

Hermione Granger's Hogwarts Crammer for Delinquents on the Run

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Hermione Granger's Hogwarts Crammer for Delinquents on the Run

by [waspabi](#)

Summary

'You're a wizard, Harry' is easier to hear from a half-giant when you're eleven, rather than from some kids on a tube platform when you're seventeen and late for work.

Notes

Loosely based off of [this prompt](#). Thanks to everyone who helped/is helping me out with this -- especially to Catie, Serena, Clare, and Lily, who have helped me with everything from the particularities of alternate timelines to how best to incorporate gratuitous undercover scenes. This bananas explosion village could never have careened into terrifying life without you.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

- Translation into Tiếng Việt available: [Trại Hogwarts dành cho thanh thiếu niên bỏ trốn của Hermione Granger](#) by [goldcloudy](#)
- Translation into Русский available: [Памятка Гермионы Грейнджер для беглых хогвартских дебоширов](#) by [wakeupinlondon](#)

Chapter 1

Draco Malfoy's shiny dragon-leather oxford sunk four inches into the largest, most excessive dog dropping he had ever seen. If he hadn't known better, he'd have sworn the source had to be hippogriff.

"I cannot believe this is my life," he announced, looking in horror at the mess that had once been his foot. This is clearly what happened when one abandoned everything one knew for a fool's errand of a search for a myth. London was disgusting. His shoe was ruined, and he couldn't even do a scouring charm in front of all the bloody Muggles. *Harry Potter*. They might as well have been on a search for Merlin's grave.

None of his five unlikely compatriots gave him a moment's sympathy.

"Believe it," Girl Weasley said cheerfully. She looked down at her book again, squinting at the small maps. "London A-Z? Are you sure all this is accurate, Hermione?"

"Aside from wizarding areas, yes," Granger said crisply. "And it's entire when you purchase the wizarding supplement."

"Muggle London is massive," Boy Weasley said glumly. He peered over his sister's shoulder. "How are we ever going to find this bastard?"

"Logic and deductive reasoning," said Granger.

"Innovative thinking," Luna suggested.

Girl Weasley shrugged. "Dumb luck?"

"A combination," said Neville, grinning.

We aren't, Draco wanted to say, but didn't. The city was too big, and *Harry Potter* was just — some boy who got lucky, once. It wouldn't even matter if they did find him. It's not like it would help.

"My foot is still entirely *dung*," Draco informed them. "If anyone wanted to duck over to some helpful alcove so that I could prevent my entire sock from becoming subsumed in faeces, I would be much obliged."

Granger ignored him. "The boy from his old school —"

"Ali," Boy Weasley substituted.

"Ali, gave us a good lead. I'm absolutely positive we'll be able to find him — or find someone who *can* find him." Granger shook her head. "I can't believe he's been out of his family's protection for so long and *they* haven't found him."

Everyone glanced, reflexively, at Draco. Draco tried not to take it personally. He had once been *they*, after all.

“They underestimate Muggle areas.” Draco checked the street for onlookers, palmed his wand and crouched over his shoe to clean it.

“Thank Morgana,” said Girl Weasley. She peered into her map. “Okay, both of the possible addresses are in someplace called... *Peckham*.”

Everyone but Hermione traded baffled looks. “Muggles,” said Boy Weasley bewilderedly, and Draco nodded.

Granger hummed, as if this meant something to her. “We’ll take the tube, then we’ll split up to check the addresses.”

Both Weasleys looked thrilled. Draco made a face. “*Must* we. Why can’t we just Apparate?”

“London is rather a populated area, Malfoy. Not to mention that some of us still have the Trace, and we can’t risk the Statute of Secrecy.” Granger adjusted her handbag, which clunked forebodingly. “And the two of us who can actually *perform* Apparition need to save our strength in case we need it for an emergency.”

“Cheer up,” Neville said, clapping him on the shoulder. “You can do the ticket thing.”

Draco did like the ticket thing. “Glorious. A metal tube beneath the ground, let us all descend merrily into hell.”

“I don’t think it will be as bad this time,” Granger said. “It’s not peak hours.”

“Ooh, perhaps we’ll see the Underground dragons.” Luna smiled blithely up at the terraced houses, as if at old friends.

