouse suite. Harry had been sore about that for days not that he ever said anything about it. Not that he ever said anything about anything, really, these days. But he was alive, Ron was alive, and they were still friends, and he really didn't have any right to complain. Things could have been a lot worse; he should be grateful for all that he had.

He was *going* to be grateful if it killed him.

A systematic search of the house turned up his flatmate in the rarely used front parlor. Harry was curled up in a window seat, staring at the moonlight that glowed on the snowy front garden without really seeing any of it. Ron leaned against the wall. "Hey."

Harry barely glanced up before turning back to the window. "Hey."

"The Cannons lost again."

"Mmm."

"I'm ready to leave."

"Mmm."

"By the way, Mum just burst into flame."

Harry glanced up again. "Mmmm?"

Ron sighed through his teeth and crossed his arms. "You feel like rejoining the land of the living, mate?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, you've been hiding in here most of the afternoon."

Harry glanced at him for just a moment, then looked back through the window. "I'm glad you noticed."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Ron asked, bristling.

"Nothing."

"Then why'd you say it?"

Harry sighed, and seemed to deflate a little. "Never mind, Ron, it's not important."

Ron opened his mouth to press the issue, then let it snap shut again. If Harry wanted to be weird and cryptic, fine. Ron wouldn't make an issue out of it, because he had to work in the morning, and when he and Harry fought these days it left them both sleepless on opposite sides of a paper-thin wall. When they saw each other the next morning or more often than not the next evening, since Ron was usually at work long before his friend even rolled out of bed they'd mutter apologies and rattle around awkwardly in the flat for a few hours, stepping on each other's toes until some trivial thing broke the tension. Then they'd laugh, and forget why they'd been angry in the first place, and everything would be fine again until suddenly it wasn't. The reliability of it all was nearly comforting.

So instead of pushing for an explanation, Ron sighed and glanced at his watch. The minute hand was fixed on *Past You Bedtime*, while the hour hand had been stuck on *Time to Take a Vacation* for the past month. "We should probably get going soon," he said

"What do you mean?"

"I've got work, Harry. I need to be up early."

"So?" At least Harry was looking at him now, instead of addressing his comments to the window.

"What do you mean, so?"

"You can go on without me, you know."

Ron stared at him for a few minutes. "What are you talking about?"

"Go ahead, Ron. I'll be along in a bit."

Ron's brows knit in confusion. Harry always wanted leave; except for these Sunday dinners and occasional lunches with Remus, the Boy Who Lived had become a veritable hermit at age nineteen. He rarely left the flat, and when he did he was usually all too eager to get back again. Ron leaned in closer and dropped his voice. "Harry, is some thing wrong?"

He snorted. "Of course not."

"Then why are you acting like this?"

Harry sounded more irritated than Ron thought he had any right to be. "Is it a capital crime to want to be with people I care about?"

"Pretty odd way of socializing you've got," Ron snarled, stung by the backhanded insult, "considering you haven't said five words to anyone all night."

"And *you* spent all evening screaming at the wireless." Harry turned back towards the window with a set-jawed scowl. "If you're so eager to go, then go. No one's keeping you."

"Believe me, Harry, I've no desire to go back to the flat, but unlike some people I have a job." Of course, Harry didn't need to work; between his inheritance and the awards heaped on him by the grateful Ministry, he was set for the rest of his life. Of course, in Ron's way of thinking that didn't mean he had to spend all day in his pajamas eating corn flakes out of the box, either.

The comment must've hit a nerve, thoughtnot that that was particularly difficultbecause Harry jumped to his feet and started yelling. "Fine! I'll go! Because God forbid anything I think should interfere with the smooth operation of the Ministry of Magic's clerical pool!"

"What the hell's the matter with you tonight?"

Harry's face flushed, and he didn't bother to lower his voice when he said, "Of course, something must be wrong, I've got an opinion."

"That's not what I said..."

"That's what you meant."

"Don't put words in my mouth."

"Then quit treating me like a child."

"Then quit *acting* like one!"

He regretted the words the moment they left his mouth. He wanted to take them back the moment he saw Harry's face. But it was too late and he was too slow, and Harry had already pushed past him by the time he had gathered his wits enough to apologize.

"Harry?" Ron called, hating the way his voice squeaked on the end of the word. "Where are you going?"

"Home." His voice was flat and controlled, artificially pleasant and utterly cold. "That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"Look, if you want to stay, we can stay. I didn't"

"Stop." Harry leaned against the wall and shut his eyes, pressing one hand against his forehead. "Just stop. You can stay, or go, or whatever, but it doesn't matter to me, because I really don't care anymore. So... just stop. Please." With one last backwards glance, as if stabbing Ron in the gut and twisting the knife had been terribly exhausting, Harry left through the front door and Disapparated.

The house was terribly silent, and it occurred to Ron sort of vaguely that his entire extended family must have heard them shouting at each other. He kept waiting for another pop, and for the door to open again, and for Harry to come back and apologize; but the longer it didn't happen, the more he realized that this time he really may have screwed things up.

Well, *fine*. If Harry wasn't going to expend the effort, then neither was he. Ron spun on his heel and stalked through the rest of the house, ignoring his gaping relations, through the empty kitchen and into the back garden. He paced outside in the January cold for a good thirty minutes before he noticed someone watching him in the darkness.

"Bill."

"Ron." His eldest brother nodded without moving from his position in the shadow of a tree.

Ron couldn't keep pacing, though, not under Bill's steady silent gaze. He raked his fingers through his hair and rounded on him. "What do you want?"

"I've been chosen by popular cowardice to find out what's wrong."

Ron scowled at him. "Nothing's wrong."

"That's why you and Harry were screaming, then, yes?"

"Harry..." Ron turned his back on Bill, but his indignation suddenly petered out, and he felt deflated and tired. Part of him insisted that it was nobody's business but their own, and he should tell his brother to keep his nose out of it. Another part, though... "I don't know about Harry anymore," he confessed, chapping his hands without really warming them.

"What's the problem?" Bill asked softly, handing Ron his cloak.

He snorted as he wrapped it around himself. "What isn't the problem?" he growled. "He spends most of his time sleeping, he never leaves the flat, he treats my job like some bloody great *inconvenience*. He doesn't say two words to me all day and then he acts like I ought to have been reading his goddamn mind..." He hated the words even as they came out of his mouth; it felt like a betrayal, and he instantly wanted to take them back, like that would make them untrue. But at the same time he'd been wanting to say something like this for so long that it almost couldn't come out fast enough. "I don't think I've seen him smile in weeks, it's like...like he refuses to do anything that might accidentally make him happy, but he expects me to cheer him up anyway, and he gets snitty if I try to do anything else. I don't know what to do, or what to say, because it seems like the most random sorts of things set him off, and...and I thought things were supposed to get better when the war was over, you know?"

The last part came out almost as a plea; a weight seemed to lift from his chest, one he'd been so used to he hadn't even noticed. Bill squeezed his shoulder, but what he said next jarred Ron badly. "So that's the problem with Harry. Now what's the problem with *you*?"

"I don't have a problem," he said, pulling away.

"I don't believe you." Bill snagged the back of Ron's cloak to keep him from walking away, nearly causing him to slip on the icy path. "You're exhausted lately, Ron, everyone's noticed it."

"I'm fine."

"Be honest with me, here. With yourself."

Bill had a way of saying things that always made them right, and Ron was too tired to resist it. He leaned against the apple tree alongside Bill and rubbed his eyes. "I'm tired, okay? I work a lot."

"And you go home and fight with Harry."

"No."

"No?"

"...maybe."

Bill sighed and steered Ron over to the bench opposite the tree, which was mostly clear of ice and snow. "Look, Ron," he said as they sat, "you and Harry are closer than anyone I know, including the twins. Hell, that includes Mum and Dad. Did you ever think...maybe you're too close?"

Ron looked up sharply. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you know each other better than your know yourselves, and that means you know exactly how to hurt each other. And whether you realize it or not, that's what you two are doing every time you argue like you just did. It's not healthy and it isn't good."

"Harry needs me," Ron cut in, uneasy about where Bill was taking all this. "And I...I guess I need him, too. Hell, Bill, I followed him through the war and back, a little bickering's no big deal."

"You call that bickering?" Ron cringed; Bill shook his head. "Tell me, Ron, if Harry disappeared tomorrow, what would you do without him? And be serious about it."

Ron tried to imagine a Harry-less life, without the flat, without the fighting, without idle conversation or inside jokes. A world without the boythe man, nowwho'd been the center of Ron's world since he was eleven years old. It made something lurch uncomfortably in his chest. "I...I dunno."

"Which is exactly why you should find out." Bill held up one hand when Ron tried to protest. "Look, you two have been joined at the hip since you were kids. Hell, you've already got more commitments and history with Harry than some married couples, and you're not even twenty yet. You deserve a chance to figure out your own identityyou both do. And I think you can only do that apart from each other."

"He *needs* me," Ron said again. "Bill, I can't abandon him after"

"I know what Harry's gone through, Ron, believe me. I was there for some of it, too. But he's got to get over all that on his own. You can't fix him all by yourselfand it hurts the rest of us to see you trying."

Ron started at the ground, at the snow that had been stomped into slush and frozen again in strange peaks and swirls, and bit his lower lip until the icy air stung it raw. "So you just want me to give up?" he asked quietly.

Bill sighed again. "Think of it as a strategic retreat. A little time apart could do you both a world of good."

"What if he hates me for it?"

"The way you're going, he'll hate you for something eventually."

When Ron didn't respond immediately, Bill stood up and flicked his wand in a slow circle. The lamps around the garden burst into flame, softly illuminating the snow-blanketed beds and spindly remains of last summer's flowers. "Hey, how did the game end?" he asked briskly. "I didn't quite hear."

"Cannons lost again."

"Ah, well. Better luck next time, I guess."

He snorted. "Next time, right."

"Hope springs eternal." Bill patted Ron on the shoulder again. "Promise me you'll at least think about what I said."

"Yeah. Sure." It was the last thing on Earth he wanted to contemplate.

Bill stared at him until Ron felt his neck begin to redden, then sighed. He turned up his collar and shoved his hands in his pockets. "G'night, Ron."

Ron nodded, and hunkered down into his cloak. He stared at the sky, at the icicles glittering in the trees, at the diffuse lights coming from the kitchen windows. Leave Harry...but where would he go? He couldn't afford his own place, and he had no intention of moving back in with his parents. Hermione might put him up, or if it were absolutely necessary one of his brothers, but that didn't solve the basic financial problem, and secretaries weren't the most upwardly mobile of Ministry employees. And Harry would be by himself in the dingy little flat, eating cornflakes out of the box...

He couldn't deal with this right now. He needed to clear his mind. His first instinct was to go get pissed, but his more rational side told him (in a voice that eerily resembled Hermione's) that he'd just end up hung over and late for work. What he needed was distractionsomething to help him calm down and think straight. And there was nothing to drive a bloke to distraction like the Chudley Cannons.

"Bloody Tornados," he muttered under his breath as he rose to his feet. "Think winning the League Cup four years in a row makes them special. We just need a good Seeker, is all...or at least one that can find the Snitch when it's still in the crate..." He kicked at a stone and watched it skitter on the ice that crusted the pond. "One good Seeker, that's all we need..."

From the deepening shadows, a smooth, silky voice that Ron didn't recognize chuckled softly. "Oh, I agree."

On to [Chapter Two](#).

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Ron meets an old friend with an offer he can't refuse.

"Oh, I agree."

Ron turned around so quickly he almost fell, and the hair rose on the back of his neck. Someone was once again standing in the shadows of the apple tree, but the voice wasn't one he recognized. "Who are you?" he demanded, groping for his wand.

"A man who agrees with you."

Very funny. "Come out where I can see you," he said calmly, aiming his wand.

The figure stepped out from under the shadows, still chuckling softly. "Really, Weasley, is that any way to greet an old friend?"

The wand slipped from Ron's fingers and fell to the snowy ground. He was aware of his jaw dropping, but it seemed better to concentrate on getting air into his lungs and staying upright, two tasks that had suddenly become rather difficult. He stared at the man before him and tried to reconcile what he knew he saw and what he knew he couldn't be seeing. Draco Malfoy had been killed some months ago at Hogwarts while trying to sabotage the castle defenses; Ron had had the misfortune of seeing the body.

Draco Malfoy was now standing in his parents' garden, and judging by the little trails of steam coming from his nose, he was breathing.

"You dropped this," the dead man said as he picked up Ron's wand and handed it to him. Ron reached for the wand, but found himself grabbing onto Malfoy's wrist instead. Solid fabric, solid flesh. Not an illusion, then. Malfoy jerked his arm back and brushed imaginary grime off his immaculate cuff. "Watch it, Weasley, these robes are worth more than your life."

"What the hell are you?" Ron managed to blurt. He tried to step back, but his foot hit a patch of ice and he nearly fell.

Malfoy pulled something out of his breast pocket and waved it Ron's face, too fast for him to see any detail. It looked like some sort of badge. "You might call me an agent of supernatural forces in the physical world. A messenger, if you would, although that term usually gets applied to other beings..."

Ron blinked. "You're dead."

"Yes, Weasley," Malfoy said slowly, "and, as you so often advised, I went to Hell."

Ron blinked furiously, but Malfoy didn't disappear. Perhaps he should've gone to get pissed after all. "What are you doing in my parents' garden?" he asked dully.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "I'm here to nick your mother's prize cucumber. What do *you* think?"

Ron reflected that, if he was indeed hallucinating, his subconscious could've stood to be a bit less accurate. "I don't know, Malfoy, I'm not an expert on...whatever you are."

Malfoy smoothed the lapels of his pinstriped robe. "You don't believe me?"

"Let's just say you're not exactly a trustworthy source."

He sighed in mock weariness and cast his eyes down. "True, true...incidentally, care for a fag?"

Ron didn't see him handle a wand or make an obvious gesture; he heard no incantation or spell-word spoken. Yet between one second and the next Malfoy was holding two lit cigarettes in his outstretched hand. "How did you do that?" he demanded.

Malfoy smirked. "Where I've been, one gets to be handy with fire." One cigarette disappeared just as quickly as it had materialized; he took a slow drag off the other. "Now, about why I'm here..."

"I didn't say I believed you," Ron interjected.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "To tell the truth, Weasley, I don't care if you believe I'm a psychotic delusion or the Virgin Mary, just so long as you listen to what I'm about to say." Ron would like to think a product of his own imagination might be a bit more courteous; then again, this was about how he best remembered Malfoynasty and blunt. He said nothing, and after a moment, Malfoy began to slowly circle him, blowing cigarette smoke in his eyes. "You're rather pathetic, aren't you, Weasley?"

"If you're just going to insult me"

"I could've said 'you look like shit, poor boy.'"

"At least I'm alive."

Malfoy narrowed his eyes. "That," he said, "was low."

Ron folded his arms. "Get on with it."

"All right. I'm going to be blunt." Malfoy threw his cigarette into the snow and folded his arms. "You *are* pathetic, and moreover, you know you are. You work obscene hours on the off chance it'll get you promoted, or from a subconscious desire to avoid Potter, I don't know which. You're a joke among your fellow secretaries I'm sorry, 'clerical aides' and the people with real jobs spit on you, except for Elvira Troutwig, who grabs your arse when you deliver her mail. You haven't had a date in months, you live in the filthiest firetrap in Hackney, and

these little familial soirees are the closest thing you have to a social life in any sense of the term. Have I left anything out?"

Ron clenched his fists and grit his teeth, as his urge to strangle the blond bastard warred with his doubt that there was any blond bastard to be strangling. "What's your point?"

Malfoy smiled and conjured another fag to puff on. "The one beacon of light in your life, such as it is, would be your darling Chudley Cannons, who just happen to be off to their worst start since 1918. In fact, if the Wanderers hadn't melted down against Kenmare in their opener, the Cannons would be last in the League. You've wanted to play for them since you were old enough to spell 'Quidditch,' and currently happen to be their single most dedicated partisan in England, or indeed, the world. Which isn't terribly surprising, all things considered...but I digress.

"Now, this is the part that requires a little cooperation on your part, Weasley, a little...act of faith, shall we say?" Malfoy gestured with his cigarette, and the ember on the end left faint after-images in Ron's eyes. "You are pathetic. So are your precious Cannons. I'm proposing to fix both those problems in one fell swoop. After all, they only need a good Seeker, right?"

"What does that have to do with me?"

Malfoy surveyed him through half-lidded eyes, blowing smoke out his nose, smirking a little. "Come now, Weasley. Don't tell me you never in your entire life wanted to be a Seeker on a professional Quidditch team? That you never fantasized about playing for England and catching the Snitch at some crucial moment? That you were never the teensiest bit jealous of Potter for his spot on the team, or for the talent he had flowing out his ears in addition to the money and the fame and the"

"Malfoy!" Ron breathed deeply and tried to reign in his emotions. "I may have thought those sorts of things once in a while" he ignored Malfoy's snort of laughter "but that doesn't mean anything. I can't play professionally, I can't *be* Harry, and at any rate, I never played Seeker, even in school."

"That's where I come in."

"What do you mean?"

Malfoy's voice took on the tone of a particularly unctuous used-broom salesman. "Picture this: the Chudley Cannons are having their usual nightmarish season. Every sane wizard in Britain has written them off as hopeless. But suddenly, in their hour of need, a hero appears an unknown wizard, with nothing but a burning desire to wear unfashionable robes and more talent in his little finger than most teams have in their entire first string. A giant among men among house-elves! He inspires the entire team to greatness! Opponents forfeit rather than face him! And for the first time in a century, the Chudley Cannons take the League Cupright out from under the Tutshill Tornados' collective nose." He seized Ron by the shoulders and looked him over critically, even going so far as to examine his teeth. "We'll call you Hardy that sounds nice and corny, doesn't it? Ron Hardy, the greatest Quidditch player who ever lived. You'll be famous the world over. Women will throw themselves at you...what

the hell, so will men...opponents bow down in your wake. I wouldn't be surprised if they build a statue to you somewhere."

And Ron could almost see it, in his mind's eye, like a series of pictures: the cheering crowds, the newspaper headlines, the glittering Cup...and the idea that it could be him, at the center of it all, the focus of attention...his brain couldn't quite hold it all at once. "What about my job?" he asked weakly. "I mean, I can't just...what about my life?"

"Your life," Malfoy pronounced, "is shit. I thought we established that."

"What about Harry?"

The self-proclaimed demon leaned in close and forced Ron to meet his eyes. The smell of tobacco on his breath mixed with something sharper, like rotten eggs made Ron's eyes itch. "Harry doesn't want you. Harry doesn't need you. Harry is a neurotic, self-centered brat who's completely oblivious to the people he claims to care about. You have worked your arse off for over seven years in the name of the almighty Harry Potter and it's earned you sod-all...I think he made his feelings abundantly clear earlier."

"How do you know about that?" Ron whispered.

Malfoy grinned. "It's time to forget about Harry, my dear Weasel. Go where you'll be appreciated. Get out of everyone else's shadows. Quit being taken for granted and show some spine, for Hell's sake." He stepped back suddenly and shrugged. "Of course, you could stay...do the noble thing, loyal, self-sacrificing friend that you are. Stick it out at the Ministry, make up with Potter, keep a stiff upper lip and all that. I'll just go away...and the Cannons will lose...and you get to spend the rest of your life baby-sitting a world's best-loved basket case and hiding from Elvira Troutwig.

"It's up to you."

A headache was building up behind Ron's left eye; the wind was picking up, cutting through his cloak, to the bone. This was absolutely insane, and any minute now someone would come outside to find out who he was talking to...Malfoy would just disappear, and take all these lovely visions of fame and acclaim with him. Because it all just couldn't be true, could it? Draco Malfoy was dead, the Cannons were losing, and tomorrow morning he would go to the same dead-end job and the same dead-end life and Harry...Harry didn't care anymore.

Malfoy was still there when he looked up.

"How do you propose to do this?" he asked slowly, aware that he was taking a considerably large step off the deep end.

Malfoy smirked. "Leave that all to me, Weasley."

"Why?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why do you care whether the Cannons win the League Cup?" he asked, stepping closer to the dead man. "Since when did you give a shit about my happiness?"

"To answer the last question first..." Malfoy slung his arm across Ron's shoulders, or tried, but there was good six inches difference in their heights to deal with. "I don't. Give a shit, that is. But you love the Cannons, Weasley, everyone who's ever met you knows it. You're also completely, totally, thoroughly, disgustingly Gryffindor. You are the one wizard in Britain I can count to see this through, for the sake of the team if not for your own. As for why I care..." He took another drag from his cigarette and grinned, letting the smoke trickle through his teeth. "I really don't want the Tornados to win another Cup."

It was the worst excuse in the world, but then again, he'd died for less.

Ron shrugged off the blond's arm easily and stepped away again. "What happens when it's all over? When I retire?"

Malfoy chuckled. "I thought that was fairly well-known..."

"And if I want out?"

The cajoling, mock-friendly attitude melted away. "Why the Hell would you want out?" Malfoy demanded.

"Let's assume that I might."

"Weasley, I'm offering you everything you've ever wanted in life. You'd have to be mad to give it up."

"I'm currently haggling with a figment of my own imagination," Ron reminded him.

Malfoy growled, and in a very un-businesslike fit of petulance, stomped his foot. "It's preposterous! It's ludicrous! This is not a...a *real estate* transaction!" But Ron just stared at him with his arms crossed over his chest, until Malfoy sighed in defeat. "Fine. If you decide that fame and fortune are really so horrible that you'd rather push parchment for the rest of your life, then you can get out...before noon on Midsummer. After that, the deal is done."

It couldn't really be happening, of course; it was all a hallucination. But...what did he have to lose? Besides the obvious, that is. And even then he wasn't *really* losing it, like to a Dementor, because then he wouldn't be much use to Malfoy...assuming any of this was really real. Which it wasn't. But still...

Why not go mad?

Ron exhaled and watched the steam fade away. "Just let me get a few things..."

Malfoy grinned broadly. "Take all the time in the world, Weasley. But first" He extended a hand, which Ron warily shook. "There you are. Just a formality, of course."

"That's it?"

"What were you expecting, to sign your name in blood?" It must've been obvious from his expression that he had at least something a little less anticlimactic. "Honestly, Weasley, we're both wizards here. Now, go on, get whatever it is you think you'll need..."

It sounded like most of his family had already gone home; it was easy to slip upstairs unnoticed, to his old room, where he still stored the vast amount of things that wouldn't fit in the flat in London. It took only a bit of probing to dig his Cleansweep out of the closethe couldn't take the time to fly anymore, much less play. He paused to stare at the battered handle and the ragged twigs. There were so many memories attached to this broom...

"A strategic retreat," he muttered under his breath. The sound of his own voice startled him.

He turned to the door, but something still felt incomplete, somehow. He looked back on his former room, which echoed with even more memories than the broomstick. No matter what, he owed Harry *something* years of friendship couldn't just disappear overnight. At least, not for Ron. He sat down at the creaky old desk and conjured up a parchment and quill.

Dear Harry

By the time you get this owl, I'll be gone. I can't tell you where I'm going, or when I'm going to come back. I hope it'll be soon. Please trust me on this one.

I know I haven't been a very good friend in the past few months, and I'm sorry for that. Things haven't always been perfect between us, but we've always worked them out in the end. That's what I'm trying to do now. I think it's probably best this way.