“I don’t like being in confined space for that long,” Girl Weasley admitted. “The Under-train is amazing, though.”

“Yeah,” Boy Weasley agreed, “Dad would have...” He trailed off, putting his hands into his pockets for something to do.

Granger touched Boy Weasley’s arm lightly. “No time to waste,” she said, and led them down the street. Though she was the shortest of their number, she somehow managed to convey height through sheer intensity of expression.

Our fearless leader, Draco thought, and regretted every decision he had ever made. Hermione Granger may have been the most determined and capable person Draco had ever met, but this wild-ghoul chase had been doomed from the start. Draco was shocked they had survived for *this* long. He wasn’t foolish enough to expect to survive much longer, let alone find *Harry Potter* wandering around this infested city.

In a small and leaky flat in Peckham, Harry Potter stared at his face in the streaky mirror.

“This is not forever,” Harry told himself. “This is not going to be your life forever.”

Harry’s reflection just stared back at him, glasses smudged, face drawn. His scar stretched jaggedly across his forehead, breaking into lightning tendrils and cutting through part of his eyebrow.

His one and only sort-of-friend, Ali, had told him his scar was wicked.

“You should get your hair cut short,” he’d said, “No one’ll fuck with you if they see that scar.”

People didn’t fuck with Harry all that much, really. When he first started at the local comprehensive, older boys tried to rough him up but they always seemed to have things happen to them afterwards — Harry would find himself on top of a roof, or the boys’ fists would slide from his body as if they’d been trying to punch oil. Eventually, people stopped trying. He still got called the same sorts of names Ali did, although unlike for Ali they didn’t always feel personal to Harry.

“You don’t pray,” Ali had said one day, rolling up his prayer mat. Harry had been watching the door, making sure nobody came barging in. “You Hindu?”

Harry had shrugged. “I don’t know.” The Dursleys were strictly C of E. He didn’t know what his parents had been, if anything.

Ali had nodded thoughtfully. “Hope you find out, one day,” he’d said.

The Dursleys had moved house again not long after that, Harry in tow like a collection of unwanted boxes, but it had been Ali who put him in contact with his sister’s best friend’s cousin in London, when Harry finally took the bag filled with all of his worldly possessions and fled in the dead of night.

Three months later, Harry had managed to acquire an exhausting job, a temporary sofa in a flat with serious mould problems and four horrible flatmates. It was already several orders of magnitude better than the first seventeen years of his life.

“This is not forever,” he said again. He shouldered his bag, gave himself a decisive nod in the mirror, and left.

“Oi, Potter,” said Tall Flatmate, catching him on his way out the door. “Rent at the end of the week, mate.”

“I just paid rent last Saturday,” Harry said. It had been higher than rent for sleeping space on a stained sofa ought to have been probably, but he’d paid it anyway. He hadn’t had time to find other accommodations.

Tall Flatmate shrugged and picked something out of his crooked teeth. “Lauren told me to tell you.”

Harry watched Tall Flatmate for a long moment. “Fine,” he said, and left.

He’d have to get a new flat, and soon. He’d look at postings at work, maybe, or ask his coworkers. Harry was glad most of his belongings fit into the messenger bag he took with him everywhere; he did not trust anyone in that flat with his toothbrush, let alone anything else.

Harry had not stood on the train platform for more than three minutes before he felt eyes on the back of his head.

Every couple of years, a funny-looking stranger would stop in the middle of the street to gawk right at Harry. When he was thirteen some stout bloke had even knocked Harry out and, when he woke up, he was bleeding from his left arm and the man was gone. Only three minutes had passed, and he still didn’t know what had happened. Harry had always figured he was a target for weirdos — this was just a few more weirdos than normal.

The strangers were conspicuous and improbable on the tube platform: two boys and a girl, all of them staring at Harry like he was an unattended rucksack that had just begun ticking. Something about them was *off*. Something about them struck a strange yet familiar chord right below Harry’s throat.

One of the boys — tall, blond, pinched expression — stared right into Harry’s face. “Are you Harry Potter?” he demanded, his accent akin to Joanna Lumley’s Etonian nephew.

Harry scanned his oddly-cut fine dark wool coat and his shiny shoes and disliked him on sight. “Who’s asking?”

Posh Bloke straightened up, long nose wrinkling. “I think you’ll find—”

“Malfoy, not now. We don’t have much time,” said the girl, dark-skinned with bushy hair and rather large front teeth. She sounded nearly as posh as the other one — what the fuck was Harry doing, getting harangued by toffs of a Wednesday morning? Jesus Christ, he was going to be late to work because these arseholes were bored.

Could Dudley be somehow behind this? They hadn’t been in contact since Harry left the Dursleys, but... Harry tried to back away from them, craning his neck to stare down the tunnel for approaching lights. He backed up so quickly he nearly ran into the tall ginger bloke.

“Mate, sorry to bother you,” Ginger said, less posh. Harry’s shoulders settled. “Just give us a listen, all right?”

Posh Girl’s brown eyes darted nervously between platform entrances. “We don’t have much time. Harry — you’ve always had strange things happen, haven’t you? When you were angry, or scared, or upset, things would happen. Things you couldn’t explain. Things no one could.”

Harry’s insides felt like he had been plunged in cold water. How could she — did someone tell her, or did his aunt and uncle get gossiping at a stuffy party about nasty Harry and the

trouble he brought with him? How could she *know*? Or — had he done something just now? He looked around the platform, but nothing seemed out of order.

“Thought so,” said Posh Girl, satisfied like she’d just been awarded a high mark. “I’m Hermione Granger, this is Ron Weasley and Draco Malfoy. I’m afraid you’re in tremendous danger. We’re here to help.”

Harry swallowed his reaction, covering with a half laugh. “Yeah, all right. You have fun with that. I’m going to be late for work.” He clutched his messenger bag, trying to squash the tide of sour fear rising inside his ribs. Everything was fine. The train would emerge any minute and take him to work where Aurelia would yell at him and the customers would be rude and everything could go back to bloody normal.

“Harry, please, listen to me.” Hermione Granger got between Harry and the edge of the platform and looked up at him with gigantic, pleading eyes. “It started when you were young. Six, maybe, or seven. You fell out of a tree and bounced instead of breaking a bone, or you got angry with someone and something bad happened to them — their coursework disappeared from their desk, or a pencil flew out of nowhere to hit them in the head. You couldn’t explain it. No one could. Maybe you can even — maybe you can direct it now, a little bit. Things you can’t explain.”

Or you turn your teacher’s wig blue, Harry thought, his stomach plunging down past the tracks, down towards the molten centre of the earth. *Or you vanish glass for a boa constrictor in the zoo.*

“The same thing happened to me. To all of us,” Hermione said, motioning to the boys who flanked her like lieutenants. “If you’d like, we can tell you more — and there’s something you should know, Harry: there are people after you.”

“And they’re you, and you’re right here.” *They know, they know, they know*, beat Harry’s treacherous heart.

“Besides us. Besides us, Harry, you *know* what we’re talking about. You can feel it, can’t you?” Hermione Granger’s large brown eyes watered with earnestness. She believed so hard she fairly shone. “Haven’t you wanted *answers*?”

God, what *hadn’t* Harry wanted? He’d wanted a place to sleep that wasn’t a cupboard. He’d wanted to stop moving house every five minutes. He’d wanted London. He’d wanted friends. He’d wanted clothes that fit him. He’d wanted someone to — someone to touch him, just affectionately, on the arm or the shoulder, a touch that meant *you are not alone*. He’d wanted enough to eat, a better job, something — *anything* that belonged to his parents. That he could have *answers* never really seemed like a possibility.

“I’ve got work,” Harry said, as the train came rushing towards them. The wave of warm air blasted Hermione’s hair into a small typhoon. His stomach twisted. “The Stockpot, on Old Compton Street. I get off at half twelve.” Before he could rethink he pushed onto the carriage, turning back to glimpse the three of them still waiting on the platform: Posh Spice, Ginger Spice, and Hermione Granger, who rushed forward.

“In the afternoon?” she called.

Harry snorted. “In the morning!”

Before Hermione could reply the doors whooshed shut, sealing Harry off from whatever — whatever that was. He sat in a vacant seat and stared at a peeling advert on the wall. *Answers*. Fucking hell.