You have been and are my first and greatest friend. I'll see you soon.

Yours as ever,

Ron

He reviewed his words. They were clumsy, pathetic, inane; they would have to do. He folded the parchment in thirds and sealed it, and before he slipped out the back door again he grabbed his parents' new owl, Flynn. It took a moment to tie the message to its leg and a simple toss to get it airborne. Watching the owl sail off into the frosty night, Ron felt suddenly, incredibly light; it didn't matter any more whether he was barking mad or if a demon was loitering in the garden. Nothing mattered anymore. He was leaving, he was going somewhere, he was getting away from Harry and the Ministry and his whole miserable existence. He made his way back to the apple tree by the hedge, but really, it didn't matter whether anyone was there or not. "Malfoy?" he called softly, not expecting an answer; the whole thing had probably been some mad waking dream, but it didn't *matter* because he was finally getting *out*....

"I'm on the other side of the hedge, you numbskull."

Well. That damped things slightly.

Ron ducked his head and shuffled through a gap in the hedge, using his broom handle to push through the thin, extending branches. Clumps of snow fell on his head and slipped down his collar. He didn't remember the gap being this narrow...or the hedge being this thick...it felt like an age as he worked his way past the skeletal, gripping fingers crusted in ice. Then he was through, and he was free, and Malfoy was leaning on a sleek black broomstick smoking yet another cigarette. He blew a delicate ring of smoke, grinning, then gave Ron a leisurely once-over from head to toe. "Not bad, if I do say so myself."

"What the hell are you...talking...about?" Ron clutched his throat, heart pounding; that hadn't been his voice. Come to think of it, that wasn't his throat. He stared at his hands, which were smaller and more elegant than they had a right to be; his body had suddenly become muscular and lithe. And was Malfoy a little taller than earlier? "What the hell did you do to me?"

The dead man laughed. "Come on, Weasel. You couldn't go onto a Quidditch pitch as yourself; you'd be recognized. You're incognito now. Ron Hardy, remember?"

Once again, he looked for the wand that wasn't there; and anyway, he had never heard of Transfiguration this subtle. "You could've warned me," he muttered, and winced at the sound. "I'm talking like a bloody Yank!"

"Naturally," Malfoy said slowly, as if Ron were exceptionally thick. "Otherwise they'd look for your name in Hogwarts records, and then the whole plan's shot straight to Heaven, isn't it?"

Ron stared at his hands, his ability to think painfully jammed by the conflict between his eyes and his nerves. This had gone far beyond the realm of hallucinationsthis was flatly impossible, and some small part of him was suddenly interested in reconsidering the deal.

"If you're done admiring yourself..." Malfoy flicked his cigarette to the ground and mounted his broom. Ron swung his leg over his Cleansweep and tried to concentrate on a single, simple thought: *if he can make me an American, he can get me on the Cannons. And if he can do that, he can do anything.*

I'll just cross my fingers and hope for the best.

You've Gotta Have Hope

Chapter Summary

The Chudley Cannons meet the greatest Quidditch player of the century and Rita Skeeter is there to cover the moment.

Edwin Coulter considered himself a down-to-earth fellow: reliable, steady, not prone to extremes or excess. He considered himself a cautious optimist. He considered himself a mediocre Chaser, long past his prime, with a good head for Quidditch and some fairly strong leadership skills.

Nevertheless, it was noon, and he was fighting the urge to start drinking.

Ludo Bagman sidled up next to him, grinning as he surveyed the alleged "practice." Coulter didn't know where the old fraud had gotten the gold, but he'd purchased the Cannons last year and hired Edwin to coach them. He hadn't been about to turn down a steady job at the time, even if it was with the laughing stock of the League. Now he was just about ready to change his mind. "They're pulling together well, aren't they?" Bagman asked cheerfully.

Keeper Oliver Wood was staring off into space a good thirty feet away from the nearest hoop; the boy had once had great potential, but he'd been on the receiving end of a vicious foul from the Falcons in his first start, and just hadn't been the same since. The three Chasers were gathered near the center of the pitch, arguing, the Quaffle neglected in the muddy, trampled snow. Anne Macelwrath was screaming histrionically and waving her arms so wildly it was a miracle she stayed on her broom; Nigel Funt cowered before her; and Richard Killjoy, as always, glowered at them both with the utmost contempt. Vassily Brajnikoff waved his bat in furious circles, trying to fend off both Bludgers at once, while his partner, Paul Stebbins, appeared to be sleeping. And Eamon MacGregor wasn't even in the air, but perched on a bench with a self-warming lap rug, quietly working on the *Daily Prophet* crossword.

"Coaches dream about a team like this," Edwin said blandly. *And wake up screaming.*

Bagman clapped him on the shoulder with a grin, and left whistling. Coulter sat down next to MacGregor and watched Funt make some truly inspired loops-the-loops, in an attempt to get away from the shrieking Macelwrath. They flew a bit too close to Stebbins, who awoke with a start and nearly fell off his broom. Coulter would've gladly called up the reserves, if the team had actually *had* any but they could barely afford the salaries of the starting seven, and if ticket sales stayed this low, they'd be forced to cut into that anyway.

"It's a damned shame."

Coulter looked curiously at MacGregor, who was now eyeing his teammates with something like pity. They watched Killjoy seize the Quaffle and score easily; Wood got to the goalposts in plenty of time, but his heart wasn't in the catch and he nearly unseated himself in a poorly-timed lunge. "A shame," Eamon repeated, shaking his head. "So much potential out there, and it's wasted."

"A lot of potential down here, too," Edwin said, in what he hoped was a bracing voice. He patted MacGregor on the back.

The old Seeker sighed. "Don't kid yourself, Mr. Coulter. Years ago, maybe...but old age and old Arthur have their hooks in me now." He shook his head and rubbed his shoulder, as if to make his point.

"You're the best we've got, Eamon."

He harumphed and turned back to his crossword, rustling the paper. "Which says more about us than it does about me."

The truth was, Edwin would have replaced MacGregor in a heartbeat and he was certain MacGregor would step aside graciously if asked. But they had no one to replace him, and a bad Seeker was better than no Seeker at all. Besides, the old man did impart some dignity on the club...and, as he watched Stebbins and Killjoy engage in a tug-of-war over a Beater's bat, he reflected that they could use all the dignity they could get.

It wasn't like any of the players were actually *bad*; that was the problem. Wood's record before the Falcons game had been spectacular, and Coulter was sure his problems were more mental than physical. Brajnikoff had been named to the Ukrainian national squad, for Merlin's sake, but he'd had to leave the country after a some fiasco involving the Seeker, the Keeper's wife and a hot tub full of borscht. Stebbins' play in the school had been inspired, but he had more libido than work ethic, and all the common sense of a bag of hammers to boot. Macelwrath had been a top scorer for Holyhead, but she'd gotten released after trying to relieve a teammate of her eyeballs, without the aid of a wand. Funt could fly circles around most of the League, but only when no one was watching, and...well, Dick Killjoy had a personality to match his name. Individually, not bad at all; but somehow the team had amounted to less than the sum of its parts. As a coach he was frustrated as hell; as a fan of the sport, he had to admit, he pitied them.

The sudden sound of high heels clicking on wood sent the hair on the back of Coulter's neck up; the shrill cry of "Cooo-eee!" made the acid rise in his stomach. He plastered on his most pleasant face, fisted his hands in his pockets, and turned to face the bane of his existence: Rita Skeeter, picking her way delicately down from the stands.

"Cooooee! Mr. Coulter!" She strutted forward with her crocodile-skin handbag under one arm and her quill already in on gloved hand. "How are you today, Edwin darling?"

"Rita. You're looking as lovely as ever." *Seeing as it would be hard to look worse.* Coulter tried to intercept her before she got to the bench; ever since she'd developed this sinister urge to cover Quidditch, MacGregor had become her favorite target. Eamon was no fool, however, and hurried into the warmth of the stadium, muttering about his arthritis.

"I was just wondering how the practice was going," Rita said sweetly, and drew a notepad out of her purse.

"Practice is going well," Edwin said confidently, and then ducked. A curse blacked the side of the pitch; high above, Wood was struggling to restrain Macelwrath, while Funt attempted to hide behind a befuddled Brajnikoff. "We're still working some of the kinks out."

Rita's smile turned sharper. "I noticed."

"What brings you out here today, Ms. Skeeter?" he asked as he rubbed his stomach. This was going to a worse case of heartburn than usual.

Rita twiddled the end of her quill innocently. "Oh, I was just working on a piece for tomorrow's edition of the *Prophet*, and I was interested in hearing some of your thoughts...on the Tornados."

Edwin continued smiling through sheer force of will. "The Tornados are a great team and a great bunch of wizards and witches," he recited mechanically.

"Oh, yes, they're very nice, aren't they? Even after they beat you into the pitch."

"Tutshill is just another team as far as the Chudley Cannons are concerned," he ground out, wondering how much he'd have to pay Stebbins to have an "accident" that left the journalist short of a head.

A new voice cut off Skeeter's reply, which was just as well, since it was probably snide. "You know, I read it somewhere that they're talking about handicapping the Tornadosmake them fly on Shooting Stars, just to keep everything fair." Edwin turned around to see a sleek little blond man in tailored robes, smiling in a way that ought to be illegal. He was standing casually at the foot of the stairs that led out of the stands; behind him, an athletic-looking young man with sandy hair was staring around as pop-eyed as a child in a sweet shop. Just when had his pitch turned into a convention center, anyway?

"Really?" he asked the newcomer sharply. "And might I ask who the Hell you are?"

"My name is Applegate," the blond said smoothly, completely unfazed by Coulter's manner. Dammit. "My card, sir."

He turned away from the proffered card, heading into the locker room. "I'm busy," he said gruffly. Applegate, unfazed, fell into step with him, and Rita Skeeter was only a pace or so behind.

"Mr. Coulter," the blond man said, putting one hand on Edwin's shoulder, "I'm a longtime fan of the Chudley Cannons."

"Listen, mate, I told you"

"For some time now, I've been, ah, 'beating the bushes' for talent, as they say," Applegate continued on blithely. He stopped Coulter and waved his sandy-haired friend over. "This is

my protégé, young Mister Ron Hardy. Ron's quite a lad with a broom under him and I'd like you to give him a trial."

Edwin surveyed the second newcomer without much enthusiasm. Hardy was too big to Seek, too small to Beat, and moved like his entire body was a different size and shape than he'd expected when he woke up that morning. He had a battered old Cleansweep clutched in one hand and a nervous, over-wide smile on his face. If Rita Skeeter hadn't been watching the whole thing, he would've walked away then and there; as it was, her rhinestoned gaze compelled him to be at least slightly polite. "Where have you been flying, then?" he asked Hardy.

The alleged prodigy looked at Applegate in a panic, then squeaked out, "Oh, uh...here and there."

Edwin managed not to wince, barely; it was common knowledge that Americans played Quidditch only a little better than a rhinoceros played Gobstones. "Where's 'here and there?'" he prompted.

Hardy blinked again, mouth moving without generating words. "Uh...uh...I...uh...if you just let me fly a bit, Mr. Coulter, I mean..."

He opened his mouth to tell him where to fly, but Applegate's hand on his shoulder tightened, and the blond man leaned up to his ear. "Edwin..." he whispered silkily, "what have you got to lose?"

Not the Cup. Not a match. Not even his job, unless Bagman found another sucker on short notice. Certainly nothing that mattered. Nothing, really, at all....

Edwin whistled sharply and waved Wood down to the pitch. "Oliver," he said shortly, pointing to Hardy. "I want you to take this fellow down to the locker room."

Hardy's eyes lit up, and his grin suddenly became easy and handsome. "Thank you, Mr. Coulter. I really hope"

"Get him some gear, and get him a proper broom," Edwin continued. "Then tell the rest of the team we're putting him through his paces."

Wood blinked, but shrugged, and waved Hardy after him; the American stared open-mouthed at the retreating Keeper before his manager planted an elbow in the small of his back. Then the both of them tried to follow Oliver into the bowels of the stadium. Coulter caught Applegate by the sleeve. "Just where do you think you're going?"

Applegate blinked, but never lost that oily grin. "My protégé may need my advice."

"Wood will give him all the advice he needs." A thought suddenly occurred to him. "What position does your lad play, anyway?"

Applegate shrugged. "All of them."

Later on, Coulter would say that he hadn't believed it even when he'd seen it. They put Hardy on a team Nimbus and, as Coulter had ordered, put him through the standard practice drills.

He glided through the basic flying exercises easily, ten seconds faster than anyone else Edwin had ever seen; Funt said something about a British record. When they gave Hardy a Quaffle, he made shots that defied everything known to magic about how balls are meant to move. In front of the hoops, he was like a stone wall or a shield charm, and he could hit a Bludger the length of the pitch and knock a butterbeer bottle out of the center hoop.

"Not fucking possible," Macelwrath said, watching him bat the Bludgers back and forth with Brajnikoff. "This bloke's unreal."

"He's got a nice swing," MacGregor said mildly.

Stebbins smirked. "Nice arse, too."

Coulter shook his head. "Wood, go up there and tell Vassily to swing hard."

"He *is* swinging hard," Oliver said ominously. "Can't you hear the way he's grunting?"

"Then tell him to *stop* swinging hard before he puts his back out again."

Killjoy looked up from the *Daily Prophet* with a practiced sneer; Coulter knew it was practiced because he'd caught the Chaser at it in the lockers. "It's all very well that he can put on a show in practice," he said imperiously, "but in a real game"

Whatever he'd been about to say was lost in the sound of a Beater's bat exploding. Coulter watched the splinters rain down from the stump in Hardy's hand, and the iron ball sailing cleanly out of the stadium. He counted one, two, three heartbeats before it came screaming back over the rim. "That's impossible," Stebbins hissed, eyes wide. "That's not there's spellshe can't have"

"He just did," Macelwrath said with some like awe.

"Not bloody believable," Coulter muttered, and shook his head. He whistled Hardy down while Brajnikoff rounded up the Bludgers. The tawny-haired American dismounted and walked over, expectant and almost nervous. Merlin's big hairy balls, he hadn't even broken a sweat. "Er...nice Beating there, Hardy, very nice. How's you Seeking?"

Another one of those strange panic looks, and he blurted out. "I, uh, I dunno."

"You...don't know?"

"I mean, I mean..." He looked around frantically. "I, uh...my manager was supposed to be here..."

And he was; Applegate appeared at Hardy's side like they'd spoken him up. "Did you want me, Ron?"

Hardy glared at him. "Yes, Maaa...ister *Applegate*. They want me to Seek."

The blond snorted. "Well, what are you waiting for, permission? You can do anything you know that." Hardy nodded nervously, but spared another dark look for his manager.

Coulter nodded over Hardy's shoulder to Brajnikoff and Funt, who were putting the Bludgers back in the crate. "Get the Snitch out. We'll give it thirty seconds' head start and then start the clocks"

It happened so fast that they almost missed it; Funt fumbled with getting the Snitch out of the crate, and the tiny golden ball slipped from his fingers. It zipped away in a shiny streak, in the general direction of the oblivious Hardy who, in the next heartbeat, had it secure in his fist. He looked almost as shocked as the people around him.

"Uh." He turned around and held the Snitch out to Funt. "You dropped this."

They all stared at him.

Edwin cleared his throat. "Right, er...right. Well. You're certainly an excellent player, Hardy, but, er...you see, we..." He glanced over at the rest of the team. Seven players, none of whom were actually all that *bad*, but he'd have to replace one of them, and when it came to it as dysfunctional as they were, he couldn't quite bring himself to send anyone home now that he had the chance...

...and then MacGregor caught his eye. The old man nodded once, tipped an imaginary cap, and walked off the pitch.

It was hard to get more gracious than that.

"...we need to talk to Mr. Bagman about your contract," Edwin finished quickly. "Though I don't see what kind of objections he could possibly have..."

"You mean it?" Hardy asked eagerly. "You mean I made it? I'm a Cannon?"

"We just need Mr. Bagman to sssssargh!" Coulter had to duck to avoid being bowled over by Hardy's trailing arms as the new Seeker, quite literally, jumped for joy.

He threw himself onto Applegate, nearly bowling the smaller wizard over. "Did you hear that? Did you hear that, you greasy little ferret, I did it! *I did it!*"

"We did it," Applegate snarled, "now let go of me before you wrinkle this suit."

Hardy rolled his eyes. "That's no way to talk to your *protégé*, now, is it?"

Rita Skeeter, who'd actually been sitting quietly and minding her own business for once, broke up the conversation with quill in hand. "Mr. Hardy, where are you from? What's your hometown? Where've you been playing? What do you think of the Cannons? What do you think of the Tornados? Who"

Applegate pushed her away. "All questions should be directed to me, as his manager."

"All right," Skeeter said peevishly, "Mr. Applebate, where is"

"Applegate, and I'm not answering questions right now." He took Hardy firmly by the arm and pulled him forward with surprising ease, considering how mulishly the Seeker was digging in. "Mr. Coulter, I believe you said something about seeing Mr. Bagman, and a contract...?"

-x-X-x-X-x-

Remus Lupin double-checked the tarnished brass number on the door; it was definitely the right flat, but his knocking had gone unanswered for far too long. Harry may have disliked going out in public these days, but he'd never stood up his old teacher for lunch before, and Remus was starting to get worried. After a quick check for prying eyes, he spelled the door open and slipped inside. "Harry?" he called softly.

He found him slumped in an armchair, staring at a creased piece of parchment. He looked up the second time Lupin called his name; his face was strangely blank, suggesting only a vague and resigned puzzlement. "Hello, Remus," he said, monotone.

"Harry, what's the matter?" he asked, taking in the creased clothes, the day-old stubble, the sag of his shoulders. Harry waved the parchment in his general direction, eyes unfocused; Lupin caught only the familiar loopy scrawl, not the words. "Is that from Ron? Did something happen to him?"

Harry's voice caught when he spoke. "He's gone."

The Barefoot Boy from Hannibal, MO

Chapter Summary

Ron starts having a few second thoughts about the turn his life has taken.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Even after more than two months playing for the Cannons, it was all still a bit surreal to Ron; a bit like a really strange and detailed dream he was going to wake from at any moment. It wasn't just living in a body that wasn't his own, answering to a name he wasn't born with, or even playing, really, despite how eerily easy that had become. It was more in the way people treated him, once Rita Skeeter had done her seedy deeds. He found his name on the front page of the *Prophet* before he'd played a single match, and people had started recognizing him on the street within days of his first start (a win over Wigtown, 150-60). Everyone treated him like some kind of super hero, even his own overawed teammates. Even the legendary Oliver Wood, legendary to Ron, at least, who still couldn't sit down and have a normal conversation with the Keeper, addressed him with something almost like deference, as if he, Ron, were some great authority on the subject of all things Quidditch. He'd been swarmed by fan owls every morning for a week before Malfoy had gleefully retained him a secretary, making him the only person on the team to have one, Bagman included. Reporters from the four corners of the world were suddenly beating down his hotel door with questions and cameras, and it was on account of those reporters he was currently hiding in Ludo Bagman's office, fantasizing about Rita Skeeter's head on a stick.

Malfoy all but kicked the door in, scowling blackly at his so-called protégé. "That," he hissed viciously, "was embarrassing, Weasley."

"I know," he snapped back, "Why do you think I walked out?"

"I meant for *me*." The demon shut Bagman's door and locked it before turning back to Ron, arms folded. "A good relationship with the press is very important to the club, and to you, if you can get that through your iron-plated skull. Those people can tear you apart with a well-turned phrase, you know."

Ron snorted. "They can't say a bloody thing if I keep playing like I have been."

"And who do you have to thank for that?" Ron averted his eyes; he wasn't about to answer *that*, and after a few minutes Malfoy sighed and rolled his eyes at the ground. "Look, Ron, please try to play nicely with the media every once in a while. It's good for you, it's good for the club, it's just plain good for business."

"So tell them to mind their *own* business," he growled. Granted, most of them just wanted to talk Quidditch, and that was something Ron could do until the end of the world. It was the others, Skeeter in particular, who were determined to get a "human interest angle" that made him see red. He had no idea what human could possibly be interested in what sort of toothpaste he preferred, his shoe size or a list of his possible birthmarks. "From now on I'm not answering any more personal questions," he declared.

"Why the Hell not?"

He turned on the demon. "I can't sit out there lying for hours on end!" he shouted.

"Don't think of it as *lying*," Malfoy said, earnestly laying a hand on Ron's shoulder. "Think of it as performance art."

Ron shrugged off the gesture. "They all want to know about this town you said I'm from...."

"Hannibal. Hannibal, Missouri," Malfoy supplied. "Lovely place, you know. Lots of history."

"Which I don't *know*, because I don't know where this Hannibal place *is*," Ron snarled. "I don't know where *Missouri* is!"

"It's...er...somewhere in the middle. Look, that's not important." Malfoy pulled a cigarette out the air and started gesturing with it, drawing lines of smoke through the air. "You can tell them whatever you want, whenever you want. They will devour it regardless of whether it's true or plausible or even in English. They're so desperate for a cover story right now they'll print anything that comes out of your mouth."

"So what am I supposed to do about what comes out of yours?"

The demon's whole manner instantly changed. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said innocently, not meeting Ron's eyes.

Ron folded his arms across his chest. "You've been feeding them stories, you little ferret, that's what. Press releases and interviews and look, I have a hard enough time keeping track of what I've told them without trying to keep track of what you're saying, too!"

"Perhaps you wouldn't have so much trouble," Malfoy said venomously, "if you spent a little less time out on the town."

"What's is that supposed to mean?"

The demon stubbed out his cigarette in one of Bagman's old trophies. "I followed you last night. And the night before in fact, ever since a little owl told me you had 'urgent business' in London to attend to."

Ron's stomach tightened, and he desperately sought a diversion. "Why'd you go to all that trouble?" he asked. "Don't you just know where I am at all times?"

"No," Malfoy said coolly. "There's only one person Who can do that, and He's the last One Whose attention I want to draw. I have to do most things the hard way...now, what have you

been doing in Hackney these past few nights?"

No point in playing dumb, if Malfoy knew that much. "Walking. Is that a problem?"

"Walking where?"

"Around."

"Walking around Potter's apartment building?"

"What if I was?"

"Seventeen times?"

Ron glared, jaw clenching. "What's wrong with me checking up on my old friends now and again, eh?"

"Everything." Malfoy rolled his eyes at Ron's skeptical look. "For Hell's sake, Weasley, haven't I explained this enough times? Hanging around with people who used to know you is just asking someone to investigate this background you're so concerned about making up. You get too chummy with Potter or your parents or someone, one of them gets suspicious, they start to snoop, and then bang you're in a situation even *I* can't save you from."

"I'm just looking, Malfoy, It's not like I'm moving in with any of them," he said quickly.

The demon grumbled something, then donned a strained smile. "Look, Weasley Ron? Fine, Weasley I know just what you need." He patted Ron's hand. "You need a diversion."

"How do you mean?"

"I know a couple of attractive girls who would be eager to meet you," he said in a cajoling tone, straightening his robes. "Friends of mine. From...around."

Ron scowled. "I don't want anything to do with friends of yours, Malfoy."

Malfoy rolled his eyes again. "Please, Weasley, have an open mind. They're all very charming, you know...very interesting...very *compliant*..."

He wrinkled his nose. They probably had horns, too, and tails. "No, thanks."

The demon sputtered for a moment, then growled. "Well, don't go back to Hackney, then. Do you understand? I forbid it!"

"You don't own me, Malfoy," Ron shot back. "Not until Midsummer."

"And then?"

Ron hadn't thought about *then* he'd been too busy trying to survive the three-ring circus his life had become. He had the unpleasant feeling he was treading water in the middle of a hurricane, but between the matches, the practices and the interviews he barely had time to

think, just to react to whatever got flung his direction. *Then*, the world after Midsummer, still seemed like an eternity away, too distant and unreal to think about. "Is it so terrible just to want to go home?" he asked softly, turning around.

Malfoy turned up his nose. "It's gauche. Now, if you'll excuse me" He straightened his hat in a handy mirror, which promptly cracked. "Er, take care of that, will you? Bagman ought to be by any minute."

Ron sighed at Malfoy's retreating back, and mended the mirror with a quick Repairing Charm. He still had a couple months before the agreement became final, months in which he could yet decide to go back to his old life. If he wanted to. Because, after all, this had been his dream, hadn't it? Rich, famous, playing the sport he loved. Adored by all, envied by many, a giant among his peers. Taking his favorite team on a winning streak that ended with the League Cup in their hands.

Alone.

Because for all the people who adored him and admired him, he couldn't really *talk* to any of them. Not like a friend not like he could talk to Harry. It was one of a million little things he had taken for granted, things he'd grown to miss more and more keenly as the season dragged on; with Harry he was completely at ease, had never worried about looking like an idiot or being misquoted to a reporter later on. He had never worried about being misunderstood, not in the things that mattered. It had been more than two months, and sometimes he still caught himself thinking that, boy, Harry would think that was great, he'd have to remember to tell him when he got home...

...but *home* for Ron Hardy was a hotel room in downtown London. Or Hannibal. Or something. Certainly not an overpriced flat in a bad neighborhood, whoever he might be sharing it with.

He snapped back to attention when someone knocked on the door. Bagman stuck his head inside, smiling a little nervously. "Ron? Everything okay?"

"Yeah," he said absently, staring at the reflection in the mended mirror. Even after two months, he couldn't connect with the handsome face he was wearing. "Everything's brilliant."

"It's just, well, the reporters still have a few questions..."

He sighed. Might as well get this over with. "Sure. I'll be back out in a minute."

Bagman looked relieved. "Wonderful, wonderful...you're a real champ, you know that, Ron?" He roughly patted Ron's arm, a sort of *atta-boy* gesture. "A real trooper, you are. I can't thank you enough for coming to play here."

"You're welcome," Ron muttered, and looked away.

When he returned to the press conference, Coulter was talking, but most of the audience wasn't even pretending to take notes; one or two were openly dozing, and he noted that some had up and left already. "always had faith in my team, you know, since day one," Coulter was

saying. "Since Ron's come to Chudley, this team's been playing like I always knew we could, and I couldn't be prouderoh, and here's the man of the hour!"

Every journalist in the room suddenly leapt to attention, scrambling for quills and notebooks. Rita Skeeter leapt to her feet like some gaudy jack-in-the-box and called out, "Mr. Hardy, I don't think you quite answered my last question before yourahdeparture."

Ron winced. "Ah...what was it again?"

"Your family," she prompted.

They'll print anything that comes out of your mouth, Malfoy had said. "I don't have any," he said quickly. "My parents both passed away when I was very young."

A murmur of sympathy rolled through the room, but Rita hardly looked away as her quill took this down. "What about friends?"

"He's got one friend I know of!" Bagman boomed, throwing his arm around Ron's shoulders. "I tell you, this boy's the nicest bloke I've ever seen on the pitchmyself included!"

There was a ripple of laughter, and not a few groans, but it didn't knock Rita off the trail even a bit. "What about your friends back in the United States, Mr. Hardy?" she persisted. "Iner*Hannibal*. Have you heard from them since you started playing in Chudley?"

Ron's mind went blank. What was he meant to say to *that*? Yes, he had loads of friends back home but no one else was allowed talk to them? No, everyone else in Hannibal hated him and would curse him to next Sunday as soon as look at him? He lived alone under a rock and talked to the squirrels? Everyone he'd ever met was dead except Malfoysorry, Applegateor whatever his name was this week?

"Ex-kee-yooz meeyuh," someone called in a horrible, nasal drawl. Malfoy was standing in the back of the room, with a press pass pinned to the brim of his hat, wearing the most horrible false moustache Ron had ever seen. Nobody in the room seemed to recognize him, of coursethey never did, unless he wanted to be recognized. "If y'all will jest permit me t' say a few wordsI'm Chuck Anderson from the Hannibal *Bugle* and I'ma telling you right now that everyone in our li'l ol' town is jest proud as pumpkins of li'l ol' Ronny."

Rita narrowed her eyes at him, but Ron saw his chance and blurted out, "Ah, anyone else have a question?"

The *Prophet's* regular Quidditch reporter waved to him, and stood up. "This one's for Mr. Bagman. Now that Mr. Hardy's come to play for you, what do you think about Chudley's chances for the Cup?"

The entire room burst into smothered laughtersmothered, except by Rita Skeeter, who brayed like a caffeinated donkey. "The Cuphonestly! When I swim the Channel!" she shrieked, covering her mouth.

Ron's fists clenched. "What's so funny?" he demanded without thinking. "What's so bloody funny about the Cannons competing for the League Cup?" Coulter put his hand on Ron's shoulder, but he shrugged him off. "Who's winning more matches than we are, huh? Who's scoring more points? We're not just in the running for the bloody Cup this season, we've got a fair chance at winning it outright!"

Bagman stood up and applauded. "Hear, hear! Atta boy, Ron, you tell 'em!"

One thing he hadn't lost the ability to do was blush like a traffic signal; Ron dropped back into his seat, muttering an apology for the outburst. But Bagman cuffed him on the arm and turned back to the crowd. "Don't apologize for that, Ron! It's this lot who ought to be apologizing so what if we're behind in the standings right now? We're playing like a new team! We're moving up! We've won our last six matches, and outscored Tutshill doing it, might I add. We've got hope again, and that's something this club hasn't had in a good long while. So you just go ahead and print this tomorrow the Chudley Cannons will have the League Cup in our hands on the twenty-second of June." He grinned at Ron. "Right, mate?"

Ron nodded, watching the reporters scribbling away, before he really registered what Bagman had said. "The twenty-second? That's when the season ends?"

"That's right, we're the last match of the season Chudley at Tutshill, day after Midsummer"

What a coincidence. Ron stood up, and pounded on the podium to get everyone's attention. "I say we're going to have the Cup in our pocket by the twenty-first."

If Bagman's announcement had caused a stir, this one caused pandemonium. Half the crowd ran for the doors to report to their papers, the other half charged the podium to ask him more questions. Owls erupted out of pockets and handbags and circled the room shrieking, waiting for messages. Paper airplanes zipped out the windows and doors. And, in the back corner, Malfoy looked at him with a glare that could've melted tempered steel.

Chapter End Notes

(Just for reference, I am a native Missourian. We don't actually talk like that.)

A Little Brains, A Little Talent

Chapter Summary

Draco decides to call in a little back-up, but the situation's worse than he thought.

Draco Malfoy sat in his hotel room and brooded. It was something he'd always fancied himself rather good at; he had practiced it, along with its cousins sulking and snitting, plenty often while he was alive. On his desk sat a dog-eared copy of *Damnation for Dummies, Thirteenth Edition*, open to the chapter on one-on-one temptations by corporeal agents. He'd read those particular pages so often he knew them by heart. "It is imperative," he quoted to the empty room, rocking back on the hind legs of the desk chair, "that the tempter keep the subject isolated from any possible sources of the noble emotions (see Table 6-66) or the entire temptation may be jeopardized. The chiefest among all these threats to damnation is Love, which comes in three forms: that between lovers, that between family, and that between friends. Any form of Love may in turn lead to such potentially virtuous feelings as Guilt, Remorse, Humility"

A knock startled him so badly he toppled over and crashed to the floor. Clambering to his feet, he quickly shut the book and stuffed it in a drawer. "Come in!"

The woman who stepped into the room was more than gorgeous she was breathtaking. Her figure was perfect to a degree not normally found in nature, and she had legs that went on forever, a peaches-and-cream complexion, and the elegant bearing of a dancer or a gymnast. Her thick blonde hair fell to her waist, framing a delicately pretty face with full lips and stunning blue eyes that was unfortunately twisted by an ugly scowl. She was the sort that men died for, or killed for, and several had; Draco, however, had two things up on those unfortunate mortals. One, he was not technically a man, but a demon, and therefore had no sex drive in the hormonal sense. Two, he already knew exactly who she was.

"Parkinson," he snarled, feeling a similar sneer leapt to his face. "What in the name of Hell are you doing here?"

"I was assigned," she snapped, waving a frail pink work order in his general direction. "You sent for a seductress, didn't you?"

"I sent for a Class B Succubus at the very least." And that had been a week ago the bureaucracy Below was getting quite out of hand. It was really a miracle that anyone was getting damned these days.

"And that's what you've got." Those perfectly painted lips twisted into a smirk. "Promotion just came down this morning."

"Congratulations," he said reluctantly. He and Pansy had been an item in life, and a rather committed one at that. They had reigned as king and queen of Slytherin, the heirs-apparent to the pureblood aristocracy, the most promising young Death Eaters in Britain. Well, he had been a Death Eater; Pansy had never technically joined, though he'd been planning on correcting that once the Dark Lord had Harry Potter's head for a lawn ornament. As it turned out, the whole point had been mooted; Potter won, they died, and now they served a Prince much more powerful than any self-styled Dark Lord could ever imagine.

"What's your title, again?" she asked, crossing to his desk with that saucy strut that would've had a mortal man slobbering enough to fill a swimming pool. "Still just a Tempter Third Class, aren't you?"

"Not for much longer." He snatched the work order out her hand and scanned it over. Yes, Pansy Parkinson had attained Succubus status, and yes, she'd been assigned to him; they'd even backdated the thing to make it look prompt. Bless them all. "No, Pansy, you will have the privilege of participating in the damnation scheme of the century."

"Bigger than Microsoft?"

"It'll make that Muggle rabble look like a monastic order by comparison," Draco assured her. "Not to mention make me the biggest name Below. You should be honored to have a chance to participate."

He looked up; she had found his manual and was flipping through it. "So this is what you tempters do all day? How boring."

"Give me that!" *Damnation for Dummies* went back in its drawer, and he glared at her. "Temptation is an intensive and complex process, Parkinson. I wouldn't expect you to appreciate it or anything more complex than 'lay back and spread,' come to think of it."

He expected her to get indignant, but she merely turned her chin up and smiled. "Which would explain why you went crying to Personnel for the urgent help of a skilled seductress."

Oh, bless her, bless her, bless her *straight* to Heaven. "There's been a minor complication," he growled. "A speed bump. A glitch. An unforeseen development. A bud that is in sore need of nipping"

"I get the idea already." She sat down on the end of his bed and arranged her short-cropped robes to show the maximum amount of thigh. "So what is this brilliant scheme of yours?"

Draco adjusted his tie and adopted his best stage presence. "It's a mass-torture project, one right out of the War. There'll be suicides, heart attacks, rioting in the streets; every Quidditch fan in Britain is going to get a little dark spot on his soul." He glanced over to make sure she was listening; she nodded him on. "You see, I've got half the wizarding world or more drooling under the illusion that the Chudley Cannons are going to win the League Cup one of those sickly-sweet fairy tales of the underdogs rising to greatness through hard work and dedication and blah, blah, blah. They're eating it up, they're absolutely mad for it; and I'm going to snatch it all away before you can say 'Ron Hardy.'"

"Hardy..." Pansy frowned for a moment. "I know that name. Some Quidditch player, isn't he? Clarence yammered on about him endlessly."

Draco scowled at her lack of overawed appreciation. "Who the Hell is Clarence?"

"My last assignment." She began to absently file her nails. "I had to wrap it up early to get here and report to you. He jumped out a window."

"That's good, isn't it?"

She looked at him coolly. "I was aiming for the roof."

"Well, here's your big chance." Draco began to pace; it was a habit he'd picked up from his father, who had always been able to make it seem ominous and stately. Draco usually just looked fidgety and nervous. Of course, he wasn't buried up to his nostrils in feces Below, either, so he generally considered himself the more successful one in the family. "Hardy's one of mine. He's the key to everythinghe's the trigger man, fall guy, the main player. I string the team and their fans along until the last minute, then force him to throw a game against Tutshill; without him, the Tornados will eat those clowns alive and spit out the bones, without even breaking a sweat."

"Not bad," Pansy allowed. "Who was he before you got to him?"

He smirked. "D'you remember a Ron Weasley from school?"

Her eyes got appropriately wide, finally. "You've got to be kidding me. You reeled in Weasley?"

"Hook, line and sinker, as the Americans say."

Pansy shook her head. "I don't believe it. He was one of the worst of that lotalmost as bad as Potter and that Mudblood they ran with."

"Ah, yes, but I had one up over him." He leaned against the wall and inspected his fingernails, enjoying how impressed she was. "I just played on his fiendish frequencies."

"His what?"

"Fiendish frequencies." Obviously the concept was far over the head of a mere succubus; he was hardly surprised. "All mortals have themthe things that make them mad, or stupid, or just provoke emotions so primitive they completely bypass the brain and the conscious on their way to the guts. They're a tempter's best friend and greatest tool."

"Really." She looked unimpressed. "Doesn't seem too much different from sex."

He snorted. "On a gross level, perhapsbut temptation is all about psychology. You may damn a man, but I get him to damn himself, and do it gladly. In Weasley's particular case, it was almost too easya touch of inadequacy, a dash of jealousy, and healthy dose of pride had him eating out of my hand."

Pansy put her file away and smiled thinly. "Well, congratulations, Draco. I never thought I'd see the day when a Weasley sold out."

"Er..." Now how was he to put this? He cleared his throat. "That's sort of where the problem lies."

"You mean he *didn't* sell?" she asked with narrowed eyes.

He sighed. "Look, the truth is I let the stupid ginger oaf talk me into an...an *escape clause*, of all things."

Her perfectly shaped eyebrows went up higher than he thought possible. "An escape clause?" she echoed faintly. "Are you out of your tiny mind, Malfoy?"

"It was a moment of weakness," he said snapped. "It won't happen again."

"No, because if word of this gets out Below, you'll be joining your father in the shit pit for couple of centuries."

"And *that* is why I sent for you." He decided to play the victim; demons didn't normally have any sympathies, but she might enjoy embarrassing him enough to agree. "Pansy, darling, please. I need you. I'm desperate. Weasley is getting out of hand he's been sneaking out, he won't listen to a blessed word I say, he's ignoring direct orders...I can't control him like this. He's been going back to Potter's place, Pansy, *Potter!* That specy bastard's got excess grace coming out of his arsehole! If they start getting chummy again, and some of old Scarhead's virtue rubs off on him, Weasley might actually start to *think* about what he's done, and then he'll feel bad about it, and then we're all of us off to Heaven in a hand basket!"

She smirked. "Perhaps you should've thought of all that before you decided to use a Gryffindor as your fall guy."

He growled. "Parkinson, these robes are Italian. Do not make me kneel."

She took a compact out of her handbag and examined her face in the mirror. "Wellll...since you do beg so prettily..."

"Excellent." Not that he'd ever doubted her compliance, of course. He rubbed his hands together briskly. "Though, I'll warn you, this Weasley in particular is almost as stubborn as he is ignorant."

Pansy raised her eyebrows at him. "I didn't make Class B for nothing, Malfoy. I promise you, once I've been at him, Weasley won't remember his own name, much less Potter or his other little mates."

"You realize I'll hold you to that." Draco straightened his tie and picked up his cloak and scarf. "As it stands, I've got a press conference to run in half an hour, so I can't give you a full briefing"

"All I need is a easy cash and a clear shot," she said, folding her arms.

"Fine, fine..." He fished the funny piece of Muggle plastic he'd been issued out of his pocket and tossed it to her. "Keep the receipts, though. This is going on my expenses and the last thing I need is a memo from Accounting."

"Oh, keep your hair on."

"You know as well as I do what they do to demons down in Accounting."

She flashed him a saccharine smile. "You've got my help and my silence, Malfoy. Now stay out of my way."

Pansy strutted out of the room with Draco's hopes and his credit card in her hand. "I'm probably going to regret this," he mumbled under his breath, before departing with *Damnation for Dummies* tucked under his arm.

-x-X-x-X-x-

Ron watched the lights flick one, one by one, in the grungy old building. This wasn't a neighborhood he would normally want to be hanging around alone after dark, but he was willing to risk a confrontation with a Muggle mugger. He waited until the alley window he was interested in lit up. His old flat. Harry's flat. Harry.

Malfoy would kill him for continuing to come here. Ron didn't much care, though he had become a bit more discreet on these outings. He came as often as he could get away, to pace around the block of this building and watch these windows, wondering what was going on upstairs. The curiosity and the uncertainty had gotten worse and worse as the weeks wore on, and now it was nearly unbearable. Was Harry all right? Was he angry? Had two months of separation been as beneficial as his brother had claimed, or was Harry still waking up at noon and eating the cornflakes out of the box? Was he even still *there*?

Turning up his collar against a damp breeze, Ron walked around the perimeter of the building, unwilling to leave but too nervous to go inside. Again, he imagined himself climbing the dim stairs that smelled faintly of urine, slipping down the dirty hallway pockmarked with burnt-out bulbs and odd stains in the carpet, knocking on Harry's door just to check on things, mind. Just to see if Harry was still okay. Because if Harry *wasn't* okay, then Malfoy could take his contract and shove it out his arsehole thought his nose. But even if he went up to see Harry, he knew Harry wouldn't see *him* would only see the skin he was wearing, not the old friend who lived inside it. As long as he had Ron Hardy's face and voice, he might as well be a complete stranger for all that Harry would know or care.

And maybe that was a good thing.

The thought brought Ron up short in front of a blinded window, and he studied his reflection in it while he thought. Maybe it would be a good thing to approach Harry in the guise of a stranger. If he was still angry over Ron's abrupt departure if, God forbid, he hated him for it it might be better to appear to him as a stranger. Safer, too. If Ron Weasley no longer had a place in Harry's life, Ron Hardy might have a chance to make one because who wouldn't be interested in a handsome and talented Quidditch star, especially compared to a Ministry "clerical assistant"?

And if Harry by some miracle wasn't angry...

Ron circled back around and looked at the alley windows. Light still burned in Harry's. It was all a matter of approach, of getting close to him without making it seem like he was trying to get close; Harry had been used for his fame too many times, had gotten too cautious, and one false move would ruin him. Malfoy would go absolutely starkers, of course, but Ron didn't give a damn, bad choice of words there didn't give a *shit* what the demon thought, not where Harry was concerned. Because death and damnation and contracts aside, when it came down to it Malfoy was still an enemy, and Harry was still...just about everything, to Ron.

He turned down the block again and hurried away, heading for a place he could safely Disapparate. He smiled a little to himself in anticipation, ignoring the hard-eyed young Muggle men loitering on a corner, mind already spinning with way he could arrange to meet his old friend for the first time.

A Man Doesn't Know

Chapter Summary

Harry gets an unexpected visitor. Or two.

"This the last of it?" George Weasley asked, hefting a cardboard carton onto his shoulder.

Harry, who'd spent nearly the entire operation staring out the rain-blotted window into the alley, didn't even look up. "I think so." George headed out the door, and Hermione crossed the room to stand at Harry's side. To his credit, he didn't even try to ignore the steel-penetrating glare she was giving him. "What is it, Hermione?"

"He's not coming back," she told him bluntly.

"The Hell he's not."

"Harry" He walked away from her, flopping down in an armchair to start into the sputtering fireplace they'd magicked into the wall. "Damn it, Harry Potter, look at me and try listening to some sense. Ron's been gone for almost three months. *Three months*, without so much as a hummingbird to let us know where he is or how he is or anything. We've been up and down the country with a fine-toothed comb and found not hide nor hair of him"

He met her eyes, staring with an intensity that would've thrown a lesser witch off her stride. "He told me he was coming back," he said mulishly. "Therefore, he's going to come back."

"As admirable as your faith in him is"

"Compared to your lack of it?"

She clenched her fists. "He left, Harry," she said shortly. "He abandoned his job, he abandoned his family, he abandoned us. Maybe he had his reasons the point is, it's not healthy for you to hang onto his things like some shrine, or something. You're going to have to face up to it eventually, he's gone for good."

She expected him to snap and argue with her. Instead he sighed and took off his glasses, rubbing the bridge of his nose where they pinched. "Say what you like, Hermione," he said, sounding much too old and tired for his age. "If that's what you really think everything I know about Ron tells me that he's going to come back."

"Everything *I* know says he shouldn't have left in the first place," she said, but couldn't summon much in the way of ire.

"I know that. Believe me..." He stared at the wall, at an old Cannons poster he'd refused to let the twins take away with Ron's other things. "You know, in a strange way, I'm grateful."

"What?"

He put his glasses back on and stood up so he could face her. "I said I'm grateful that he left. I finally saw...it was like, I'd been living so long in the middle of a crisis, once it was over there was nothing left for me to do but wait around for the next one...I was using him, Hermione, and everyone else around me. He put up with it for so long, he never said a word I don't blame him for leaving like he did. I'm grateful as Hell, in fact..."

His voice broke, and Hermione put her arm around him, but in the next instant someone knocked on the front door. Probably one of the twins, ready to inflict more complaints on Harry about living in a Muggle flat where they couldn't Apparate. She called over her shoulder, "For Heaven's sake, just come in! It's unlocked!"

It wasn't Fred or George who stepped into the flat, however, but a handsome man with sandy hair and a wet cloak folded over his arm. He spotted her and Harry standing near the kitchen, and she thought she caught a fleeting expression of something like relief on his face. "Uhhello," he said, twisting the ends of his lurid orange scarf through his fingers.

Hermione recovered first and stepped forward to meet him; she realized a moment later that she'd situated herself between Harry and this new stranger. How appropriate. "I'm sorry, I thought you were someone else, can we help you?"

"Yeah, in fact. I'm that is, someone told me that there was a room" He was addressing her, but his eyes kept straying over to Harry, who'd retreated partway into the kitchen but kept peeking around the corner like a curious child. "I mean, I'm looking for a place to stay in London, nothing too expensive...and I heard that someone here...was looking for a flatmate...." He trailed off rather limply into silence.

"I'm sorry," she said, "you must have the wrong flat, nobody here is"

"What's your name?" Harry popped around the corner, with his fringe flattened down so far she was surprised he could see past it.

The sandy-haired stranger smiled, but faltered nervously. "I'm RonRon Hardy," he said, offering Harry his hand.

"Harry...Evans," Harry said, with a small smile of his own.

Hermione watched them shake hands with suspicion. Harry had never been good at reading people, and normally around strangers he was either shy to the point of rudeness or suspicious and surly. "Like I said, I think you're in the wrong flat," she told the newcomer firmly.

"No, this is it," he replied, without even looking at the number on the door. In fact, he didn't look at anything but Harry.

She cleared her throat. "Out of curiosity, who told you about the room?"

"Told me?" He blinked in confusion, and finally let go of Harry's hand. "Oh, aboutuh, yeah, some bloke in the lobby mentioned it."

She smiled. "What did he look like?"