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“That went well,” said Hermione, watching the train disappear into the tunnel. She felt for the reassuring rattle of her overstuffed handbag. It would be a bit much, she thought, to take out her To-Do List and tick off ‘Find Harry Potter’. She’d do that later, preferably alone, when she could be adequately victorious. She had been right. She had been right all along. Hermione never, ever tired of that feeling. It surged through her like a sugar rush.

Malfoy and Ron stared at her blankly.

“Did it?” Ron asked, tilting his head.

“It did,” she insisted. “He told us where he worked!”

Malfoy shrugged. “Could be a lie.”

“Or he could dodge us,” Ron added. “Slip out the back when we show up, or something.”

“He won’t.” Hermione eyed the empty tunnel. Their situations were entirely different, but Hermione had once been a girl around whom strange things happened every day. She had been a girl who wanted answers. She had been a girl who wanted *more*, and she could see that same hunger in Harry Potter’s tired face, in his startlingly green eyes. He wanted *more*. He wanted more, and he would meet them outside of his work at half twelve in the morning just to see if they could give it to him.

Or she’d track him down again. Of course it would be *better* if Harry would meet them of his own accord, but Hermione was not above forcing him to see reason. Honestly, what did she have to lose?

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By the time the cloudy sky went dark, Harry had started to wonder whether he imagined the whole experience. Then he was busy with the dinner rush, and they got a load of drunks at eleven, and before long it was time to clock out and Harry was sore, exhausted and smelt faintly of curried eggs. He was really not expecting to be accosted right outside the door but — here they were. Posh Spice, Ginger Spice, Hermione Granger and —

“There’s more of you now,” Harry said blankly.

“Yes, this is Neville, Luna and Ginny,” said Hermione, “Is there somewhere we can go, Harry?”

Harry looked over his shoulder. Costin and Aurelia were still inside, nicking whatever food would spoil before tomorrow. Harry had maybe planned on going out with them after they finished. They usually went down the pub on Tuesdays and then showed up to their Wednesday shifts reeking and hungover. Not that Harry had ever joined them before, just — maybe he could, this time.

“Dunno,” Harry said, avoiding her eyes. “I kind of already made plans.”

“I told you this wouldn’t work. I don’t know why I’m even here,” huffed Posh Spice. Malfoy.

“You are here because you’ve made a turn for the moral,” said one of the girls. She had what appeared to be conkers strung into her dirty blond braids, and was wearing a truly bizarre combination of skirts.

Malfoy ground the toe of his expensive shoe against the pavement. “And every day I regret that decision.”

“No you don’t,” Conkers said peaceably.

Hermione settled her shoulders and leaned closer to Harry, eyes pleading. “Harry, this is of very serious consequence —”

Ginger Spice — Ron — put a hand on Hermione’s shoulder. “Just give us a chance. We’ll buy you a drink,” he said. His freckly face was genial, genuine. Harry almost trusted him, despite himself.

“Yeah, all right,” Harry said, and lead them to the sleazy pub round the corner. None of them said anything as they walked — maybe they were all a bit nervous of the down and out. Posh kids and all, could have been their first time out of Sloane Square. Harry led them past a leather bar to see if that helped their comfort levels. It did not.

They fought their way through the crowd at the front and found a booth in the smokey haze, settled in with their illegal pints. Well, at least Harry’s was illegal. The others didn’t look much older than he was, but who knew, they could have been eighteen.

“So,” said Harry.

“So,” said Ron.

Across the room, a bloke in a Manchester United shirt began crooning “Candle in the Wind” in the vague direction of his pint. His mate clapped him on the shoulder sadly, and harmonised the verse.

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake,” sighed Malfoy, putting his head in his hands. “We bring the *actual* Harry Potter here, and this is what we do with ourselves.”

“We’re doing our best,” said the handsome one, whose name may have been Neville.

“Malfoy, the Statute,” hissed Hermione.

“We’ve brought him here to talk about fairly non-Statute stuff, Hermione,” said Ginger Girl. “Best do a Muffliato in advance.”

“Right,” Hermione said, and bent her head, muttering something.

“I wouldn’t worry,” said Conkers. “Some Muggles are quite aware of magic, you know. The Ministry doesn’t like it, of course, but what can they do, when Gorbles have been populating the Underground since the mid-eighties?”

“First of all, *I* actually brought *you* lot here,” Harry said. “Second of all, and this is a general question, but what the fuck?”

The two gingers, Posh Spice, Handsome One and Conkers turned towards Hermione. Hermione sighed. “Well, this is going to be rather difficult to get into over a pint.”

“Maybe try for two, then,” Harry suggested.

“I’m afraid it might take more than that.” Hermione stared down at her drink. “Oh, dear. May as well come out and say it, shall we? Harry, you’re a wizard.”

“Right,” Harry said, “Fuck it. Sounds great.”

Hermione went on to inform Harry that there was, in fact, an entire world of witches and wizards living amongst the sorry masses. There were magic shopping centres and magic government organisations and magic quality control bodies. And there were magic schools, to which every young witch and wizard got an invitation.

Every young witch and wizard, that is, except Harry.

“You were meant to,” Handsome One assured him, “Everyone expected you to be in our year, and when you weren’t —”

“There are loads of theories about it,” Hermione said earnestly, over the dull buzzing of Harry’s cranium. “Some say it was He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Some think maybe the Muggles who raised you managed it somehow, like they emigrated to somewhere unreachable, and somehow the magical trace was disrupted. But I knew — I mean, we knew you were out there.”

“There are about three things in that little speech that I didn’t understand at all,” Harry said faintly, “But let’s move forward — *how* exactly did you know about me? If there are loads of... wizards, and witches, how come you wanted to find *me*?”

“Well, you’re in terrible danger, Harry,” Hermione began, taking a deep breath for another speech.

“When you were a baby you defeated the darkest wizard of our time. Now shit is mad and the dark wizard’s followers are after your head. We’ve left school and spent the last five months tracking you down to give you a heads up, so, you know, you’re welcome.” Ginger Girl took a long sip of her pint, then glanced at the rest of them. “*What?* I think that’s pretty succinct. Hermione would have taken ages.”

“Yes, well done, Ginny,” Hermione said, looking rather put out.

Harry blinked at Ginger Girl — Ginny — and wondered what Aurelia and Costin were up to. Probably not an elaborate prank. Right? “Okay. Why haven’t these... followers found me before?”

“You were under some sort of protection when you still lived with your family, so long as you were under seventeen. But now that you’re not living with them, and you’ve passed your birthday...” Hermione made a face. “None. So it’s lucky we’ve found you first.”

“The Dursleys aren’t my family.”

“The Muggles you lived with, then,” Ginny substituted. “So, these days, loads of danger and suspense. Best we talk you into believing us pretty soon before we all get killed.”

“If this is a practical joke, it is both detailed and imaginative, as well as totally fucked up.” Harry drank deep from his pint. “All right. Go on then, this is already bizarre enough: what are *Muggles*?”

“Non-magic people,” Malfoy drawled.

“Of course,” Harry said. He drank his pint, feeling a little bit like he was dreaming. “Fuck it again. Muggles, brilliant. Darkest Wizard of All Time, cool. What’s next?”

“Er,” Ron said slowly. “Hate to break this one to you right away, as it’s not exactly cheery, but You-Know-Who — the Dark wizard — he’s sort of... taken over the Ministry.”

“You can call him by his name,” Harry said. “Can’t you? Oh, fuck, it’s a *secret*, isn’t it.”

“It’s not a secret.” Hermione pulled a napkin towards her and a pen from her small purse. “We don’t say it out loud.” She slid the napkin across the table.

Harry blinked down at it. “What, Volde—” Six people attempted to cover his mouth at once, which was quite the production. Whoever it was who was who had been mourning Princess Di by way of Elton John stopped to look at them.

“Just drink,” Ginny advised him.

Harry obliged.

The street lights swam a little when Harry and his inexplicable new gang of devoted followers finally stumbled out of the pub.

“Sorry, I’m just having a spot of trouble processing the whole, Big Evil, Out To Get Me, I Defeated a Dark Warlock —”

“Wizard.”

“Whatever. Just a bit mad, wouldn’t you say?” Harry ran a hand through his disastrous hair and pointed himself towards the bus shelter, letting the rest of them trail after him as it

seemed they were intent on doing.

Ginny lengthened her stride to keep up. “How’d the Muggles say you got that scar?”

“Car accident.” Harry touched his forehead absently, the lightning spread of scar tissue familiar under his fingers. “Killed my parents.”

“Not quite,” Ginny said.