The stranger stammered for a moment, and she thought she had him there that he surely had some nefarious ulterior motive but Harry sighed and rolled his eyes. "Did he have red hair and freckles?" he asked. "About my height, carrying a box?"

"Yes! Yes, he was!" the newcomer said quickly, and Hermione wanted to smack them both.

"I thought so," Harry said. "They've been bothering me about that for a while one of them probably just decided to take matters into his own hands."

The man glanced warily at Hermione. "So, are you looking or not?"

Harry shrugged, and Hermione decided to stop this nonsense then and there. She seized him by the arm and dragged him into his bedroom, calling over her shoulder, "Excuse us a minute!" Once the door was shut, she turned to Harry and hissed, "You are *not* seriously considering this."

He folded his arms over his chest. "You're the one who says I need to move on."

"Harry, we don't know anything about this man! For all we know, he's...he's some reporter, or a stalker, or a Death Eater in disguise!"

"Or maybe he's a perfectly nice fellow who needs a place to sleep in the city."

"Be *reasonable* here!"

"Stop being so paranoid!" he shot back. "I'd like to give him a chance, Hermione. He...it's almost like I've met him before, you know? What's that called?"

"Déjà vu," she supplied. "Harry, I don't want you to end up regretting this."

He rolled his eyes at her. "I don't need you protecting me from the big bad world, Hermione." And before she could argue, he slipped back into the living room. She followed directly behind.

The newcomer was standing by one of the chairs in the main room, one hand resting on the back, looking thoroughly lost in thought and strangely sad. He jumped when he noticed them, and Hermione thought she saw a flash of guilt cross his face or maybe she *was* just being paranoid. Harry gestured in the direction of Ron's old room, which they'd spent the day clearing out. "My, er, my other flatmate is out of the country for a while, but until he gets back I do have an extra room."

"Oh, that'll be fine," then man said. "That's great I mean, I travel a lot, so I won't even be around for two or three weeks at a time."

"You'll have to move out when he gets back," Harry said hesitantly.

He smiled in what Hermione found a highly suspicious manner, and looked away. "Oh, I don't think that'll be a problem."

They disappeared into Ron's old room, and Harry shut the door with a significant look at her. A moment later, Fred and George stomped up the stairs, shaking the rain from their hats and coats. "Blimey, that's a long climb up," George panted. "What's Harry got against buildings with working lifts, anyway?"

Fred shook like a dog, spraying water all over the room. "Where is Harry, anyway?" he asked.

"Interviewing a possible new flatmate."

They looked at one another with eyebrows up. "Already?" Fred asked.

"What'd you say to him?" George asked.

She tilted her head, not happy to have her suspicions confirmed. "You're saying neither of you had anything to do with this?"

Fred put his hands up. "Don't look at us, honest. We've been scaling the stairs for the last three hours."

She rolled her eyes at him; George looked at the closed bedroom door with his brows knit. "Who is he, then?"

"Some American. He said his name was Harper or something...."

Harry emerged, and for the first time in four months she could remember, he was smiling. A little wishfully, a little sadly, but he was smiling, and for that reason alone Hermione was almost willing to let her concerns slide. "He's going to take the room," he informed them all cheerfully. "He's just checking out the furniture. Which one of you was it that sent him up?"

"Neither," Hermione said.

He didn't even have the good sense to look alarmed. "Maybe it was someone else. then. There's loads of red-haired men in London."

"Harry, I really think"

She stopped short when the door opened, and Harry's new roommate poked his head out. "Harry, d'you think I could" He stopped abruptly when he spotted Fred and George, who stared back for a moment, then put their heads together conspiratorially.

"What is it?" Harry asked, looking at the twins warily.

"UhI, I just wanted to know if I could put the bed against the other wall. You know, away from the window."

"Sure," Harry said. "That's where it used to be, we just moved it to clean up..."

"Right. Uh, thanks."

They smiled at each other, and Hermione was about to interrupt with a few more pointed questions when she was nearly bowled to the floor by a pair of red-haired projectiles. The twins converged on the sandy-haired stranger, shouldering Harry aside, with identical grins on identical faces. "You're Ron Hardy, aren't you?" Fred said, poking him sharply in the chest.

He winced. "Uh....yeah. That's me."

The twins suddenly whooped and jumped, scaring her half to death. "I don't believe it!" George crowed. "I don't bloodyHermione, you silly girl, this isn't any *Harper*! This is Ron Hardy! Merlin's balls, this is brilliant!"

"We were at the game on Tuesday," Fred said eagerly, "that catchamazing! We thought you were going to snuff it for sure!"

"I have a bet with my brother here," George added. "When you were tracking Michaelson in the second hour, were you close enough to touch her?"

"Hold on a minute!" Hermione said, putting herself between the overeager twins and their bewildered-looking target. "Who's Ron Hardy?"

"Him!" Fred said, nearly putting Harry's eye out with his pointing finger.

George sighed. "He's only the greatest Quidditch player of the century, Hermione. Don't you read the papers?"

The greatest Quidditch player of the century blushed to the roots of his hair and inched sideways, so his back was no longer against the wall. "That's a bit excessive," he said uneasily.

"Oh, don't be modest!" George insisted. "You've got the Cannons on their longest winning streak since 1875! You're fifth the league! Is it true the Tornados offered you a thousand Galleons a game to replace Jenkins?" Hardy mumbled, and a fierce blush crept up his neck.

Fred laughed and shook his head. "This is unbelievable. Harry Potter and Ron Hardy living in the same flat! Someone will have to put Rita Skeeter on a bloody leash!"

Harry flinched, but surprisingly, Hardy just rolled his eyes. "She belongs on one," he mumbled, "and in a kennel instead of a press room."

"D'you want to go get your things?" Harry asked, pushing the twins back with anything but subtlety. "Or, well, just let me know when you want to move in."

"Now is good." Hardy threw the end of his scarf over his shoulder and quickly fastened his cloak. "I don't really have that much, so it's not like it's going to take long."

"We'll run back down and get some of Ron's old Quidditch stuff decorate the room a bit," George said happily.

"Our brother Ron," Fred explained to Hardy. "The one who used to live here. Biggest Cannons fan in the world, he was. Absolutely pathetic."

Hermione wondered why this Ron looked so ashamed to hear it. "Er I bet he is."

George nodded. "Too bad he didn't stick around to see *you* come to play! Wherever he is, I bet you he's kicking himself now!"

Quietly, almost to himself, Ron Hardy whispered, "Absolutely."

-x-X-x-X-x-

Ron snapped his suitcase shut and tucked it under the bed, out of sight. Turning around, he surveyed the room with a smile. If he overlooked the little details, like the color of the bedding and the Cannons pennants where photographs should've been, the room was exactly the same as he'd left it. Who would've thought he'd ever be glad to be back here? But after he and Harry had collected his things from his hotel room, after they'd chased out the twins and make some excuse to Hermione, and he'd had time to settle in a bit...once he was actually alone with Harry again, it felt like home.

Harry knocked once and poked his head in; his eyes bugged a little, and Ron wondered if he recognized something about the room. But the moment passed, and Harry stepped into the doorway, leaning against the frame. "Everything all right?" he asked.

"Everything's fine." Ron gave the room one last glance-over. "Did you need something?"

"Oh yeah, I was just, there's this Indian take-away down the block and I was going to order some" His stammering was cut off by a sudden pounding at the door. "What the Hell is that?"

"Got me."

Ron followed him to the door, but hung back a bit when Harry answered it. "Can I help you?" he asked curiously.

The voice that answered made the hairs on the back of Ron's neck stand up. "I'm from the Ministry of Magic," someone said someone pale and short and barely disguised by a thick pair of glasses perched on his pointy little nose.

"What's the problem?" Harry asked, far less politely and with no sign of recognition.

Malfoy held up a short scroll. "New decree for Muggle secrecy. Effective today, it is no longer permitted for two or more unmarried wizards or witches to cohabitate together on Muggle property without an approved chaperone over the age of fifty."

"What?"

Ron leapt in before Harry could get too worked up or before Malfoy could give them another reason to strangle him. "Let me talk to him," he said quickly, "I think I can handle this, just let me talk"

"Did you hear what he?"

"Five minutes," Ron pleaded, then slipped out the door and shut it. He rounded on Malfoy with his fists clenched. "Just what the fuck do you think you're doing here?"

"I was about to ask the same question," Malfoy growled. "Didn't I order you specifically to stay away from here?"

"And didn't I tell you I wasn't following any orders of yours?"

Malfoy yanked his glasses off dramatically and got up in Ron's face, apparently trying to be intimidating. "Bless it, Weasley, I am not going to tell you this twice. You are not to shack up with Potter!"

"*Shack up?*" Ron echoed. "And if I decide I am?"

"Do you think your reception would've been half as friendly if you'd been in your own skin, Weasley?" Draco said softly. "Do you think Potter's really going to forgive you for abandoning him?"

"I didn't" Ron stopped himself, thought for a moment. "You wouldn't dare."

"Wouldn't I?"

"I thought I was the only wizard in Britain you could trust with your little plan." he asked

"Plans can change," Malfoy said after a pause, but his neck and ears were flushing pink; Ron had scored a point and he knew it. *Check, you son of a bitch*, he thought.

"Look, Malfoy," Ron said, "I've been putting up with an awful lot of shit from you"

"Me?" the demon squeaked indignantly. "*You've* been putting up with *me*? You seem remarkably prone to forgetting who's in charge here, Weasel. I gave you everything you have."

Ron folded his arms defiantly. "And I'd have no trouble giving it back," he snapped.

Malfoy's eyes narrowed, and he took a step back, watching Ron carefully. "You're bluffing," he said finally. "You wouldn't dare."

Ron's mind worked furiously. He assumed the escape clause worked on demand meaning he really could walk away, right here, right now. But the Cannons were still wallowing in the middle of the standings, and they had a European trip coming up, not to mention two more matches versus Tutshill. And Harrywell, he seemed loads better and he was clearly awaiting Ron's proper return, but a little niggling doubt lingered in the back of Ron's mind. He needed

to know for certain that he wasn't going to be chased out of the flat again with an axe when he came back for real.

And, well, when he got right down to it...in spite of the journalists, and Malfoy, and the scary fans and the surreality of it all...he didn't really want to stop being Ron Hardy. He didn't want to stop playing with the Cannons. Not just yet, anyway.

So he stared Malfoy down and raised his chin and said, "Keep it up, Malfoy, and we'll find out." But he knew, and knew Malfoy knew, that the battle was a draw. For now.

The demon sneered and put his false glasses back on. "Fine, then. Enjoy it while it lasts." Ron watched him walk away, wondering why that cryptic little remark made him feel so uneasy.

Harry poked his head out the door, wand in hand. "Is he gone?" he asked, scowling.

"Oh, yeah" Ron said, praying that he sounded convincing. "Just some weird prankster, it turns out. There's no such decree."

For a moment he thought Harry wasn't buying it, but once again he just shook his head at it all, and put his wand in his back pocket. "Nutters," he grumbled.

"Yeah." Ron slipped back into the flat and reached for his coat. He'd worry about Malfoy later. "Now, you said something about a curry?"

Whatever Pansy Wants

Chapter Summary

Ron meets a very enthusiastic and persistent fan.

"Down! Let me *down!*" Ron cried, trying to dodge light fixtures without falling off the shoulders of his teammates. Being carried off the field was all well and good in theory, but in practice the complications simply weren't worth it. Unfortunately, he couldn't make himself heard over the chorus of five people singing "We Shall Conquer" at the top of their collective lungs, plus Brajnikoff, who didn't even know the words, or the language.

They finally let him down in the locker room, where Wood gave him a congratulatory clap on the back that nearly knocked him over. "That was genius, Ron, pure genius! You're a miracle worker!"

"You weren't so bad yourself," he said. "That penalty catch"

Oliver snorted. "Please. That was nothing. You're the star here it's like we can't lose with you!"

Stebbins interrupted Ron's rebuttal by jumping onto the bench; he struck a hero's pose and preened. "Ladies and gentleman, I give you the man who brought down Eleanor Harkins!"

Killjoy actually *smiled*. "You know, Paul, you very nearly resembled a Beater today."

"And *you* nearly resembled a human being," Macelwrath said, less snarky than usual. "Thank you ever so much for letting the rest of us have a turn with the Quaffle, by the way."

"Chudley beats the almighty Tutshill and puts their top scorer in St. Mungo's." Stebbins started to dance. "I should have that tattooed on my arse."

Wood cringed. "Too much information, Paul."

Funt, who had given way to grinning quietly from ear to ear, suddenly spoke up. "We beat the Tornados by over three hundred points. That puts us ahead of Ballycastle and Puddlemere..."

Ron did the math in his head, but Stebbins had already jumped down and attempted to kiss Oliver on the mouth. "*Third place!*" he shrieked. "We're third in the league!"

The shouting started over again, louder and more exuberant than ever before; they hugged each other and jumped and screamed themselves hoarse. This had to be the happiest third-place team Ron had ever seen.

Not that he wasn't happy, too. It had only been a few days since he'd moved back in with Harry, and it almost felt like he'd never left. Well, actually, it was, but the differences were all for the good. Harry was *backa* little quieter, a little sadder, but more or less the same boy Ron had known in school, his old friend. And he wasn't angry. That was the best part. Ron hadn't had the guts to bring up the subject directly, but every day he was more and more certain that if he came back with his real face, he wouldn't get thrown out on his arse.

And in the meantime, he and Harry had slipped easily back into friendship, or, actually, Harry had warmed up to Ron Hardy with surprising speed. It was so familiar, so *comfortable*, that Ron occasionally forgot he was meant to be playing a part. It wasn't much of a problem with Harry himself, who often didn't even notice, but the twins hung around at all hours angling for autographs, and they were a bit more difficult to deceive. And Hermione, of course, was impossible. But on the balance Ron didn't think he'd ever been happier, and he intended to enjoy it while it lasted.

He took his time changing, enjoying the high spirits of his teammates. Just as he was getting the last of his padding off, Malfoy sauntered in with a cigarette and an unpleasant grin. "Congratulations!" he called out by way of greeting. "Excellent game, gentleman...lady...And Ron!" He clasped Ron's shoulder roughly. "Excellent work. I'm proud of you, very proud."

"I'm sure you are, Mr. Applegate," Ron said, forcing a smile at the demon.

Suddenly Funt began to cough and wheeze, clutching at his throat. "Oh, bollocks" Macelwrath, who was already in her street robes, seized him by the arm and guided him out the back door. "Mr. Applegate, you know what that smoke does to him."

"Sorry," Malfoy said, and took another drag.

He hung around while all the other players filtered out, a tacit signal that Ron ought to as well. "Performed impressively today, didn't they?" he asked quietly, watching Brajnikoff meticulously fold his uniform. "One wouldn't even guess that you're carrying the lot of them."

"That's because I'm not," Ron growled, kicking off his shoes.

"Aren't you?"

"I didn't touch the Quaffle today," Ron growled, "and I definitely didn't knock Harkins off her broom."

"And just what do you think inspired such feats of greatness?" Malfoy nodded politely as Brajnikoff exited, leaving them alone with the lockers and benches. "You've the one who'd made this team great, Weasley. One good Seeker, remember?"

Ron didn't like to hear his own words spun back at him, and he definitely didn't like what Malfoy was implying. After all, surely he, the least of the Weasleys, couldn't possibly have any influence over the likes of Oliver Wood, Vassily Brajnikoff or Anne Macelwrath...? He couldn't; but superstar Seeker Ron Hardy could, and did. They were ecstatic just to make it into the top three, and they attributed it all to him. Talk about pressure...

"We might be get into second place by the time we get back from Europe, you know," he said, striving for a change of subject. "Funt's figured it all out. If Holyhead beats Applebee next week and Ballycastle beats Holyhead, there's a chance about a Snitch either way."

Malfoy nodded like he cared. "Hmmm, yes. Excellent possibility. Tell me, Ron, did you notice the rather fetching girl sitting with me in the top box at today's match?"

"Er..." He racked his brain; he'd been concentrating more on the Snitch rather than the spectators. "I think so."

The demon smiled and let smoke trail out of his nose. "Well, it turns out she's quite a fan of yours. She wants to meet you."

"So does everyone else in Britain," Ron said. "What's so special about her?"

"Nothing at all, really, nothing at all..." Malfoy rocked back on his heels, looking at the closed lockers instead of Ron's face. "She's not bad at all, though. Sweet young thing. It would be good for your public image."

Ron checked his watch; it was nearly six o'clock, and the game had started at ten the morning. "I'm tired, Malfoy, and I've got somewhere to be soon."

"A date with Potter?"

Now, why did it sound so...well, *unsavory* coming from his mouth? "You can skip the lecture," he said bluntly.

Surprisingly, though, Malfoy laughed. "No, no, Weasley I've changed my mind about that. You do whatever it is that makes you happy. I'm sure you can hold your own with Scarhead and friends." He caught a glimpse of Ron's expression and quickly changed the subject. "But this girl, Weasley it'll only take a few minutes. Please?"

Ron was perfectly willing to tell Malfoy what to do with this girl, but he'd wrangled with the demon often enough these past few weeks that he knew how to pick his battles. "All right," he sighed. "Just let me finish changing."

Malfoy clapped him on the shoulder. "That's my Weasel. I'll just go get her, shall I?"

Wherever he'd stashed this special girl, it didn't take long for Malfoy to come back with her; Ron had barely got his trousers buttoned all the way. "Ron, my boy," Malfoy said with a smile that was lost on Ron completely, "I'd like you to meet my friend Lola."

Lola smiled and Lola blushed, and Ron had a difficult time looking anywhere else in the room. She was...well, *gorgeous* didn't begin to encompass it. She was *perfect*, every contour, every line of her like a dream stepped into the flesh, from her golden tan to her smoky eyes to her enormous, round, heaving

"Hello, Mister Hardy," she said demurely in a musical tropical accent, offering him a hand. Ron's head snapped up and he blinked stupidly at her for a moment, then gingerly shook with her. Her brow even furrowed gracefully. "I am so honored to make your acquaintance."

"Uh," said Ron.

Malfoy grinned from ear to ear. "Ron Hardy, Senorita Lolita Banana. She was Miss Wizarding West Indies in 1997."

Lola fluttered her eyelashes and looked away. "Mister Applegate is bragging."

"Only telling the truth, darling." Malfoy patted her on the shoulder and glanced at his watch. "Well, will you look at the time! I've got places to go, things to do...you'll keep Miss Banana company, won't you, Ron?"

"Uh," he said.

"Of course you will." Malfoy paused at the door of the locker room to tamp out his cigarette. "Have fun!"

Lola smiled at Ron, who finally got his brain back in gear. This woman was as confounding as a Veela and twice as gorgeous; he wondered if she was going to try to eat him later. "Uh, it's a, it's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Banana," he stammered, offering her his hand before he remembered they'd already shaken.

She laughed, a glorious sound, and leaned towards him. "The pleasure is all mine, Mister Hardy. I am very humbled to be meeting so great an athlete as you."

He felt his face warming and tore his eyes away from her. "It's, um, I'm not really...d'you want to sit down?"

She smiled, and sat on the bench. "So this is where you all get ready?" she asked, looking around the locker room like it was utterly fascinating.

"Er...yeah, this is where we change clothes and, and stuff." He winced at his own banality. "It's not that interesting."

"Ohwhat are those?" Lola pointed at something stacked on top of the locker, and before Ron could ask her what she meant, she'd climbed up onto the bench and grabbed it. He had a moment to admire the acrobatic sensibility it took to climb anything in spiked heels, before he realized she was holding Stebbins' athletic supporter by the strap. "What is this, Mister Hardy?"

"Nothing!" he yelped, and grabbed it, before he remembered where it had been and threw it to the ground. "It's, er, it's just some...equipment, that we wear. Um. It's not that interesting."

"Oh." She actually looked disappointed for a moment, before she looked at the ground below her and held out her arms. "You help me down?"

"Uh...sure..."

Ron took a deep breath and placed his hands on her slender waist, with the innocent intention of lifting her down off the bench. But Lola threw her arms around his neck, pulled him forward, and used his body like a slide. She was wearing clingy, filmy robes that left just

enough to the imagination, and he felt every perfect curve acutely as she eased herself down his front. She was soft in all the right places and firm in all the others, and smelled faintly of wildflowers and girl things. She fit against him smoothly, and once her feet hit the floor she leaned up to his ear and breathed on it as she whispered, "Thank you, Mr. Ron."

He couldn't have leapt away faster if her purse had started ticking. "Uh, d'you want to, uh, go get some candy?"

"Candy?" she echoed, brow furrowing again.

"Yeah, candy." Candy was, in fact, a brilliant idea; anything to get them into a public place. "There's a stand that sells it upstairs, and they're open pretty long after the matches, and I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

"I don't think I would like any candy," she said, stepping closer. "A girl has got to watch her figure."

"Oh, I can watch it for you" He cringed. He had not just said that.

But he had, though Lola only laughed. "Oh, Ron! You are too sweet."

"I am?"

She twined her arms around his neck, once again getting far too close for comfort. "You're very honest," she said earnestly.

"Uh...yeah, sure."

"I like a man who does not brag about himself," she sighed, and stroked the side of his neck with the tip of one lacquered nail as she eased closer.

He tried to back away. "I, uh, I...you know, MalAppmy manager, he"

"Would you like to take me out dancing tonight?"

Ron's back hit a locker; he was trapped between cold steel and warm flesh. "I don't dance," he croaked.

Lola grinned, and leaned closer. "I can teach you..."

"M-M-Mr. Coulter likes us well-rested," he stammered, trying to dodge those ripe red lips. "You know, in b-bed early..."

She grinned mere inches from his face. "Oh, I can arrange that, too."

Oh, holy shit. Ron gave up being the gentleman and pushed her back, dodging sideways. He tried to keep it in his head that this Lola woman only wanted him because he was famousunfortunately, certain parts of his body were just happy that she wanted him at all. He took a deep breath that didn't calm him in the slightest. "Miss Banana," he said crisply, "I'm sorry. You're aa lovely girl, really. It's just, well, I already had plans this evening, at home."

Something in her face darkened. "Home?" she echoed with a pout.

"Yeah." Ron tried to sound apologetic, even as he backed away towards his locker. "I kind of promised."

"You want to hurt my feelings?" she asked, pouting a little.

"Well...no" Damn, but she was making this hard. *Difficult*. God. "It's just, well...look, you're really a nice girl and all, and if I was two people I'd love to stay, but I'm not, and...and there's some place else I'm meant to be." He snatched his bag with one hand and his cloak in the other, and slipped out of the room as quickly as he could, heading for the nearest Apparation area, and his flat, and Harry.

-x-X-x-X-x-

Draco stepped out of his hiding place and glared at Pansy. "That was pathetic," he snapped. "I thought you didn't make Class B for nothing?"

She glared back before snatching up her handbag. "So I made a miscalculation."

"Miscalculation!" He goggled at her; did succubi have to surrender their brains as part of their training? "Pansy, you threw yourself at him like a bitch in heat. What was calculated about that?"

"You didn't give me enough time," she mumbled, and pulled a cigarette out of the air.

"I gave you over a week," he reminded her. "That should've been plenty of time. And what do you come up with? 'Ooooh, Meester Hhhahdy, hyoo are so seeeexy, voulez-vous coucher avec moi?'"

"That's French, you idiot," she snarled. "Look, Malfoy, I can get him, I just need more time"

"Which is *exactly* what we don't have!" he yelled. "They've got a European trip coming up, which means they get to zoom around, playing teams outside the league and padding out their standings, while their competition tear at each other's throats back here. If they get more than a Snitch ahead of Tutshill, they'll have the Cup in the bag, my plan will be ruined, Weasley will use the escape clause to go off and live in nauseatingly perfect harmony with Pott-head and the rest of his red-haired rabble, and *I* will spend the next *six hundred years* buried up to my *neck* in *SHIT!*"

She winced and blew a trail of smoke in his face. "You're the one who made him so good," she said. "Why don't you just...well, take it back? "

He rolled his eyes. "Because, you miserable strumpet, it's part of the contract. I get his soul, he gets to be the greatest player in history. If I shave so much as an *ounce* of talent off the package, the whole thing's voided. Undone. *Kaputt.*"

"So what are you going to do?" she asked, throwing he butt to the floor.

He shook his head. "I'll think of something. In the meantime, do try to come up with something besides that Latin love goddess act? Something that might, I don't know, work?"

Draco left her fuming in the locker room and made his way outside. Standings, souls, succubieverything was going to Heaven on him. It would *not* do. He turned a corner and found himself face-to-face with the last two mortals he wanted to deal with at the moment.

"Why, hello, Mr. Bagman, Mr. Coulter," Draco said, smiling. "How wonderful to see you."

Bagman nodded to him, grinning like the fool he was. "Applegate! Did you see the game Ron had today? Fantastic!" The old fraud reeked of cheap champagne, and he had a moldy-looking cigar clutched between his teeth. Luckily Coulter was doing the steering.

"Indeed," Draco said politely. "He's exceeded even my expectations of him." *Unfortunately.*

"Listen," Bagman said, leaning in close. "Listen, Applegate, some of us were thinking about throwing a little party for the old boya little *shindig*, just to thank him for all he's done."

Coulter sighed, and steadied the team owner with one hand. "It can wait until the end of the season, Ludo."

"The seasons is over!" Bagman hollered, drawing the attention of several passers-by. "That Cup's already got its name on us...I mean..."

"I know what you mean," Draco said quickly. "What sort of a party did you have in mind?"

Bagman waved his hands, sketching pictures in the air that only he could interpret. "Food. Music. Let the fan clubs put on a little dance. Invite some big names, make it a ph-ph-*photo op*."

"Why not let's wait until we've got the Cup in our hands," Coulter said evenly. "I don't want to distract anyone on the team."

"Distracted?" Bagman snorted. "Who's distracted? I'm not distracted."

Big names. Fan clubs. The media. Draco's brain was already in motion. "You know, Mr. Bagman, I think a party would be a wonderful idea," he said, slinging his arm around the ignorant lush's shoulders. "We can make it a real event. Open it to the publicsell tickets! You could get as much revenue out of it as a match, maybe even more...just think of all those Galleons jingling..."

Coulter frowned at him. "I don't think it's quite cricket to sell"

"Brilliant!" Bagman boomed, grinning stupidly at them. "That's *brilliant*, Applegate! You're a genius!"

Draco smiled, and stepped away from the fumes. "I try."

"We'll do it right away..." Bagman rounded on Coulter and shook his shoulders. "We'll do it right away, you hear me?"

"We're playing in Europe for the next few weeks," Coulter said, trying to right his employer. "We won't be around to have any party."

Bagman's face fell. "Oh...hmmm...when they're back, then! We'll throw the party as soon as the team is back! We'll make it a real *bash*." He tipped his imaginary hat to Draco, then staggered off. Coulter favored the demon with a single nasty look before he followed.

A major media event, centered on Ron, bare weeks before the end of the season. Lots of guests...lots of reporters...lots of *witnesses*. Draco smiled to himself as he made for the nearest stadium exit. He couldn't have set things up better if he'd actually tried.

Our Hero

Chapter Summary

Ron goes to a party and gets a revelation, and accusation, and a very awkward moment in a cloakroom. Not in that order.

Hermione looked around the "Ron Hardy Appreciation Banquet," wincing at the sheer amount of orange. "Why did you want to come again?" she asked Harry, watching some poor underlings trying to bewitch a paper cannon.

"I thought it might be good for a laugh," he said, frowning at the crowd. "Besides, you're the one who's always on me about getting out..."

She had to give him that, though she felt he really could've picked a better place. The price of tickets to this little soiree had amounted to extortion; they'd sold out in hours anyway, and the entire building was surrounded by hordes of fans hoping for just a glimpse of the great Ronald Hardy. It astounded her how the Cannons' winning streak had captured the imagination of the wizarding world. Perhaps, after the war, they needed something as pointless as Quidditch; they'd needed to let themselves get absorbed by something other than a life-or-death struggle. That didn't stop her from being seriously alarmed by the orange old man at the gate who'd offered to show her his 'Cannon.'

"I thought he didn't want you to come," she said.

Harry shrugged. "He said he didn't care one way or another. I think the European trip got him down."

"The team's in second place, aren't they? I thought he'd be pleased."

"Yeah, but...he lost the Snitch against Vrastra, remember, and they barely squeaked ahead of Madrid and Hamburg." They ducked as the paper cannon suddenly fired, shooting a balloon the length of the hall and knocking down an ice sculpture of Ron. "I guess he feels like he hasn't played too well lately."

"Well, if he needs an ego boost, this is certainly the place." She eyed the giant poster of Hardy hanging from the wall and shook her head. "I'm going to get a drink, Harry. I may need it."

The refreshments were set up on a vast table in the back of the room, and most seemed to have escaped the color scheme. Hermione got herself some punch, and was contemplating whether to get anything for Harry when she saw two of her least favorite people in the world making their way toward the table: Rita Skeeter and Hardy's horrible manager. Fortunately,

they seemed rather engrossed with one another; as they approached the bar, she could hear Rita's sickly-sweet voice take on a strident edge.

"...only I've just *been* to Hannibal, the paper sent me, frightfully expensive..."

Applegate rolled his eyes. "That's lovely, Miss Skeeter. You gave your regards to the staff of the *Bugle*, no doubt."

"That's just it," Rita said. "There isn't any such paper as the *Bugle*, Mr. Applejack"

"Applegate," he corrected her irritably. "You ought to know it by now, you've mentioned me often enough in your column."

Rita smiled, the rhinestones in her glasses twinkling. "Ah, yes, of course I know *your* name."

Applegate narrowed his eyes at her. "What are you implying?"

"I went to Hannibal," she said, tapping her quill against her notebook. "I asked around. It seems nobody there has ever heard of your Ron Hardy. His birth isn't registered there, and his name isn't in the records of any of the wizarding schools in the United States."

"He was tutored at home," Applegate said lightly, brushing off his cuffs.

Rita scowled at him. "Mr. Applejuice, you're evading the question."

Hermione watched from a short distance as Applegate looked around carefully, as if examining the gathering crowd; he almost seemed to look directly at her through the shifting screen of backs. Then, with great drama, he turned to Rita Skeeter with his arms crossed. "Miss Skeeter, if you are ever so subtly referring to the rumor that Ron is in fact Shifty McCoy, I deny it emphatically. Now, if you'll excuse me"

"Who's Shifty McCoy?" Rita called after him, eyes lighting up. But Applegate was already walking away, and Hermione quickly lost him to the crowd. So did Skeeter, although that didn't stop her quill.

At that point, Hermione made a calculated tactical decision, and sidled up next to the reporter. "Rita. Been a while, hasn't it?"

Skeeter's eyes narrowed when she recognized her. "Granger. Not long enough."

Hermione nodded, then tilted her head in the direction Applegate had vanished to. "I overheard some of your conversation just now. You say there's no record of Ron's birth in Hannibal?"

"None at all." Rita raised one thin eyebrow at her. "You know the golden boy?"

"A bit," Hermione said. "And I've got a few suspicions of my own about him."

"Such as?"

"Well, he's got an American accent, but he doesn't speak like one," she said. "Most of them don't say 'bloody,' for example."

"Whereas Hardy uses it every third word."

"Only with you."

Rita quickly scribbled all this down. "Interesting...very interesting...you wouldn't happen to know anything about a wizard named Shifty McCoy, would you?"

Hermione almost said no, but then a thin scrap of memory drifted up. "He was a Quidditch player," she said slowly. "I think...I believe he played somewhere in Canada...he was accused by their Ministry of well, something horrid, I forget exactly what. It cause quite a scandal."

Rita was practically salivating. "What happened to him?"

"He disappeared, I think went into hiding rather than face the charges. The whole story was in the papers at the time..."

"With pictures?" Rita didn't wait for Hermione to answer her; she shoved her quill and notebook into her handbag and started jostling her way towards the exits. "Oh, yes, Mr. Applebaum, I've got you now..."

"You're headed for the archives?"

"Of course." Rita grinned, and Hermione caught a glimpse of a brassy filling. "Want to come?"

She hesitated only a moment. "I'd be glad to."

-x-X-x-X-x-

"...so when the Bludgers are flying / the score is a tie / you'll catch the Snitch for Chudley / oh, you really can fly / you're our hero 'cause..."

Ron cringed through what sounded like fifty dying cats in a centrifuge. Bagman claimed to have auditioned these acts personally; Ron thought the manager was insane. When alleged song ended, Coulter marched up on stage with a fixed grin, clapping in a strangely mechanical way. "Thank you," he said with forced joviality. "Thank you very much...ladies and gentlemen, once again, that was the Middlesex Ron Hardy Fan Club. Weren't they great?"

For a method of torture, maybe, Ron thought sourly.

"Now, our next act is from the...er..." Coulter squinted at the card in his hand. "The 'We Heart U Ron' club from...ah...I can't quite make this out here...well. Let's all give a warm welcome to our fellow fans!"

It was a welcome, though not necessarily a warm one; Bagman and Malfoy seemed to be the only ones clapping with any degree of enthusiasm, and Ron knew for that the demon, at least, enjoyed pain.

The band, after a few minutes of fumbling, struck up a song with a throbbing beat, and someone backstage brought down all the lights but a single spot in the center. Through a part in the curtains, a woman emerged: a woman with the most gorgeous figure, the most perfect body, the most purely erotic aura that Ron had ever encountered. She was skirting the edge of decency in something tight, black, and sparkly, with a tiny Snitch strategically placed over each breast; she was utterly breathtaking.

She's stalking me, he thought, and cringed.

"Lola Banana" started to dance, if you could call it that; Ron would've called a sex act looking for a partner. She rolled her hips, stretched those long legs, and bent over in time with the drums. She twirled around a brass pole and licked her lips in the most unsubtle gesture of the century. The men in the crowd, and not a few women besides, began to whistle and cheer; he noticed several mothers ushering out children, some blindfolded. Lola flaunted her body, flashing tanned skin and golden hair in every direction, and most of the men in the audience ate it up. Ron closed his eyes until the song ended.

He'd thought it was a coincidence the first few times, thought he was just letting all the star-struck fans run together in his head. Eventually, however, there was no question about it: no other woman in the world had that figure, that allure, or that nearly-psychotic tenacity. Lola Banana had followed him all over Europe, and he was starting to wonder if she was entirely mentally stable. Or maybe it was him.

When the last beat struck, Coulter raced up on stage and all but shoved Lola off into the wings, dodging the Galleons being pitched on stage. "Thank you very much...er...we're going to intermission now, so, there's refreshments located at the back of the roooooom!" The curtain, bewitched Chudley orange for the occasion, dropped nearly on his head; it wasn't quite thick enough to muffle the shouting behind it.

Ron immediately headed for the cloakroom, the first place he could think of that would give him a bit of privacy. Everywhere he turned, he saw Hardy's face, Hardy's name, the adoring fans of Hardy chasing him through the aisles; the more adulation that was heaped on Ron Hardy, the more Ron Weasley wanted to run from the room screaming. It wasn't really him they were cheering for, he realized, it was the myth Malfoy had created. He, Ron, didn't figure into the equation, and the weight of all that praise was starting to smother him. He slipped into the cloakroom and leaned against the wall, contemplating escape. But that would annoy Malfoy, not to mention Bagman and Coulter, who were still sore about his performance in Bulgaria. No, he was going have to stick this out; maybe the last few acts would go painlessly.

The door suddenly banged open, and he pressed himself flat against the wall, trying to hide without looking like he was hiding. Someone stumbled in, and a voice growled, "And see you don't return, you hear? This is a family establishment!"

"That was performance art, you bastard!" That voice Ron knew; he sighed in resignation and turned to face Lola Banana, who was fumbling with a sensible wool cloak over what she'd passed off as a costume. She rolled her eyes when she saw him. "You again. I don't suppose you're hopelessly enamoured of me of yet?"

"I was going to ask why you're following me, actually," he said coolly.

She shook her head and secured the cloak. "Just doing my job, Weasley."

Ron's jaw dropped. The moment she spoke his name, Lola Banana disappeared, or transformed; or perhaps she had simply broken some subtle spell. "P-P-Parkinson?" he stammered.

"Delighted you remember."

"But you're" Ron shook his head. "You're like Malfoy, aren't you?"

"In the broadest sense of the word." She sighed and looked at him. "The dance really didn't work?"

"No," he snapped. "Why've you been following me?"

"You noticed that?" She seemed impressed.

"When someone keeps trying to get in your robes, you start to pick up on a trend."

Pansy actually smiled. "And here I told him you'd be easy..."

"Told who? Malfoy?"

She nodded, and leaned against the wall. "He brought me in on this case, to provide a little...distraction."

"Malfoy ordered you to?"

"Is that really so surprising?"

He shook his head again. Yes, he supposed it was, because in spite of everything he'd forgotten the game they were really playing. "He wants the team to lose, doesn't he?" he asked. "That's why..."

"Why what?"

Ron bit his tongue. He hadn't told anyone else about this, because he couldn't explain without giving himself away, but since Parkinson already knew... "He was singing," he muttered. "At the match against Vrastra."

"Singing?" Her brows knit down the middle. "Not that bloody song from school?"

"Right in one." Odd how something so stupid and juvenile as *Weasley is our King* could still throw him off. It had started at Quiberon, Malfoy singing just loud enough for Ron alone to hear him. In Germany and Spain he'd started getting louder and bolder, even introducing some cruel new verses and Ron knew they were new, because he'd practically memorized the original in a fit of adolescent masochism. But the worst part had happened just days ago, in Bulgaria; Malfoy had goaded some of the Vrastra supporters into singing along with him, although most of them couldn't manage the words. The melody alone had been enough to drive Ron to distraction.

They'd ended up losing by a matter of twenty points or so; the locker room had been silent afterwards, and Ron had fled as soon as possible, unable to face his teammates. He'd seen how they'd looked at him, and at each other: not really angry, just bewildered and shocked. He didn't ever want to see it again.

Pansy shook her head, clucking her tongue. "You'd think he could've come up with something new, wouldn't you?"

"It worked, didn't it?" he grumbled.

"He's just scared," she said. "He doesn't want to lose you."

Of course. This was about contracts and conditions, not Quidditch. "And what about you?" he asked. "What do you want?"

She looked up at him, and despite her painted face, she looked a little sad. "I think I'd like to get to know you better, actually."

"Yeah. Right."

"No, really." He glanced back at her face, wondering if the sincerity in her voice was, well, sincere. "You're the first man I've met since I died who's been able to resist me. It's rather...exciting. Not in *that* way," she added, noting his expression. "What I meant is...oh, forget it."

She tried to push past him, but he caught her arm. "What?"

Pansy looked away, down at the floor, where one spangled shoe poked out from the hem of her cloak. "You make me feel...human again," she confessed, and bit her lip. Ron stared at her, searching for a reply, but the door opened again and the beautiful demon started. "Shit!" she hissed, and Disapparated right from under his fingers.

Ron spun around, ready to offer the intruder a few choice words of his own but that was Harry slipping through the door. "What are you doing here?" Ron asked, annoyance melting away.

Harry shrugged. "I thought you might be hiding in here. I've done it a few times myself."

"Not here, I meant..." Ron peeked nervously over Harry's shoulder, but no one was looking in their direction. "I said you didn't have to come."

"I wanted to." Then, as if he were startled by his own earnestness, "I mean, where else can I get completely ignored in public?"

"True." And really, something warmed inside Ron to think that Harry had subjected himself to this circus for his sake. He started towards the door, but hesitated; the cloakroom was very narrow, and the thought of squeezing past Harry to get out suddenly seemed very intimidating. "Er...d'you want to grab a drink?"

"Sure," Harry said, sounding almost as nervous as Ron felt...though there was really no reason for it. They were just two blokes in a cloakroom, after all. Two friends, in a rather dark cloakroom. A confined space, where no one was very likely to interrupt them for a while... "Hermione she came with me she said she was getting a drink, but she sort of disappeared," Harry said suddenly.

"I was considering that myself," Ron said.

"Yeah."

A drink, right. They were going for a drink. Ron started forward, telling himself that it didn't really matter at all if they happened to bump into each other, if he felt the warmth of Harry's body or Harry's breath on the side of his neck. He pressed himself tightly against the wall layered with cloaks and coats, took a deep breath, started forward and tripped over a walking stick he hadn't seen in the murky light.

Ron went flying towards the floor, but Harry lunged forward and helped him right himself. "Thanks," Ron whispered.

"Y..." Harry suddenly swallowed. "You're welcome."

And now they were two blokes in a cloakroom, standing toe to toe in the concealing shadows, arms practically wrapped around each other and neither one moving an inch. The poor lighting just traced the contours of Harry's face and managed to sparkle off his glasses, but behind the lenses he could still see vivid green eyes that were watching, waiting, and at that moment kissing him seemed like the most natural thing in the world.

Harry's lips were warm and dry and a little rough; somehow they just seemed to *fit* like this, pressed together, scarcely moving, like time had stopped. Ron gingerly pressed a little harder, and Harry pressed back, inhaling deeply through his nose, and their arms found their way a little tighter. Perfect. Wonderful. Ron dared to let his tongue slip out of his mouth and taste Harry's, and he was happy, because this was perfect, this was wonderful, this was like Heaven

And then Harry suddenly, abruptly, pulled away from him. Just like that. Ron's eyes snapped open, and they stared at each other, and with a sinking stomach he recognized that panicked expression.

"I have to go," Harry blurted, and fled.

Ron turned around and pounded his head against the wall. *Stupid!* He should never have come to this bloody festival, he should've just stayed at home...he should've gone home a long time ago. No chance now. Growling to himself, he flung the door of the coatroom open and stalked out, ready to locate the bar and start drinking until it didn't matter anymore.

The crowd seemed even louder than ever; someone cried, "There he is!" and suddenly he was surrounded by a crush of people all talking at once, some yelling, some near tears. They pressed him against the wall, and he stared into their angry and confused and desperate faces, not comprehending a word. A few bright hexes flared in his peripheral vision, and suddenly Coulter was at his side.

"What the Hell's going on?" he asked the manager.

"Not here," Coulter said shortly. "Bagman's waiting. Come on."

They managed to escape the crush, and Coulter pulled him into a small side room. Inside, the team was gathered in a corner arguing, and Bagman knelt on the floor with his head in the fire. "*I'll sue all of you!*" he screamed, pounding his fist on the hearth. "I'll sue your mothers! I'll sue your owls! I'll sue people you didn't even remember you knew! If you run thatwhatdon't you!" Bagman suddenly jerked his head out of the flames, rivulets of water running down his face. "The son of a bitch extinguished on me," he growled, climbing to his feet.

"What's *happening?*" Ron demanded again.

Macelwrath stalked out of the cluster of players and stabbed him in the chest with her finger. "I'll tell you what's wrong!" she shrieked. " You lying bastard!"

"What?"

Coulter pushed her back and took a deep breath. "In less than half an hour a special edition of the *Evening Prophet* is going to go out, accusing you of being a Canadian player caught using performance-enhancing potions."

The entire room seemed go briefly out of focus. "*Itwhat?*"

Bagman grabbed him by the robes and shook him; the old man was still strong enough to rattle Ron's teeth. "Listen, Ron. We believe in you. This team believes in you. I want you to look me in the eye, and tell me that you aren't this...this McCoy bloke."

"I'm notI swear I'm not" He turned to his teammates. "I don't know what you're talking about. You've got to believe me... "

"I do," Wood said quietly, and Ron sagged in relief.

Bagman nodded. "Of course we believe you. Ed, go out there and calm those people down. We've got to make a statement, head this off." He shoved Coulter towards the door, and Ron dropped heavily into the nearest chair, cradling his head in his hands. In an unexpected

display of camaraderie, Killjoy placed his hand on Ron's shoulder. "Don't worry," he said sagely. "The truth will out in the end."

Ron cringed. *That's what I'm afraid of.*

Near To You

Chapter Summary

Ron and Harry have a discussion, and Draco has to make a change of plans.

Ron usually hated venturing out into the Muggle world; it was confusing and strange, full of hidden complications and illogical technicalities just waiting to trip up the unsuspecting wizard. On the rare occasions he had gone before, he had usually been in the company of someone like his father or Hermione, who knew how to navigate the hazardous waters of a place without simple magic. Today, he went forth alone, however, and for once he hardly noticed the foreignness of Muggle London. For the first time he could remember, he was actually relieved to be out of the wizarding world.

He double-checked the name of the café three times and made certain the door he was about to enter did, in fact, lead into it; you could never really be sure with Muggle buildings. It took him a few moments to locate an empty booth, and he wedged himself into a hard plastic seat that had apparently been designed to accommodate toddlers. He was quite early; he didn't trust Muggle transit, but he hadn't had a lot of alternatives to taking the Tube. Apparating to a strange place packed with Muggles would've just been asking for trouble, and if he got on the Knight Bus he was guaranteed to be recognized. Of course, he hadn't really needed to come out at all, but he was getting sick of the inside of his hotel room. And, well, it was Harry; however badly Ron had bolloxed things up, he still wanted to see his friend, to be near him to kiss him again, if he was honest with himself, maybe even more. But Harry's reaction had been crystal-clear, and Ron was determined to content himself with whatever he could get. At least here, in the Muggle wilderness, they could both get some anonymity.

Ever since the *Prophet* had broken the story, Ron had been the talk of the wizarding world. He was buried daily by fan mail and Howlers, and his secretary had quit from the strain of deflecting all the curses. He was mobbed practically wherever he went; the only difference was whether the crowd wanted more to bolster his spirits or hex him to death. And speaking of death—Malfoy was, unsurprisingly, no help at all. One minute, the demon was stonewalling reporters and forbidding Ron to talk to the press at all, and the next he was issuing press releases and shoving his client unprepared into interviews with some of the wizarding world's most hysterical journalists. Ron was almost positive that Malfoy was behind the whole fiasco; he just wasn't certain how, or to what end, though Pansy's comments about Malfoy not wanting to lose him had been bothering him since the banquet. Ron had felt one step behind Malfoy ever since they met up at the Burrow, and he was starting to think that the whole thing should've ended there, before it began...

"Hey." Ron jumped; Harry was standing over him, hands stuffed in his pockets, rocking slightly on his feet. Nothing someone who didn't know him well would notice. "I'm not late, am I?"