“Oh, good, more exciting revelations from the drama club.” Harry pulled up in front of the night bus stop and checked his watch. Great, he’d be here for *ages*.

“We can show you, you know,” Malfoy said, eying him intently. His odd face looked stark and shadowed in the streetlight, all cheekbone. “Well — some of us can.” He glanced at Hermione, who nodded.

“I’ll take him,” she said. She took out a long stick — her wand, Harry remembered. That was a wand. Hermione took Harry’s arm. “Take a deep breath,” she advised, “This is going to feel odd.”

Harry wanted to respond, but all of a sudden the world went black and Hermione’s arm was the only thing anchoring him in a whirling press of movement. He would have sworn but there wasn’t time — his eardrums throbbed and his ribs ached and, before he could get a grasp on anything, Hermione was dusting off her jeans and Harry was sat on the pavement, blinking up at the familiar sight of the off license across the street from his flat.

“Well *done*, Harry.” Hermione beamed at him. “Didn’t even vomit on your first try! Most people do, you know. I was sick all over the instructor.”

“Er,” Harry said, as Ron popped next to them, clutching Malfoy’s elbow with one hand and Ginny’s wrist with the other. He seemed to yank them into existence, like pulling a rabbit from a hat.

“Just a sec,” Ron said, hands on his knees. “Knackered. Hermione, do you think you could go back for Luna and Neville?”

Hermione popped away without another word, leaving Harry to stare up at the thin air where she had been.

“C’mon mate,” said Ron, putting out a hand. Harry grasped it and Ron pulled him up. “That was Apparition. Nifty, right? I just got my license. Failed the first time — splinched half an eyebrow — but did all right the next. Dead useful. Only Hermione and I can do it so far but — not bad.”

“Beats the night bus,” Harry admitted, still taking this in. He tried to seem nonchalant and felt he was not doing a very good impression. Something else occurred to him, sickly and cold. “How’d you know where I lived?”

“It’s where we looked first,” Ron said, “You weren’t in, but one of your flatmate said you’d be in the... The... Underthingy.”

“Underground,” supplied Malfoy, mouth curving in a smug sort of way. “You see, Weasley, I know Muggle things too.”

Ron rolled his eyes. “Yeah, throw a parade, mate.”

There was a loud *crack* and Hermione appeared, with Luna and Neville on either side.

This time the night before, Harry was having a crap drink in his crap flat with his crap flatmates. He couldn’t quite connect the dots with the him yesterday and the him today — with the *magic* and the *evil warlock* and these six strangers who all looked at him like he was...

“I’m going to bed,” Harry announced. “You can all... Just leave me alone, for the time being, all right?”

“Harry,” Hermione sighed, clearly gearing up for a speech about his safety.

“Save it,” Harry snapped. They all kept *looking* at him with awful, hungry eyes. He didn’t know what they wanted from him. He didn’t have anything to give. “Please, just — I’ll talk to you tomorrow. You can meet me after work, again, all right?”

The six of them exchanged glances, uncertainty written in the planes of their faces. “Okay,” Hermione said, finally.

“Try not to get murdered,” Malfoy advised him.

Harry flipped the two fingered salute, and went home.

*

When Draco was a toddler, he named every single one of his imaginary friends Harry Potter. That era came to an abrupt end when his mother gently suggested he perhaps not mention his imaginary friend in front of his father, or his father’s friends, or really anybody, anywhere. When he was older, Hogwarts, terrible cesspool of gossip that it was, rehashed the Tale of Potter roughly twenty times per day. Now that Draco had actually *met* Harry Potter, the entire fiasco felt like an out-of-body experience.

Harry Potter, as it turned out, was not a myth, nor a mystery, nor a ghost. He was just a boy. An underfed teenage boy with horrid hair and ill-fitting clothes, and, as if that weren’t enough, he was also clearly an irritable, vulgar, unimaginative *arsehole*.

He was also undeniably fit.

Draco put that to the back of his mind.

“We can’t just let him *go*,” Granger insisted. “If *we* could find him, *they* can.”

“That doesn’t mean we should stake out his flat like a bunch of weirdos,” Boy Weasley said.

“Too late,” said Girl Weasley.

“I think it’s nice.” Luna smiled serenely. “Like we’re watching over him as he sleeps.”