"No, no...I'm early." Ron gestured, unnecessarily, for Harry to sit. He hadn't seen his friend in a good couple of weeks; he'd moved out as quickly as he could, before Skeeter could get wind of things and drag Harry into the mess as well. Before he'd had to face up to what he'd done. Harry hadn't written or called when he found his flatmate missing, so Ron had assumed that he'd seen the last of that dingy little flat because, if Harry didn't want Ron Hardy the superstar, he couldn't possibly feel anything but friendship for Ron Weasley. And Ron knew without question he couldn't stand by and pretend he didn't want more than that, whatever face he had. And then, he'd gotten a note inviting him here, and had to fight a little ember of hope in his heart.

"Feels good to get out of that hotel room without a bodyguard," he said, hoping to break the ice.

"I know what you mean." A waitress appeared, and Harry ordered himself a drink; Ron had forgotten to bring any Muggle money and declined Harry's offer to treat him. When the girl had gone, they stared at each other in tense silence for a few moments before Harry cleared his throat. "So...er...what's the word from the Ministry?"

"Nothing, so far. I don't know how much the papers have actually got..."

"Well, if you don't count the rumors, the hearsay or the hysterical rants about the Honor of the Game" Harry started ticking off fingers. "The Ministry is taking the accusations, quote, very seriously, unquote. You are suspended until the Department of Magical Games and Sports can convene a formal hearing on the matter. There's no sign of said hearing as of yet."

"That's about the whole of it," Ron reported mournfully. "They keep changing the dates on me, changing the panelists, changing the rules" It didn't help that Malfoy was appealing just about every decision, even the ones that largely went in Ron's favor. He'd been making utterly absurd demands about the hearing with increasing stridency practically since the story had broken. Two days previously, in fact, he'd been bodily removed from the Ministry building by trolls. Everyone from Bagman on down was regularly suggesting that Ron find himself a new manager, and he was unable to explain: Malfoy had gotten him into this mess, but now Malfoy was the only one who could get him out of it. For good or ill, he was stuck with the son of a bitch, at least until the twenty-first.

"It's not that long until the end of the season, is it?" Harry said, echoing Ron's thoughts.

"Last match is on the twenty-second," he replied. "Assuming we're even still in contention by then, of course..."

Harry shrugged. "It's possible. MacGregor's been on a streak since he came back."

Ron snorted. "He says he hasn't felt this good since he was fifty." Since his suspension, the Cannons had been left to trudge along as best they could without their superstar; the last few matches had been rocky, and although they hadn't slid back into their old losing habits, they were getting dishearteningly close. A few narrow wins, a few painful losses; they were still in second, but the gap between them and Tutshill was growing with every match. Anything could happen in Quidditch, of course, but increasingly it seemed like it would take a record-setting game for them to overtake their rivals, if not a miracle.

And under the circumstance, Ron was certain that was the very last thing they were likely to get.

Another silence descended, as Ron contemplated his team's sinking prospects and Harry's drink arrived. They both watched the beads of water form on the sides of the glass and run down into a puddle on the tabletop. A few months ago...hell, a few *weeks* ago, there wouldn't have been this kind of silence between them. But then Ron had gone and kissed him, and everything had gone wrong...

"Ron," Harry said suddenly, and looked up. "I asked you here...well...I wanted to say that I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Ron echoed.

"About...running out on you like that."

Oh. *Oh*. Ron understood and cringed. "No, Harry. If anything, it's me"

Harry shook his head. "No, no. Let me say this." He took a deep breath and released it. "I didn't mean to do that well, neither of us did I mean, you're a great bloke and all, but...well...look, I told you about Ron, right? My old flatmate?"

"Once or twice," Ron said, a nasty sort of dread uncoiling in his stomach.

Harry nodded, and started drawing patterns on the table with the moisture from the glass. "He was *is* the best friend I've ever had. I trust him more than just about anyone else on Earth. I've trusted him with my life. He never cared about what I'd done or who I was supposed to be well, hardly ever he knew me better than just about anyone, and he was always, *always* there whenever I needed him, for anything at all. He'd bend over backwards for me, and I never really appreciated...

"Well, you know he moved out a few months ago. Just got sick of me, I guess. He sent a note, said he'd be back. I trust him. But I haven't heard from him since, and sometimes I'd give my wand arm just to, I don't know, *see* him for a minute, talk to him, to get close enough to touch him and know he was safe, and..." Harry looked up from the table with a bittersweet grin. "And, well, sometimes when I'm talking to you, you're so much like him I can almost pretend, you know, that you *are* him, and he's here..."

Screw it, Ron thought savagely, staring open-mouthed. Screw it all. Screw the Cannons and screw Malfoy and the Ministry and all of bloody England. Ron took a deep and opened his mouth to explain everything, about Hell and the team and this whole big stinking mess, because Harry would believe him Harry *had* to believe him, even if no one else did. He'd just lay it out honestly, and together he and Harry could figure something out. Of course they could, because Harry was Harry. Harry was his *friend*, for Merlin's sake, his best mate, and they could work this out together. Harry would help him. If anyone could fix things, it was Harry...

The words faded in his mouth.

...Harry would save him, because that's what Harry *did*.

And that was why Ron couldn't say a word.

Harry shook his head and blotted at the puddle with a thin paper napkin. "I'm sorry. I'm being stupidI just wanted to explain"

"Harry." Ron swallowed hard, and tried to pick his words so as not to give himself away. This had been his mistake, and it was his problem; he wasn't going to lay another burden on his friend's shoulders. Harry had already done enough. "You don't...it's okay."

"I didn't mean to give you my whole life story," Harry mumbled. His neck and ears were flushing a ripe pink.

Ron took a deep breath. "Look, it's...I understand." Harry glanced up over the rims of his glasses, eyebrows knit. "I...there's somebody I miss, too."

"Back in Hannibal?"

"Back home." He swallowed again, wondering why his tongue felt coated in glue. "And, look, IRon, your friend...maybe he's closer than you think." And before he could say anything stupider, before Harry could reply, he excused himself and bolted from the restaurant.

-x-X-x-X-x-

"I tell you, Parkinson, it's pure psychology." Draco examined the robes and tossed them onto the bed for consideration. He needed something dapper but sturdy; that troll had absolutely destroyed his third-best cloak. "Weasley's invested too much in this team to let them down now, on the very cusp of redemption. He can't back out and he can't let the suspension drag on, or not even Hell will be able to put that cup in their hands."

"So what do you intend to do?" Pansy asked. She was lounging indolently on the sofa, flipping through a slim volume with an unmarked cover that she wouldn't let him look at.

Draco smirked at he considered a light gray tweed. Yes, that would do well. "It's disgustingly simple. I'll string him up by his own blasted Gryffindor honoroffer to straighten this whole McCoy matter out and get him flying again, *if* he agrees to strike the escape clause. No clause, no problem, no sweat."

"And no shit." Pansy shut the book and stretched luxuriously; a mere mortal might have possibly suffered heart failure on the spot. "You seem to have this all figured out nicely."

"I do, don't I?" Cufflinks, then. Platinum or diamond? Hmm...

"One does feel a bit sorry for him, though."

Draco started so badly that he dropped his entire collection of cufflinks clattering to the carpet. "*What* did you say?" he demanded, rounding on Pansy with his fists clenched.

She thrust her chin out defiantly, but he knew her too well to miss the sparkle of fear in her eyes. "I said I felt sorry for him," she declared, sitting up and folding her arms across her bosom.

It took Draco a few seconds reign in his breathing; he'd forgotten he no longer needed to. He calmly knelt in front of Pansy, placed his hands on her shoulders, and shook her as hard as he could. "*What are you trying to do to me, woman?!?*"

She pushed him away and stood up; he cracked his head rather nastily on the coffee table and cursed her thoroughly. Pain was one thing a demon still felt, undiminished by death. As he clambered to his feet, she shrieked, "Put your hands on me again and I'll'll!"

"Kill me?" He dismissed her with a wave of his hand. "Bless it, Parkinson, I ought to report you to the Virtue Squad for that little remark. You'd be *screaming* for the shit pit before they were through with you!"

"Then why don't you?" she demanded.

"Because you're on *my* budget, that's why! You're assigned to *my* project! If I admit that you're a...a *mortal sympathizer* under my supervision, I'll be guilty by association!"

"And you expect me to care, why?"

"Do you know what they do to sympathizers, Parkison?" Draco poked her savagely right in her ever-so-perky cleavage. "They *eat* them!"

"I know that"

"With *ketchup!*"

"Malfoy, get your filthy claws"

"*Sensate*, Parkinson!"

"Touch me again"

"*I am not going to get eaten*"

"Draco, I swear to *G*"

There was a knock at the door.

Draco glared at Pansy and tried desperately to fix his hair. "I will deal with you *later*," he hissed to her, then hurried to unlock the door before it was pounded it off its hinges entirely. "Don't think for a moment this is over"

"Eat me," he snapped.

"They *will*!" He got the door open and was promptly bowled to the floor by six feet of agitated mortal. Bless them *all* to Heaven...

"Malfoy, we need to talk," Weasley said, pacing frantically through the middle of the room. He was wearing Muggle clothes, and had a dangerous sparkle in his eyes, one that Draco recognized a little too well. It never boded well for him when the Weasel got that look.

With a bracing breath, Draco climbed to his feet and tried to muster his remaining dignity. "What seems to be the trouble, Weasley?"

He locked eye with Draco with an intensity that would have been unnerving, if he hadn't been a mere mortal. "I want out."

"I'm sorry?"

"I want *out*, Malfoy." Weasley resumed his furious pacing, looking not so much fidgety as capable of attempted demonicide. "That, that doo-da, the escape clause I want to be myself again."

Draco swallowed hard. "Are you quite sure?" he asked, and blessed the squeak in his voice.

"Yes." Weasley raked one hand through his hair so it stood up on all ends, as bad as Potter. "I'm sick of it. I'm sick of the publicity, I'm sick of the rumors, I'm sick of...of...I want *out*."

He breathed deeply. "All right."

Weasley glared at him. "*Now*."

Stall, stall... "These things take time," he said quickly. "One has to do it properly"

"We made the deal with a handshake," Weasley said.

"Yes, and it'll take a good deal more than that to *break* it." He saw his opening, suddenly, and ran with it before Weasley could start screaming. Weasley could scream for *hours*. "Besides, there's the team to consider."

"What about them?"

The fact that even his precious Cannons didn't arouse any of Weasley's weaker instincts, let alone trip his fiendish frequencies, set off some very serious alarm bells in Draco's mind. He snagged Weasley's sleeve and forced him to stop pacing, just for a moment, and hoped to Hell this would work. "Think of the context," he explained in his most convincing tone. "The Cannons go on their improbable winning streak thanks to their break-out Seeker who is accused of cheating and then vanishes into thin air without a hearing? Do you know what that would look like?" Weasley growled and shook Draco off. "It would look like Skeeter was right, Weasley. What will that do to the team? It's the sort of thing that gets clubs disbanded..."

It did work; though Weasley's fists were clenched in frustration, he didn't burst out with any more ridiculous demands. After several minutes of huffy breathing and incoherent growling, he spun on his heels to face Draco. Draco took a step backwards, just in case. "When, then?"

"After your hearing," he said, trying to soothe him. "I'll take care of the Ministry, we'll get the name of Ron Hardy cleared and the Cannons redeemed then you can ask to speak with me, privately we'll step into another room and you walk out a free, and boring, man, just as pathetic as you started. Hardy....*poof!* Never to be heard from again."

Weasley nodded. "All right. All right. That'll work."

I wasn't asking for your approval, Draco thought sourly, though he kept a smile on his face. "Excellent. Now, why don't you go back to your room and settle down while I start making the arrangements, hmm? This might take a while."

Weasley left; Draco locked the door behind him and slid to the floor with his head in his hands. What were they *doing* to him first the whole escape clause, then Parkinson, now *this*?

"What are you going to do now?" Pansy asked, rather nastily.

Draco glared up at her, even as a new plan presented itself and began to unfold in his mind. "Wait and see, Parkinson," he said slowly. "Just you wait."

The Stroke of Twelve

Chapter Summary

Ron gets his hearing, but things don't quite go according to anybody's plans.

Ron rinsed his hands and splashed a little water on his face. It was eleven-thirty on Midsummer's Day; his hearing at the ministry had finally convened at nine. Skeeter and Malfoy had spent the morning allegedly presenting their cases to the panel, though to Ron it seemed more like they were staging an elaborate melodrama and nobody had provided him with a script. *Soon*, he told himself. *It's got to end soon...*

Malfoy stepped into the bathroom, letting a burst of chatter, and scowled at Ron. "Hurry up. You're the last person I'd expect to be wasting time."

"You're the one who left things so late," he grumbled.

Malfoy ignored this and stepped up to a mirror. He began to preen his hair. "You're really making a very poor showing in there, you know."

"*You're* the one running things like a three-ring circus!"

"Well, what do you think this is? A legal proceeding?" Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Now come on, or they'll start without us."

"Go to Hell."

"In due time."

The corridors were packed with journalists, who erupted with questions the moment they saw their targets. Ron shoved Malfoy ahead of him as fast as he could, but when they got back to the conference room, they were both dusted with bits of multicolored down from all the quills that had been waved in their faces.

"Would you kindly take your seats?" asked the nearest panelist. Ron cringed.

"Yessir, Mr. Weasley," Malfoy said cheerfully, and brushed himself clean with one flick of his hand.

The timing of the hearing was suspicious; the make-up of the panel was bizarre. Due, Malfoy claimed, to a series of interdepartmental squabbles, the arbiters of Ron's case were the recently-retired Aidan Lynch, Elvira Troutwig, and, of all people, his brother Percy. Ron thought he might've been able to deceive the ex-Seeker, but Percy would be impossible, and Troutwigwell, he still had to fight the urge to cover his bottom and flee when he saw her.

Picking down off his robes, Ron took his seat and tried to avoid Troutwig's eyes. He ended up looking right at Skeeter, who was absolutely hideous in glaring yellow robes. Since breaking the story, she had filled large columns of the *Daily Prophet* with stories of her persecution by irrational Chudley fans, her personal sacrifices for the good of Quidditch, and so much other self-aggrandizing drivel that even Malfoy had stopped reading it days ago. Now she sat amidst artistically-arranged stacks of parchment, smiling serenely at the crowd of observers that packed the rest of the room. All of the Cannons were therewhenver Ron glanced back, they smiled and waved, and Funt occasionally shot orange and black sparks from his wand. Ron tried not to glance back too often.

"Is everyone here?" Percy asked gravely, looking around. "Everyone? Good, let's continue."

Malfoy immediately had his arm in the air. "I move that we recess for a midmorning snack."

Percy glared at him. "Mr. Applegate, that is the fifth such recess you have proposed. I assume you'd like to be done with this matter before noon?"

Ron watched Malfoy carefully. The demon leaned back in his chair and said mildly, "Of course. I apologize."

"Indeed," Percy said brusquely. "Now, to the *business* of this hearing, Ms. Skeeter"

"Mister Weasley!" she cried, and stood with her hand over her heart. "I hope to take this moment to thank the committee from the deepest recesses of my heart. When I consider the abuse I have suffered in my attempt to save the noble sport of warlocks from the scurrilous influence of such individuals as the alleged Ronald Hardy"

"Ms. Skeeter, *please!*" Percy drew a deep breath and dabbed his forehead with a hankchief. "Though your presentation of your accusations against Mr. Hardy was...ah...*vigorous*," and here several people muttered, "you have yet to provide any direct evidence to support them."

She blinked. "But I told you, there's no record of his birth in the United States"

"And since when has not being American constituted an offense in the *British* League?" Troutwig asked icily.

Rita tried to marshall her dramatic energy. "Madame Troutwig, you know that a reporter of my status would never publish such grave accusations without a thorough investigation of the facts." She had to stop for the snickering. "My first thought was to review the media coverage of the original McCoy affair in search of evidence that would link him to Hardy, but and one can well imagine my surprise upon arriving at the archives of that bastion of journalistic merit, the *Daily Prophet*, I discovered that an entire year's worth of back issues had been accidentally destroyed *the very day* I learned of the rumors following Mr. Hardy like a seething, billowing, black"

"Ms. Skeeter," Troutwig said gravely, "need I remind you of the panel's request regarding illustrative metaphor in oral arguments?"

"Of course not, Madame," Skeeter said, clearly annoyed. "As I was saying the records at the *Daily Prophet* had been mysteriously destroyed, but it was, perhaps, just an inconvenient coincidence. So I contacted that most honorable publication of the sport, *Quidditch Quarterly*, only to learn that *their* records had been badly damaged after a duel broke out during a staff meeting. Every other newspaper and magazine in the Wizarding World that I attempted to contact presented me with the same story; oh, the reason was never the same, but in every case, the records destroyed included every photograph ever publicized of the real McCoy!"

She glanced wildly around the room at this pronouncement, apparently perturbed that there had been no dramatic gasping. Lynch sat up straighter and cleared his throat. "And, ah, what exactly does that have to do with us?"

Rita glared at him. "I am trying to tell the panel that there is a *conspiracy* at work here!" There was some mumbling, and a rather inopportune laugh. Ron, however, glanced suspiciously at Malfoy. He seemed to be napping.

Percy leaned forward. "Ms. Skeeter, that is a grave accusation"

"I am aware of that!" she declared. "But it is the only conclusion I could draw from so convenient a series of 'accidents' convenient for *Ron Hardy*, that is!" She pointed at him dramatically; he did his best to look innocent, and Malfoy started awake. "In fact, the only place I could find any photographs of Shifty McCoy was in the offices of a small publication run by a Mr. Lawrence Lovegood"

"Oh, come *on!*" someone in the back yelled, and that set off a wave of muttering and catcalls. Troutwig yanked the pipe from her mouth, transfigured it into a gavel, and pounded on the tabletop until the audience silenced.

Skeeter, meanwhile, rooted around in her artful piles until she produced an old issue of the *Quibbler*. "Here it is!" she shouted triumphantly. "The only photograph of Shifty McCoy to escape the mysterious purge of the wizarding media! Gentlemen, madam, I present to you *incontrovertible* proof of my claims!"

She slammed the paper down on the panel's table. Percy picked it up gingerly and examined it at arm's length. "Ms. Skeeter," he said after a moment, "this article alleges that Quidditch was invented by hedgehogs from the Moon."

"The *picture*, Mr. Weasley!"

Lynch peered over Percy's shoulder and frowned. "He's not there."

She seized the paper and scowled at the photograph, then spread it out on the table. "Then I motion we wait for him to reappear."

Malfoy leapt to his feet. "I object!" he shouted. "Ms. Skeeter is deliberately trying to obstruct the proceedings!"

"No more so than you have, Mr. Applegate," Percy said hotly.

Malfoy folded his arms. "Gentlemen, madam, Ms. Skeeter's accusations are ludicrous. Once again I motion to dismiss them."

"She deserves a chance to present her evidence," Troutwig said, sticking the end of her gavel in her mouth.

Lynch peered closely at the newsprint. "I think I saw an elbow."

Ron glanced fearfully at the clock. Twenty-five minutes before his escape clause expired. It could be hours before the photographic McCoy flew back into the picture. He tugged Malfoy's sleeve until the demon reluctantly lowered his head to ear level. "Does the picture prove anything?" he whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, does Hardy look like McCoy?" If the picture would prove him innocent, he could dart out now, and let the matter sort itself out...

Malfoy coughed. "There may be a slight resemblance..."

"How slight?"

"Mr. Applegate," Troutwig said gravely, "is there a problem?"

"None whatsoever," Malfoy said, straightening. "Mr. Hardy was merely suggesting a way we might, ah, hasten the proceedings a bit."

Percy leaned forward. "How so?"

"If, as Ms. Skeeter alleges, my client has been using performance-enhancing potions, there should be evidence." He paused dramatically. "Physical evidence, that is. The sort a Healer should be able to detect."

"I object!" Skeeter screeched.

"On what grounds?" Percy demanded.

She pointed one ruby-red talon at the two of them. "Neither of these wizards can be trusted! Who knows what sort of despicable ploys they may use to manipulate such an examination!"

Lynch snorted. "Ms. Skeeter, what would you have us do? Conduct it in public?"

For a minute, Ron was terrified she'd suggest it; Madame Troutwig looked altogether too interested in the idea. But Malfoy came to the rescue with a haughty chuckle. "That's hardly necessary. If the examination itself is in question as I hardly think even Ms. Skeeter would go so far as to impugn the integrity of the St. Mungo's staff then perhaps one of you would care to observe the procedure as a safeguard against any...improprieties?"

"Excellent idea," Percy said. "I'd be glad to do it."

Troutwig's eyebrows went up, and Ron's stomach sank. "Excuse me, Mr. Weasley, but *I* am the most senior member of the panel...."

He blinked at her. "I mean no offense, Madame Troutwig, but I feel I am the most qualified."

Troutwig swelled like a balloon, and Ron had no doubt Percy would be happy to nigger over his credentials with a shrieking harpy for the rest of the afternoon. "Excuse me," he blurted, "but II'd be more comfortable...that is, I don't think it's *proper*"

"My thoughts exactly!" Malfoy chimed it.

Troutwig pouted and relaxed back into her chair. "I see. Very well, Mr. Weasley."

Summoning a Healer from St. Mungo's wasted more precious minutes; Percy refused to adjourn again, and so Ron spent the time cowering under the gaze of Madame Troutwig while Rita and Malfoy traded glares. When the healer finally appeared, Percy led them to an empty conference room on the other side of the hall. It turned out he needn't have worried about Troutwig; the examination was thorough, but nothing to be embarrassed about. "Relax, Mr. Hardy," the Healer said more than once as Ron checked and rechecked the clock on the wall. When it was finished, Ron yanked his shirt back on and nearly bolted from the room without his shoes.

While the Healer testified, Ron grabbed Malfoy again. "Five minutes," he hissed.

"I'm aware of that."

"I don't care if the hearing's over."

"Do you want to get acquitted or not?"

The Healer wrapped up his remarks, and Percy looked to Skeeter. "Does that satisfy your concerns, Ms. Skeeter?"

"No!" She shrieked. "Obviously the witness was suborned by Mr. Applegate!"

"I was?" asked the Healer.

Rita jumped to her feet and pointed at Malfoy again. "Mr. Weasley, this disgrace to the name of Wizard has been plotting against me from the moment I publicized my findings! This panel has been deceived!"

"Deceived?" Malfoy said, and rose smoothly from his seat. "Ms. Skeeter, you are hardly the one to talking about *deception*."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she hissed.

"It means I can prove that your vaunted claims of acting for the good of the game to be a convenient fiction." Malfoy held up a slim file folder he hadn't had a moment before. "I have here *truly* incontrovertible proof of Rita Skeeter's agenda: this woman is in fact a partisan of *the Tutshill Tornados*."

He whisked from a folder a large, glossy picture of a crowd of Quidditch fans. Front and center was Rita Skeeter, dressed in Tutshill, blue, silently shrieking as she waved a Tornados pennant. Several people in the audience gasped aloud, and someone in the rear started booing. Skeeter gaped for a moment before managing to squeal, "Lies! All lies! That's a fake"

"These accusations are a mere a ploy to prevent the Cannons from threatening the Tornados' supremacy in Britain!" Malfoy shouted over her.

"*Give me that!*" Rita snatched at the photo, which Malfoy jerked away. She wobbled on her improbably spiked heels and toppled into him, sending them both to the floor.

"Stop that!" Percy shouted, pounding his fist on the table. "Stop that at once! Ms. Skeeter, I demand you release Mr. Applegate, you *will* let go both of you!"

"We will have *order in this hearing*," Troutwig shouted at the same time, addressing the observers, who ignored her, "we will have *order*, and to have *order* means to have *silence* and we will have *silence right NOW*"

Lynch suddenly grabbed the *Quibbler* off the table. "I think I saw a foot!"

Ron could only watch the clock ticking in horror....

"*EXCUSE ME.*"

The amplified voice froze everyone in the room. Ron's gaze snapped to the doorway, where Harry Potter stood with the tip of his wand held up to his mouth. Hermione and a strange woman in an old-fashioned dress squeezed in behind him. Harry cleared his throat and lowered his wand, speaking again at normal volume. "I wish to address the panel."

Percy straightened up and set his glasses back on his nose properly. "What is it, Mr. Potter?"

Harry stepped forward, and Hermione and the other woman followed, forcing the door shut behind them. Hermione didn't look exactly happy to be there, and the woman...there was something familiar about her, but Ron couldn't place it. "I've brought a witness who can personally testify to Ron Hardy's identity," Harry said.

Skeeter clawed her way to her feet and shoved her hat back on backwards. "What do you mean, testify?"

"May I ask exactly how you are involved in this, Mr. Potter?" Troutwig asked.

Harry made eye contact with Ron for a split second. "Mr. Hardy is a friend of mine, Madame Troutwig. When I heard about these accusations, I naturally wanted to help however I could. I'm sorry to leave everything so late, but I've just gotten back from America with" he pushed the strange witch forward "with Mrs. Melusine Trott, a longtime resident of Hannibal, Missouri and an old friend of the Hardy family."

Ron blinked at him, then glanced at Malfoy; the demon was staring furiously at Harry, and scowling. Percy righted his chair and sat primly. "I see. Mrs. Trott, I thank you for coming such a long way."

Trott giggled shrilly. "Ah, shucks, 'tweren't nothin'. I'da come to China for little Ronny-poo. Oh, *Ronny!*" She rushed over to him and firmly pinched his cheeks. "My, but you *have* grown! I remember when you was knee-high to a garden gnome! Don't you look just like your momma now?" She turned to Malfoy. "He looks just like his momma!"

"I'm certain," Malfoy ground out.

"Hello, Mrs. Trott," Ron said, hoping he sounded convincing.

Mrs. Trott laughed. "Oh, honey, don't be shy now! I'm still your same Auntie Mel, just like when you was little. Oh, you look so fine now..."

Madame Troutwig cleared her throat. "Mrs. Trott, can you verify that Mr. Hardy was, in fact, born in Hannibal?"

"Of course he was born in Hannibal!" Mrs. Trott said indignantly. "Didn't I pull him outta his momma myself? And what a *fat* baby he was, you know"

"Auntie Mel," Ron whispered pleadingly.

Skeeter leapt forward. "Then why isn't his birth registered with the magical authorities there?"

Trott's face softened. "Oh, honey, you mean he hasn't told y'all?" She embraced Ron dramatically. "Oh, bless your little cotton socks, your momma woulda been so proud of you!"

"What haven't you told us, Mr. Hardy?" Troutwig asked.

Ron panicked.

Sniffling loudly, Mrs. Trott dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. "Oh, Ronny, you let Auntie Mel handle this." She turned to the panel. "Y'see, well, Jane Hardy bless her soul wells she wasn't one of *us*, if you catch me meaning. "

A murmur ran through the room. Percy nodded slowly. "I see."

"But she raised herself a good boy!" Trott said defensively, and patted Ron vigorously on the arm. "And me 'n my man Lucilius done our best to help and believe you me, we're jest proud as anyone of what he done" She burst into tears, and Ron patted her awkwardly on the back.

Malfoy rallied himself admirably. "You see?" he said, gesturing. "I move to declare Ms. Skeeter a raging lunatic."

"*Lies!*" Rita shrieked again. "That they're you can't believe this! That woman is an actor! It's all lies!"

"Prove it!" Malfoy snapped.

She stalked towards the panel. "Mr. Weasley, Madame Troutwig, Mister oh, never mind." Lynch was engrossed in the *Quibbler*. "I have been derided. I have been disdained. I have

been demonized and demoralized and...and *disgraced*." She took a deep breath. "But I tell you that Ronald Hardy *is* Shifty McCoy, and that I first discovered it not from some unnamed source but from Hardy's own manager, *MISTER APPELEGATE!*"

"What?" Ron pushed Mrs. Trott away and spun towards Malfoy. "From *who?*"

But the demon dismissed Skeeter with a casual wave of his hand. "Nonsense. She can't possibly prove it."

"Yes, I can!" Rita cried. "*I can!* Granger that witch there she was with me! She heard him too!"

Ron gaped at Hermione, who'd been standing a little behind Harry with an expression of mild disgust. She blinked at Rita's quivering finger and folded her arms. "Honestly, madam, I have no idea what you're talking about."

Rita whimpered.

Percy sighed. "I think, in light of these revelations, we can put this matter to a vote. Those in favor of acquittal?" He raised his hand. So did Troutwig. "Those opposed?"

Everyone looked at Lynch, who looked up from the *Quibbler* and blinked. "Hmm?"

"We're voting, Mr. Lynch," Percy said evenly.

"But I haven't read this issue..."

"*Aiden*," Troutwig snapped.

Lynch jumped. "Oh! Acquit."

Ron had never heard a room exactly *explode*, but that was the nearest he could come to describing it. The shouts reverberated off the walls, and the first row of observers swarmed up to shake his hand, pat his back, congratulate him in one continuous smear of voices. Paul Stebbins took a flying leap and landed in his arms, then planted a wet kiss on his cheek. "That's my boy!"

"We knew you were innocent!" Wood said enthusiastically, pushing his way up.

"Nothing between us and the Cup now!" Macelwrath shrieked.

Brajnikoff pumped his hand and said something emphatic in Russian.

"Yes, thank you!" Ron stood on his tiptoes and peered over the milling crowd, trying to catch a glimpse of Harry; he spotted him trying to sidle his way to a side exit. *Not yet, don't leave yet*

"Gentlemen!" Malfoy called, mercifully directing attention away from Ron. "Ladies! Please, I want to thank you all for coming, we really appreciate your support now if you please, we're going to have a press conference in a moment. I know you want to congratulate the man of

the hour, but we need this room..." Ron seized the opportunity and threaded his way through the milling shoulders, kicking over a chair in his haste.

"Harry! Harry, wait" He grabbed Harry's sleeve and stopped him at the door. "Harry...I can't...I don't know what to say."

Harry bit his lip and looked aside. "You're going to have to figure something out if you're going to have a press conference."

"No, I mean..." He glanced at the people filing out while the press filed in, and lowered his voice. "Where'd you find that Trott woman?"

"You'd be surprised who you can find when you know a Metamorphmagus," he said with a little smile.

"Ohhh." Ron nodded, and thought warmly about how soon this would all be overhe could be a real human being again, he'd have his family back, he'd have Harry...

On the other side of the room, Bagman stepped up to the podium that someone had conjured. "I know you don't want to hear from me," he said jovially, "I know you're probably itching to hear straight from the golden boy himself so you can get your stories written and get to lunch"

Lunch? Ron thought blankly.

"but I have a few words I'd like to say before we get down to business. I've always had enormous faith in Ron..."

With a slowly sinking heart, Ron looked at the clock hanging above the door.

The time was 12:01.

"...do anything for Chudley. Why, he'd go to Hell for this team..."

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Two Lost Souls

Chapter Summary

Misery loves company; good thing that Ron is miserable, then.

Ron stood before St. Paul's, staring without seeing at the ponderous lines of its towers and dome. The last evening service had ended hours ago, and he was alone with his thoughts and the statue of Queen Anne. Her granite gaze went somewhere off to the left; he couldn't really blame her, himself. He wouldn't want to look at him, either. He wasn't sure how late it was, or how long he'd been out; it was rather difficult to care. He had reached a point where he felt nothing but empty and numb, and after the events of the day empty and numb was a wonderful place to be.

He heard the footsteps on the pavement behind him long before anyone spoke. "I've been looking for you," Parkinson said softly.

"Couldn't you just ask Malfoy to speak me up?" Ron asked. He twisted the manila envelope in his hands, creasing the paper, and watched the car headlights cast weird shadows on the edifice of the cathedral.

Pansy put her hand on his shoulder; it felt light, insubstantial, and Ron wished she'd take it away. "I've got nothing to do with Malfoy anymore."

"Course not," he growled. "You did your job, didn't you?"

She stepped back, heels clicking. "If you honestly think I had anything to do with"

"No...no. I'm sorry." He sighed, and turned to look at her. She was dressed like a normal person for once, a leather jacket over a printed blouse and tan slacks. It suited her better than the provocative robes he was used to seeing her in. "I know you didn't...this is all my fault."

She sighed, and rubbed his arm. "I'm sorry. I know it doesn't help, but I am anyway."

"Thanks." He looked back at Queen Anne, but her scowl remained the same.

Pansy stood next to him and regarded the cathedral front rather calmly, he thought, for a demon. "This isn't exactly on your way home, is it?" she asked after a moment.

"I haven't been home for months."

"You know what I mean."

"I do." He paused, considering different lines of attack. "I went to St. Clement's, after the press conference."

"You mean after you tried to kill Malfoy."

"He's already dead anyway, it's not like I actually hurt anything." He flexed his bruised knuckles, trying not to remember the satisfying jolt of his fist slamming into Malfoy's jaw. Empty and numb. "I went to St. Clement's I had to buy a little map from a bookshop, but I found it, and I stood outside for an hour and a quarter. And then I decided, I'd just visit all the churches that rhyme about the oranges, just to see them all. But I couldn't remember the whole thing, so I ended up here."

"What rhyme about oranges?"

"It's a Muggle rhyme or maybe it's lemon something about citrus fruit and chuchbells that owe each other money. My sister brought Dean Thomas round for dinner one night and my dad made him say it about a hundred times over..." Something squeezed in his chest at the memory, a hollow place that he was sure he'd never be able to fill again.

Pansy took his hand and squeezed it; he should've shaken her off, but he didn't really mind the comfort, even if it was from a demon. "Why don't you go in?"

He bowed his head. "I'm scared."

"Scared of what?" Pansy asked. "Bursting into flames as you cross the threshold? It's not that bad."

"How bad is it?" he asked.

She shrugged, and regarded Queen Anne. "Not at all, really. At least, not physically." He waited for her to stay more, but she didn't.

They stood before St. Paul's for several minutes, in silence, before Pansy tugged on his sleeve. "Come on."

"Where are you going?"

"Just a place. To relax. It's nothing to do with Malfoy."

"You want me to relax."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, you can't stand outside some bloody cathedral all night, that's morbid. A little alcohol will clear your mind."

Something didn't sound right about that statement, but Ron dismissed it. He wanted to forget for a while, to stay empty and numb, and one distraction was as good as another. "What do you propose we do?"

Pansy smirked, and flung out her arms. "Would you like to take me out dancing tonight, Meester Ron?" she asked in her Lola Banana accent.

He blinked at her, backlight by headlights and signs. "Why not go mad?" he asked, and tucked the envelope under his arm.

Pansy didn't ask about it until they'd negotiated their way into the Tube station. She breezed through the till without paying, and nobody seemed to notice Ron clambering over a barrier to follow her. On a car occupied only by two veiled-swaddled Indian women and a snoring hobo, she plucked at the envelope's corner. "What's this?"

"Oh. My future." He fumbled with the catch. "Malfoy gave it to me."

"Before or after you punched him?"

"Doesn't much matter, does it?" He pulled out the glossy black and white photographs, a bit more creased and crumpled than they had been that afternoon. "He explained the scam is, with the Cannons losing and all. He says he's got the rest of my life arranged already as 'compensation.'"

"Really. I'd like to see that." She took them from Ron and flipped through them rapidly. "Let's see. Ron Hardy, Butterbeer Spokeswizard Barney the Bat will be disappointed. Ron Hardy, signing autographs. Ron Hardy, in the south of France...in New York...on a beach. Nice tan. Ron Hardy playing for England, Ron Hardy with the League Cup aren't those the Tornados' robes?"

"They are." He couldn't bear to look at the photos a second time, to see the face he was stuck in grinning and waving the trophy, in enemy uniform. "He says he's got the contract inked already."

"And he considers that compensation?"

"You haven't got to the girl yet."

"What girl? Oh. Oh, my."

"That girl."

"She's going to put out her back doing that."

"Malfoy says I'm going to marry her."

"Oh." Pansy quickly gave the photographs back.

Ron stuffed them back in the envelope, tearing a corner in the process. "It's not that bad, is it?" he asked, forcing joviality. "I ought to be ecstatic, really. I get fame and I get money and I get all sorts of shiny objects and a wife with tits bigger than her head"

"Shhh." She covered his mouth with one slim hand and nodded at the two women, who were watching them with alarm.

Ron exhaled. "Sorry."

"I don't know why they gave Malfoy a job that requires him to deal with real human beings," Pansy said harshly. "Maybe if he'd ever actually been one..."

Ron let that slide, and didn't speak for the rest of the trip. Pansy seemed remarkably knowledgeable about Muggle transit, and led him back to the surface at an unfamiliar station. He followed her a few blocks in silence until she stopped before a set of stairs that lead to the basement of a building. The neon sign that sputtered over the door said LIMBO.

"Try to look artistically jaded," Pansy suggested, and lead him down the cracked cement steps. She took his hand; it felt strange, and Ron wasn't sure whether to pull away or squeeze.

The bouncer of the club who looked awfully troll-like for a Muggle in Ron's opinion looked them both over critically before allowing them inside. Ron let Pansy pull him into the crowd, let her pull him in close and guide him through the moves. He let his hands settle on her waist and let the throbbing beat of the music wash his mind absolutely clear. She was a warm, friendly body and the steps required just enough concentration to occupy him; it wasn't as good as forgetting, but close enough, and it didn't require him to feel. He let his head drop down, until his face was pressed into her hair. She smelled like wildflowers...

They danced long enough to work up a sweat, then Pansy waved him off the floor to a moodily-lit table away from the worst of the noise. The chairs were upholstered in hideous blue vinyl and the tabletop was scuffed and stained, but a waitress in an indecently short skirt brought by drinks without them actually having to order. "The perks of being a demon?" he asked when the girl was out of earshot.

"One of few," Pansy said.

Ron examined the deep red liquor in the glass. "What is this, exactly?"

"Expensive." She lifted her glass in a toast. "To damnation."

"To damnation," Ron said, and sipped. "I don't suppose the drinks are on the house?"

She shook her head. "On Malfoy's expense account. He let me have his company credit card."

"To Malfoy, then," Ron said, and toasted her again.

"May he get exactly what he deserves."

Either there was something about this drink that he wasn't sophisticated enough to appreciate or its primary appeal was the price; either way, it was certainly not the best way of getting drunk he'd ever encountered. "I can still get drunk, can't I?"

"Of course," Pansy snorted. "You're still alive, Ron, you're just...owned."

"What about you?"

She sipped her drink delicately. "If I want to. It's mostly psychological with what passes for my metabolism, it would take a Hell of a lot of alcohol to even get me tipsy."

"How appropriate."

He twirled the swizzle stick in his drink and watched the deep red liquor swirl. Pansy watched him intently. "What were you really doing at that church, Ron?" she asked.

"I don't know." Twirl, swirl, whirl; the liquid climbed the sides of the glass, a whirlpool in his hand. "Maybe I was trying to get the balls to ask for forgiveness."

"It's worth a shot," she said mildly.

Ron looked up sharply. "I beg your pardon?"

"I said it's worth a shot." She sipped her drink again. "Though you've got a lot to forgive, what with selling your soul and all."

Ron let go of the swizzle stick and watched it spin on its own, dragged along by the maelstrom in the glass. "Are you saying"

"It's not a loophole," she said, "so don't get your hopes up."

"I didn't," Ron snapped, and downed most of his drink in a shot.

When he'd stopped coughing, Pansy placed her hand over his and left it there. "It's not a loophole," she repeated. "It's more like...like a catch twenty-two."

"A what?"

"It's a catch." She drummed her nails on the tabletop. "He forgives, Ron. He'll forgive anything, no matter how big or how long ago, any time and anywhere. All you have to do is ask humbly, sincerely, and with a penitent heart. Which is a bit hard to do when you're still enjoying the perks of the crime, and in your case it's not like Malfoy's going to let you stop playing Quidditch and become a hermit."

"But...you..." He swallowed hard; despite having dealt with a demon on a regular basis for six months, he felt himself to be on shaky and treacherous ground. "If you can if you just have to ask why?"

"am I still a class-B succubus?"

"Yeah."

Pansy's eyes focused on something over Ron's shoulder, and her face went smooth and blank. "Pride," she said softly. "The original sin. Getting down and asking begging no matter how much you regret it or how miserable you are" She shook her head and looked back at her drink. "The only way to get a camel through the eye of a needle is to cut it into very small pieces. I'm not that desperate yet...and in Hell, at least, I have some limited upward mobility."

He stared at her, at her beautiful body, and wondered if he ought to be disgusted or feeling sorry for her. "Is that why you joined You-Know-Who?" he asked. "Pride?"

She shook her head. "I was never a Death Eater. That was all Draco's doing, the sneak attack and the...other things."

"But you"

"helped him?" She smirked crookedly. "That was ambition, Weasley, the charter of our House. My family wasn't nearly as influential as his, but his parents approved of me. My future depended on his surviving long enough for me to marry him and make a claim on the Malfoy fortune."

"But you died instead."

"I was trying to get escape the castle when it all went to shit," she said dully. "Dying wasn't part of the plan."

Ron shook his head. "I'm not nearly drunk enough for this."

"Easily fixed." Pansy signaled the waitress with one elegant finger. "It's not like we're even paying for it."

"Not for this, anyway."

The second round of drinks arrived, more expensive red things, and this time the toast was silent. Halfway to the bottom, he had a thought. "Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Defrauding the underworld to get me drunk."

"You looked like you needed the drink and I had the credit card."

"No," he said, and sucked down most of the rest of the glass. "I mean...why do you care if I'm suffering? I thought demons like that."

"Most do." For all the self-assured swagger she'd been presenting before, Pansy now seemed very skittish. Or maybe it was the way the rest of the room was weaving back and forth. "I think you need another drink."

"I think I do." She flagged down the waitress; another glass appeared in front of him. "If most demons do like it, why don't you?"

She sighed and steepled her fingers. "I'm not a very good demon."

"What happened to upward mobility?"

He sipped his fresh drink while she shredded a damp napkin. "I'm a very bad demon, in fact," she announced.

"I would think that's a plus."

"Not like that." She sighed. "It's hard to explain, Ron."

"Harder than original sin?"

"In a way."

He sipped his drink and leaned forward in the chair, feeling oddly disconnected from his movements. "Try me."

She sighed and leaned forward herself, looking him straight in the eye. "Demons are supposed to enjoy the suffering of mortals. Our whole job ultimately boils down to trying to bring as many souls to eternal damnation as we can. It's a bit difficult to sympathize with someone at the same time as you're working to ensure they'll spend eternity in excruciating agony."

"Naturally," Ron said, with a wobbly nod.

"I'm a professional succubus," Pansy said. "My job is sex, and I'm not supposed to get involved with the higher brain functions. I'm certainly not supposed to actually like the guy I'm screwing. But I think...I think I rather like you."

"You do?"

She smiled weakly and looked away. "I told you before, you make me feel human again. You make me feel alive, which is quite the accomplishment considering how thoroughly I got myself killed."

He had the impression that this conversation was going somewhere he didn't necessarily want to follow. "Glad I could be of service," he mumbled.

Pansy squeezed his hand the hand she'd been holding practically all night and brought her other hand up to his shoulder. "I'm normally a pretty good demon," she said softly, "but you are an exception. And I lately I've been thinking...I think, maybe, if I had someone to share it with...damnation might not be so bad."

And then her eyes slipped shut, and she was getting closer, and closer, and her perfume smelling like wildflowers and her face was smooth and her lips were full and red like cherries and her hand was warm in Ron's and she was there, available, instant oblivion. She was willing, no, eager, and he, what did he have left to lose...?

He suddenly thought of Harry in the café, looking at him with wounded eyes. He pressed a hand against her shoulder, stopping her short. "No," he said softly. "I can't."

Pansy opened her eyes and leaned back. She didn't look angry, to Ron's surprise; more like disappointed, and somehow profoundly sad. "I understand," she said softly, looking away.

"I don't think you do."

"Think what you like."

Ron finished his drink in silence, but instead of ordering him another Pansy took him by the arm. "Come on. You've got a game in the morning, the last thing you need is to play with a hangover."

"We're going to lose anyway," he grumbled. "Malfoy said so."

"Come on anyway."

Pansy lead him out of the club and into the cool, breezy street beyond. They walked about a block in the direction of the Tube station, but then she guided him down a blind alley. Then she reached inside his jacket and pulled out the manila envelope full of pictures. "Remember this?"

"Yeah."

"Can you see it?"

"I'm not blind, Parkinson"

The envelope burst into flames in her hand. She dropped it, and they both watched it burn down to ash and black curls on the cracked cement. "There's what I think of Malfoy's plans," Pansy said softly, after a beat.

Ron looked at her. "You were the one telling me not to get my hopes up earlier."

"I lied." She stepped forward and kissed him on the cheek, in a friendly sort of way. "Good luck tomorrow, Weasley."

"It's Hardy now."

"Ron, then." She squeezed his hand and took three steps into shadow, and called out before she Disapparated, "I have a feeling it'll be a game to remember."

The Game

Chapter Summary

It's the day of the final match, and all bets are off.

Ron very nearly didn't show up to play the next morning; he didn't really see the point. If MacGregor played, the team stood a slim chance of beating Tutshill, let alone by a wide enough margin to win the cup; if Ron did, they stood no chance at all. Still, in the end he couldn't bring himself to duck and run. He owed it to the team to appear, and since it was his fault they'd lose he owed it to them to suffer the consequences.

He showed up late, though he wasn't a masochist with a hazy idea of trying to slip unnoticed into the locker room to grab his gear. He would've been better off trying to swim the Channel with his arms tied behind his back. "There he is!" Macelwrath screeched the moment she saw him, and trapped him in a rib-crushing hug. "We were scared you were standing us up, Hardy!"

"Sorry," he muttered, squirming away.

Wood ruffled his hair affectionately and grinned. "You missed your own party last night, you know. We were ready to really live it up."

"No worries, though," Stebbins said cheerfully. "We just made it our pre-victory party instead."

"Pre-victory?" Ron asked. His stomach, already irritated by last night's drinks, curled alarmingly.

Macelwrath made a rude noise as she strapped on her goggles. "Of course. We've got you back, haven't we? That cup is ours!"

Ron pushed his way to his locker and spelled it open. "Last time I checked, we were still a three hundred points back," he said roughly.

Stebbins wrapped his arms around Ron's neck and rolled his eyes dramatically. "No, you see, we're a hundred fifty points back. Because we get a hundred fifty points, and you get the Snitch, and we're golden!"

"Go put your shirt on," Ron snapped, and shrugged the Beater off. Malfoy's voice crawled into the back of his head. *You're carrying the lot of them.*

I am not, he told himself, watching them out of the corner of his eye as he unbuttoned his shirt. Stebbins playfully pecked Funt on the cheek, Killjoy and Macelwrath teased one

another warmly, Wood watched Brajnikoff go through his warm-up exercises and occasionally joined in. *Maybe at first, but now I didn't bring them this far alone. They can win on their own accord.*

Can they win if you lose?