“What if *we* want to sleep,” Draco grumbled, pulling his coat closer around his torso.

“We’ll take it in turns,” Neville said, with an annoyingly encouraging smile. “We’ve got the tent, so.”

“Amongst pavement that smells of piss.” Draco winced, covering his nose with one gloved hand. He could just glimpse the tent under its Notice-Me-Not spell, tucked in the narrow gap between a grotty shop and a row of terraces. A *tent*. Merlin help him.

“Fine then, whinger. You can take first shift.” Girl Weasley clapped Draco on the shoulder and disappeared into the tent.

Draco left the rest of the motley crew to squabble over who would join him and went to lean against a tree that had certainly seen better days, not unlike the whole of their surroundings. The Actual Harry Potter lived on the first floor of a decrepit brick building in a part of London so pungent that civilians ought to have been handed masks upon entry. The ground floor had at one point held a shop, but the sign had long since worn off and the windows were bolted over. *Crime*, clearly. The air stank of piss and old beer. Everything was just *disgusting*, and if he thought about it too long Draco would go screaming for disinfectant potion and never again return. Draco kicked a half-empty Strongbow can away from his immediate vicinity, and then regretted it, as there was now cider on his dragon-leather shoes.

“Well he’s a bit of all right, isn’t he?”

Draco raised an eyebrow. Granger giggled, as if she couldn’t quite believe she had said that either.

“Oh, you know what I mean. Saviour of the Wizarding World, and handsome as well? Could be lucky he never grew up around witches and wizards, really.”

“Practically a *Muggle*,” said Draco. “We’re doomed.”

“Maybe.” Granger leaned against the wall of the bus shelter, obscuring the frankly creepy unmoving advert for blocks of grey plastic, or something equally daft. “But at least we’ve tried.”

“What a disgustingly Hufflepuff statement, Granger.”

“You can call me Hermione, you know.”

“Don’t be crass.”

A massive bus blasted down the road and didn’t so much as pause at their stop. Either Hermione had spelled them both, or Muggles were horrifically rude.

“We’ll teach him.” Hermione sounded quietly confident, which Draco supposed made sense from someone who had not witnessed rather more death than one generally ought to in the

last year. There was still all the torture, but she apparently had a strong constitution. “We’ll teach him, and we’ll —”

“Set the world to rights?” Draco snorted. “Bit late for that.”

“I’m sorry about — you know.” Hermione’s face was pained, like she was trying to project empathy from every pore in her nose.

“Don’t be. It’s why I’m here, isn’t it?” Draco swallowed hard. “And where would you be, then?”

“Oh, somewhere awful, I expect.” Hermione sent a small smile his way.

Seeing as Hermione was Muggleborn, Draco didn’t feel entirely charitable joking about what awful places she could have been at this moment. “Hm,” he said, noncommittal. “So what is our grand plan, fearless leader?”

“Oh, I was thinking we’d probably track him for a while until something goes terribly wrong.” Hermione tapped her chin, looking a little too pleased about this prospect. She really was far too devious for Gryffindor. The Sorting Hat had squandered her potential. “Which it will, of course. Then we can — well, we’ll have to find him a wand. Or I suppose he could duel one of us, and then...”

“And then one of *us* would have no wand.”

“Well, yes. I see what you mean.” Hermione pursed her mouth and looked into the middle distance. “I’ll think of something.”

“And in the meantime, we stalk.”

“Essentially.” Hermione eyed the windows of Potter’s flat with the air of a cat who knew very well where the mouse had gone. Her eyes glinted with evangelical optimism. “He just needs to adjust to the idea.”

Hermione, Neville, Luna, the Weasleys — all of them put so much hope into the spectre of *Potter*. Potter the saviour, Potter the prophesy, Potter the main reason for running off in the middle of the night with a bottomless handbag and a terrible tent. Draco didn’t want to voice the thought that — well, what if Potter wasn’t up for the task? What if he got knocked off on his way to work? What if he had a nutty and went back to the Muggles who raised him? What if he made a stupid target of himself; what if they trained him up and set him off on the Dark Lord and they all *died anyway*. What then?

This was why it was bollocks to go run off and try to change the world with a whole mess of *Gryffindors*. And Luna Lovegood, but she hardly counted as a voice of reason. It all fell on Draco to crush their terrible dreams.