Plenty of teams have won a match and still missed the Snitch.

But this one?

"All right, Hardy?" Wood asked, brows furrowed.

Ron shook his head. "Yeah, I'm fine. Fine. Peachy." He pulled his robes over his head and started doing up the laces. No, better not to get his hopes up, whatever Pansy said; he was responsible for putting them in reach of this goal, and he was the one who would fail in the clutch. He might as well learn to accept it.

Coulter and MacGregor appeared just as Ron was getting his equipment on, long after the rest of the team had already finished. "I don't think we need a pep talk today," the coach said, "I think we all know what we have to do out there"

"Yeah" Stebbins said, "Stay out of Ron's way!"

The rest of the team laughed, and even Coulter's face quirked in a grin. "Well, there is the small matter of getting far enough ahead..."

Ron cringed and looked away, feeling nauseated. He couldn't do this. He couldn't handle the expectations, the inevitable disappointment he'd rather jump off a bridge than fly on that pitch today. Which, he reflected a little hysterically, wouldn't really solve anything, except perhaps to speed him to his ultimate damnation...

One of the stadium attendants edged into the room, a chubby little man clutching a small envelope to his chest. "Mr. Coulter?" he said. "Sorry to interrupt, sir, but there's an urgent message for Mr. Hardy"

"Can it wait until after the match?" Coulter asked, looking from the attendant to Ron.

"Let me see it." Ron climbed over a maze of knees and brooms to take the message, wondering who would be contacting him now, and why. The moment he broke the seal on the envelope, he knew; the wildflower perfume that rose out off the stationary couldn't be anyone else. Curiously, he unfolded the note and peered at Pansy's elegant script.

Ron

I took care of Malfoy, don't ask how. The point is he won't be at the match. It's all yours.

Good luck and don't you dare blow this.

He blinked, and read the message over again. What did she mean, she "took care" of him? Had she really was it really just that easy?

"Problem?" Coulter asked, touching his arm.

Ron looked at his coach, heart pounding. He looked at his teammates, watching him with nervous expectation. Malfoy wasn't coming to this match. If he wasn't there, he couldn't affect Ron's play. And Ron would have one last chance to do right by *someone* before his future left his hands forever.

"No problem," he said, crumpling the note. "Let's go get our cup."

They marched out of the locker room cheering like it was already in their hands; Macelwrath started an impromptu chorus of the Cannons' old fight song, and the rest of the team joined in with varying degrees of facility and equal enthusiasm. But the nerves came back when they got closer to the pitch, and heard the chanting and screaming of the crowd outside. This was Tutshill, after all, and they were the laughingstock of the league. They paused on the edge of the pitch, where the noise was already loud enough to vibrate bone, and looked at one another. It was gratifying that Ron apparently wasn't the only one on the verge of panic. *Don't blow this, Weasley*, he told himself, and kicked off his broom onto the pitch.

And into a sea of orange; everywhere he looked in the stands, he saw black and orange robes, and hats, and pennants and banners and signs. *Ron Hardy for President*, said some. *Cannons for the Cup*, proclaimed another. But most of them said the same short phrase, and after the first shock of noise Ron realized the crowd was chanting it, too, in a single massive voice that bounced off the walls and made the hair on his neck stand on end.

WE SHALL CONQUER, WE SHALL CONQUER, WE SHALL CONQUER...

"This is it," he said under his breath. He barely noticed his teammates nodding and forming up around him. This was his chance, and there was no way he would blow it; if he had to spend the rest of his life and death in Malfoy's grip, he was going to go out with a bang.

-x-X-x-X-x-

Draco Malfoy was well past enraged.

He stalked through the Canon's stadium and left a trail of damage in his wake. Where he passed, couples found themselves arguing over, and vendors dropped food on their customers' shoes. Scuffles broke out between rival fans. Ice cream fell off the cone and babies burst into tears, only for their parents to find that the milk in the bottle had soured. A family of starlings that had nested in the rafters fled screeching from their nest when he passed beneath it, and when a balding wizard with a train of small children got in his way Malfoy glared at him until the butterbeer in his hand began to boil. There was a faint whiff of brimstone in the air.

He pushed his way through the throngs, struggling for the shortest route to the pitch and to Weasley. That was his first concern, ensuring his plan was still on course. He would deal with Parkinson later but deal with her he would, because that bitch was going to *suffer* for what she'd done. It was bad enough that she'd come to him under false pretenses the night before, all simper and cringe, as if she were trying to finagle her way back into his project now that it

was destined to succeed. He'd needed someone to brag to, so he'd suffered her to stay, provided she entertained him; he'd made the mistake of asking her to mix him a drink.

Which she had. With a bottle of horse tranquilizers.

Even as a demon with a minimal metabolism, that concoction had hit him like a wrecking ball. But he might've been able to forgive her for it anyway. When he'd finally come to, he'd been naked and bound with duct tape, without a stitch of clothing left in his hotel room; she'd also drawn a moustache and silly eyebrows on his face in blue laundry pen. But even that, with difficulty, he might've been able to forgive her. He might've even been able to forgive her for locking him into his room and stealing his credit cards, if she begged enough. But she'd gone too far, she'd crossed the line.

She'd shaved his head.

And for that, the filthy little cunt was going to *pay*.

Draco pushed and shoved his way through a gate, stumbling in the pink flip-flops he'd purchased from the hotel gift shop with change he'd scoured from between the couch cushions. He'd also bought a souvenir t-shirt and novelty shorts that played "Rule, Britannia" when he sat down; disgusting, but it wasn't like he was going to need them long. Just long enough to do what he'd come back to do; just long enough to ensure that the Cannons were humiliated and Weasley remembered to whom he belonged. A stadium attendant stared at him as he elbowed past her: his lacerated scalp, his marker moustache, his black eye. He growled at her, and she fainted, tripping an old witch with a cane in the process. Draco pushed on.

The stadium was full to brimming of screaming, whooping idiots in identical shades of eye-searing orange; Draco winced as he fought for a view of the scoreboard, elbowing his way past one badly-dressed fool after another and leaving a series of arguments and shoving matches in his wake. What he saw when he got one made his jaw drop, and he had to rub the eye that wasn't swollen shut to confirm he wasn't seeing things.

The Cannons were leading by a score of one hundred eighty to twenty.

Calm down, old boy, he told himself, bracing both arms against the railing. *Let's deal with this rationally*. He was still in control here. He was still the owner. The orange-clad nincompoops hadn't won anything yet; all he had to do was get to Weasley and get him off his game, and there'd be no force on Earth that could put that cup in the Cannons' hands. It wouldn't be pretty; it wouldn't be the heart-breaking near-win he'd imagined; but it would get done. And then Parkinson and Weasley *both* would learn the price of disobedience.

He nudged a small child standing next to him. "Where's Hardy?" he asked.

The waif blinked at him and burst into tears.

Growling, Draco scanned the skies, wishing he'd gone ahead and gotten the heart-shaped plastic sunglasses while he was in the gift shop. Too late for regrets now; he fought the sun

and searched for the Seekers, plotting a variety of ways distract the Weasel long enough to let the Tornados get the Snitch

"LOOK!" shriek someone behind him, at a glass-shattering pitch, setting off a tidal wave of shouts and yelling. When Draco's skull stopped vibrating, he followed the pointing fingers to two plummeting figures on the far side of the pitch. Time seemed to slow down; Draco saw Weasley, he saw Jenkins lagging a broom-length behind him, and he saw the Snitch all but flying into the ginger son of a bitch's outstretched hand.

"No!"

He boosted himself up on the edge of the railing, teetering wildly, oblivious to the escalation of the violence behind him. There was still one way to stop this. With a snarl, he stretched out his hand across the pitch and *pulled*.

-x-X-x-X-x-

The wind whistled past Ron's ears, and he hunkered lower over his broomstick. He had the Snitch. He knew it. It was just a matter of getting it in his hand before the Tornados had time to score again. He hurtled himself towards the little golden ball, getting closer...closer...closer...

And then his broomstick started to shake.

No, he realized after one heart-stopping moment. It wasn't that the broomstick was shaking. It was that he'd never *noticed* the shaking before, the way it started vibrating harder and harder the faster he went until it seemed like it would shake its twigs loose and crash. His skin began to itch and tingle, all over, just beneath the surface, so badly that he would've been scratching frantically if he hadn't been terrified of falling off. He tried to focus on the Snitch and not the shuddering broom under him, but the little golden ball seemed to shrink to a blurring pin-point in his vision. He was going to lose it! He strained to keep up, but suddenly this was *hard*, harder than ever, as hard as...

His lungs seemed to catch on the rushing wind.

This was as hard as it had been when he was just Ron *Weasley*.

He sensed something moving behind him and realized that Jenkins had caught up. He couldn't see the Snitch anymore, could barely see where he was going, but he was not, was *not* going to give this up yet. Screwing his eyes shut, he lunged out over the handle of his broom, nearly flinging himself off, and swiped at the air where he thought the little ball way.

He felt his wrist guards bang into Jenkins'.

He felt the wind flow through his fingers.

And he felt sun-warmed metal settle neatly into his palm.

He'd overbalanced, and his broom was angled straight at the dirt; Ron leaned back hard, pulling out of the dive, clinging with all his strength to the broomstick he could now barely control. By some miracle, he managed not to crash or fall off, and the moment he was certain of keeping his seat he looked down. The Snitch fluttered uselessly in his hand, a hand that was swelling and stretching against the heavy leather guard, that was blossoming freckles like some rare disease as the sleeve of his uniform robes retreated down his arm. His stomach did a curious back-flip as the itching under his skin got worse. *He was changing back.*

As the crowd began to erupt in cheers and singing loud enough to buzz in his bones, he dove his broom again and veered down the path to the locker room. No time to deliver the Snitch to the referee, no time for *anything*; he had to get away before somebody saw what was happening and realized he wasn't Hardy anymore. Flying indoors, however, wasn't a bright idea for even the best of the best, and without the superstar's skill he couldn't manage it for long. He tried to brake, turned too sharply on a corner and crashed into a wall; the impact knocked the wind from his lungs, though he didn't feel anything snap, and he lay stunned on the ground for a moment before his legs would work again. He let go of the Snitch and started pawing at his gear as he ran towards the lockers, trying to get the guards off a body grown too large for them. He skidded up to his locker just ahead of the first reporters, and quickly locked the doors with every spell he knew.

He looked at himself in the nearest mirror. Ron Weasley's face a face he hadn't seen in months looked back at him. Somehow, for some reason, Malfoy had changed him back to who he'd been.

Malfoy had broken the contract.

Ron grinned.

It took a matter of minutes for him to throw off his robes and struggle into Ron Hardy's smaller street clothing. Any one of those minutes he was sure the door was going to be blown off its frame. He stuffed his feet into a pair of trainers a size too small and grabbed his wand. There were a few places he needed to stop by first, a few errands he needed to run before anyone realized Ron Hardy was gone, but after that...

Ron Disappeared. A split-second later, the locker room door burst open, and a mob of reporters, supporters and officials flooded the room. They found an empty locker, a pile of clothes, and no sign of the greatest Quidditch player the world had ever known.

Found Again

Chapter Summary

All's well that ends well at least, for some people.

"...first time in over a century. Coach Edwin Coulter has been quoted as saying the win is 'miraculous' and that his was 'one hundred per cent confident in this team from the very start.' A victory parade has been planned down Diagon Alley late next week to honor these lovable losers turned underdog champions.

"Meanwhile, the mysterious disappearance of star Seeker Ronald Hardy continues to baffle all investigators. After making the winning catch in today's heart-stopping match, Hardy flew into the stadium and has not been seen since. Cannons owner Ludovic Bagman refused to speculate on the embattled American's disappearing act just over twenty-four hours after he was cleared of doping accusations by the Ministry, but witnesses say that Hardy appeared ill as he flew off the pitch and was possibly bleeding from his scalp. His locker at the stadium and his hotel room in London were both found empty, and there was no sign of foul play at either location. The WWN will bring you further details as this story develops.

"In related news, a brawl broke out in the stands after the Cannons' astonishing win, and more than a dozen spectators were sent to St. Mungo's as a result. Healers there describe the injuries as mild and for the most part very silly, though there were reports of a few fans more seriously harmed. One wizard, a suspected Tornados sympathizer, was thrown onto the pitch by an angry mob and"

Harry switched off the wireless set and sank back onto the couch, shutting his eyes. He'd gone to the match to support the Cannons and watched from the first goal to the moment Hardy flew off the pitch. He'd listened to commentary on the wireless the rest of the afternoon, but the announcers kept repeating themselves over and over. The Cannons won. Hardy was gone. And Harry had the unbecoming urge to crawl under the covers and hide.

It wasn't like he hadn't enjoyed the match, because he had, and he was happy that the Cannons had won the Cup. But that happiness was bittersweet, tempered by the knowledge that the person he knew who would've been the happiest the person who should've been next to him at the match, enjoying it with him wasn't around. And Hardy's disappearance somehow made everything worse. Harry had liked the Seeker, and he'd hoped that, once he'd gotten his own feelings straightened out, they might've been able to maintain some sort of friend. Somehow things hadn't seemed as bleak while Hardy was flatting with him, even if the American had been a poor substitute for the Ron he was really missing. Besides, he'd never explained what he meant the day he'd gone running out of the Muggle café.

But no one in wizarding England had seen a hair on Hardy's head since the end of the match, and somehow that only compounded the loneliness squeezing around Harry's chest.

He pulled the afghan Mrs. Weasley had given them as a flat-warming gift around his shoulders and stretched out on the couch. Maybe just maybe Hermione wasn't wrong about this one. Maybe he ought to move on, move out, let Ron come back on his own time when he was good and ready. Whenever that would be. It had been nearly six months since he'd gotten that last letter, six months of waiting and empty silence. Any other wizard would've given up long ago. Maybe Harry was being unreasonable, holding vigil here when he could be staying somewhere larger, safer, nicer...

But some small part of him held out hope rather foolish, at this point, perhaps that any minute, his old friend would be walking in the door like he'd never been gone, with a smile and an amusing explanation. *He promised*, he told himself for the umpteenth time. *He promised me...*

He thought he must've dozed off for a while; it certainly couldn't have been more than a few minutes, though the flat was mostly dark when he started awake. He listened carefully, and the sound that had awakened him repeated; the front door rattled and thumped, and someone on the other side swore just loud enough to be audible. As Harry groped for his wand, though, he heard the notoriously temperamental lock grind open, and the light from the hall sketched a long, thin silhouette on the floor as the door opened.

"Harry?" someone called.

The voice was familiar, aching so. Harry's heart leapt into his throat. For a split second he was almost scared to turn the lights on, in case this was all just a really peculiar dream, and movement would wake him; but then the door shut and the shadowy figure stepped into the front room, and he had to see for himself. "*Lumos*," he called, and he was so nervous every light in the room probably every light on the floor switched on at once.

And the man who stood blinking not five feet away was *real*.

Harry stared frozen for a minute, but then Ron rubbed his eyes clear and spotted him. The grin on his face lit up the room in an entirely different way. "Harry," he said again, and Harry thought that if he could just hear Ron say his name like that all the time he could someday die a happy man.

"You're back," was the first thing that popped out of his mouth, and he instantly cursed himself as a total idiot.

Ron spread his arms, shrugging, a little shame-faced. "I'm back. For real."

Harry lunged forward and hugged him, tight and without a shred of self-conscious reserve. Ron thumped him on the back once and returned the embrace, nearly squeezing the air from Harry's lungs. "You stupid git," Harry growled, "you incredibly stupid git."

"How mad are you?" Ron asked warily.

Harry pulled back and looked up at him, at the face he'd missed so badly. "Not at all, really," he said, and stepped away, suddenly embarrassed. Ron's face was rather pink itself, and he cleared his throat briskly as they sat down on the couch. "Ron, where?"

Ron raised one hand, and Harry fell silent. "Not yet," he said. "Don't ask me that yet. Just I'll explain later. But I don't really want to think about it right now."

Harry immediately checked his friend over top to bottom, but he looked healthy and whole, though his clothes didn't fit him quite right. "All right," he said slowly. "Not yet."

They stared at each other for a moment.

"The Cannons won the League Cup."

"I know." Ron paused for a bit, cleared his throat. "I...I missed you."

Harry's heart did a funny little two-step, and he couldn't help but smile. "Missed you too, mate." Ron smiled back, and they just sat there for what felt like forever, grinning at each other like a couple of idiots. Harry wondered, in the back of his mind, whether he had the balls to do what he'd been imagining himself doing on this day for the past couple of weeks but then Ron's eyes focused on something over his shoulder, and his smile melted into an expression of sick horror. Harry turned around to look; there was nothing there but the window, rattling in the wind, and the dark alley beyond it. "Ron? You okay?"

For a moment, Ron was frozen and silent, but then he nodded his head without shifting his gaze. "Yeah," he said hoarsely. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"You sure?"

Ron looked at him, with an intensity that made Harry's breathing hitch. "Harry," he said, sounding a little desperate, "there's something I've been wanting to do for a very long time. Would you...I mean...can I...?"

"Yeah?" Harry asked, not daring to let himself hope.

Ron swallowed hard, then put one hand on Harry's shoulder and kissed him. It was clumsy and sloppy and glorious. *I have to be dreaming*, Harry thought, there was no way surely Ron didn't but there was a tongue in his mouth, which obviously meant Ron *did*, and Harry decided that even if he was dreaming he might as well enjoy it while it lasted. He took a double handful of red hair and returned the kiss, hard, with all the emotion he'd bottled up since he got the letter, all the feeling he'd forced himself to admit to after the fiasco at the Hardy banquet three weeks ago. Ron groaned a little bit and pulled Harry close, as close as they could get, until they were practically sitting in one another's laps. It wasn't nearly close enough.

And for some damn reason, Harry thought of the time Hardy had kissed him in the cloakroom at the banquet. Except this was somehow more, somehow better, because it was *Ron*; Harry's best mate, the one he knew best, the one he'd practically grown up with. This

kiss was the most intense thing Harry had ever felt, and he kicked himself for not trying all this sooner.

Ron broke off for air, gasping, and Harry dove for his friend's throat, licking his pulse point before biting down hard enough to leave a mark. Ron jumped, and tugged on the back of Harry's shirt. "Harry. *Harry*."

"Mmmm?" He left off exploring the curve of Ron's jaw and looked up, setting his glasses back arights as he did.

"Do you hear anything?"

Harry blinked. Ron was staring out the window again, but there *still* wasn't anything out there, unless he counted the rickety old fire escape. "Just the wind," he said, turning about around.

Ron was grinning, broader than ever, if that was possible. "Exactly," he said. "Just the wind." Harry wanted to ask him what was going on, but then Ron kissed him again, and he forgot the question entirely.

As a matter of fact, he forgot quite a few things, at least for the rest of the evening.

-x-X-x-X-x-

Malfoy paused on the fire escape, one flight below Potter's flat. He ached in places he hadn't even known *existed*; at least the sons of bitches who'd thrown him from the stands had gotten their just deserts. Even if he'd been too unconscious to appreciate them. Dragging his battered carcass up the last set of creaky metal stairs, he vowed to lay off the surface work for a while after this. Strictly non-corporeal manifestations for him. He'd never realized what a hassle a body was until he'd had a chance to go without one.

Just for a moment, he let his grip relax on the flesh, let this body with all its injuries fade from the world a little. That was better. He still hurt like a son of a bitch, but it wasn't so much a hindrance. And he was still real enough to do what needed to be doneget Weasley back under contract. Satisfied, he made it up the last few steps and turned to the glowing window near the edge. Potter's window.

Draco peered in, pressing both hands against the pane to keep his balance. Yes, there he was, the treacherous ginger son of a bitch. Weasley was sitting on the sofa with Potter, and they were making googly eyes at each other. Disgusting. But Draco could still get him back, oh, yesjust a little buzz on the fiendish frequencies, just a little bait in the trap. He could still pull something out of this fiasco, even if it was just one soul. He *had* to. He was *not* setting foot in the shit pit.

He tugged on the window, trying to open it. It was locked. *Bless* him. "Weasley!" he shouted, pounding on the glass. "Weasley, let me in!"

The Weasel looked up, yes, good boy and got a look of horror on his face that bordered on the comical. Draco growled and pounded harder. "Come on, Ron," he tried. "Let's talk about this. I'm not unreasonable, I'm willing to negotiate here...compromise...you stupid bastard, open this window!"

Potter glanced around, but of *course* the virtuous little prat didn't see him; Draco didn't care about him. He was there for the Weasel. "I'll change you back," Draco said feverishly, pressing his nose to the glass. "I won't sign you with the Tornados. You want Potter? I'll let you have Potter...I'll let you have all the specy little midgets you want...Weasley, *please*, don't make me beg here..."

"A bit late for that."

Draco whirled around, but the light he faced nearly blinded him; it was a more than physical glow, and took a moment for his eyes to adjust. When he could see again and recognized the figure perched on the fire escape stairs, he snarled. "*Parkinson.*"

"Very good, Malfoy, very good," she said dryly, fluffing her hair.

Draco's eyes narrowed. It was Pansy but it *wasn't*; same voice, said beautiful hair, but the lush figure had become slightly chunky, and her severe white suit didn't show it off well. And her face was different, more like she'd looked when she was alive, right down to that horrible nose...

"Let me introduce myself, by the way," she said smoothly. "Pansy Parkinson, Messenger-in-training."

Draco sucked in a breath and backed away. "You traitor," he hissed.

She shrugged. "If you like to think of it that way."

"You switched sides."

She stood up and smoothed her jacket. "What can I say? It turns out there's more important things in the world than my precious ego. Not that I'd expect you to understand that..."

The bitch. The *bitch*! "You ruined me!" he shouted. "Do you understand that? *I'm ruined!*"

"I knew that," she said coolly, "but it's no fault of mine."

Draco clenched his teeth until they ached. "Parkinson, when I get my hands on you"

"You can't do a thing."

His snarl would've put quite a Doberman pinscher to shame.

She smiled sweetly and peeked in the window. "So you didn't even get one soul out of the bargain? They're not going to like that Below."

"They're going to like it fine Below, because I'm going to get Weasley back!" Draco bellowed. How dare this virtuous little bint, this two-faced, conniving angel question his damnation skills. "And you can tell your new friends Above, too!"

"Do you really want me to?" she asked softly, and Draco swallowed hard. "I didn't think so."

"I'm a bit busy, Parkinson," he snarled, "so if you're done gloating, I have a temptation to see to."

"Go ahead, if you really think you can," she said, and took a few steps up the fire escape. "You know, Malfoy, there's still hope for you."

"I know," he growled, "that's the whole reason I'm *here*." He pointed sharply at Weasley through the glass, and yelped when he jammed his finger.

Pansy sighed. Was that pity in her eyes? Was she *pitying* him? *Nobody* pitied a Malfoy. "Enjoy the shit pit, Draco," she said. "You know the way out if you want it."

He sneered at her as she climbed the escape. Shit pit indeed. He wasn't going to end up in the shit pit. He *couldn't*. He pressed his face against the window again and kept knocking.

"Weasley, please, I'm begging you...Weasley? Oh, Hell...*Weasley!* Stop that at once! Potter, you bastard, let go of him, he's mine! Weasley...Weasley, listen...get your tongue out of his mouth and listen to me! Hey! *WEASLEY!*"

~Fin~

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