If Harry Potter had gone to Hogwarts, Draco hoped he would have at least been a Slytherin.

*

Harry could swear someone was following him.

He was weaving through the crowd on his way to the tube and he could feel his neck prickling. Hell, if it was Hermione and that lot — he'd *told* them to give him a minute to get used to the idea that, you know, everything Harry thought he knew about himself was a lie. A *minute*, a *workday*, a sixteen hour shift to make rent and think about how, you know, turned out he missed his stop at magic school and now there were evildoers after his balls.

There it *was* again, that nerve-tingling feeling that he was being bloody *watched*. Harry ducked into a narrow side street, barely wide enough for a taxi to fit through. Best to flush them out, he figured, and purposely slowed his pace.

"I told you lot to give me a fucking minute," Harry snapped, turning around. His stomach plunged — it wasn't Hermione and the rest. Two burly blokes holding sticks — *wands* — were blocking the street and looking vicious.

"Found you," one growled.

Harry didn't know what he was doing, he didn't know how he was doing it, but there was a force inside his ribcage that burned as bright as a young star and it was so easy to just — let it out. It felt like burning, like flame, and it ran through Harry's veins and out into the road, plunged deep into the cobbles and bricks and ruptured them. The ground trembled. Wind rushed through the chasm between buildings. The blokes stumbled but Harry didn't move; his feet were rooted to the ground. There was the sound of shattering glass and, somewhere, a scream.

Harry knew this was magic, now. It was so easy. He let it out.

"Merlin's fucking *trousers*," came a shout, and flashes of red light blew past Harry to knock the two blokes over into a neat pile against the brick building to their left.

A voice swam through the wind. "Harry? Harry can you hear me?"

Cobbles erupted beneath Harry's feet. Glass tumbled over his hair like rain.

"Oh for Merlin's *sake*, Potter."

Somebody shook Harry roughly by the shoulders. The fire inside his ribs dimmed to a low simmer, then went out. Harry blinked. The world shifted in focus as if he'd just put his glasses on. Malfoy hastily stepped back, adjusting his coat.

"I knew you lot were still following me," Harry said, after a long moment.

Hermione, Ron, Neville and Ginny were looking at Harry a bit like he was an unattended rucksack again. Luna just looked thoughtful. Malfoy looked — something else.

"We'd better get going," Ron said eventually, eyes darting from Harry to the fallen bricks to the fallen humans, "They're only stunned. Hermione, will you?"

Hermione crouched over the men, waving her wand in serpentine shapes as white mist flowed from their heads.

Harry looked at the slumped figures. “I don’t suppose I have to go to work, then.”

“I think that would be unwise,” agreed Luna.

Harry took a shallow breath. “I’ll just go... Get my stuff.”

“Can’t,” Ron said, face apologetic.

“If they found you here, they know where you live.” Ginny wrinkled her nose. “Sorry.”

Harry looked down at his jeans and jacket. His messenger bag had most of his essentials, but his clothes were back at the flat.

“We may have already packed your things,” Hermione said, wiping her knees off. “I had a feeling you might need them.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. There were a lot of things about this experience that were suspicious at best and incredibly intrusive at worst, but — well, whatever. It wasn’t as if he liked his flatmates much. Let Tall Flatmate miss out on his exorbitant rent this week; it would be a character-building experience for him.

“This is all very ‘come with me if you want to live.’” Harry said. Most of the others’ faces were blank, but Hermione quirked a smile in his direction.

“It’s the best way to cut to the chase, don’t you think?”

Harry eyed the burly men, wondering how many of them were out there, wondering if whatever he had done would be enough. “Fine. Where are we going?”

Hermione exchanged glances with Ron. “Somewhere they won’t expect.”

After Apparating it took Harry a minute to cotton on, seeing as they were surrounded on all sides by woodland and scrub, but they were definitely on Hampstead Heath. Neville spent the entirety of that minute hunched over with his hands on his knees, fighting the greenish tint of his skin and taking measured breaths.

“I hate Apparition,” Neville moaned quietly, after hacking bile into a shrub that certainly did not deserve it.

“Sorry, Neville,” Hermione said, not sounding the least bit sorry.

Harry put his hands in his pockets and peered through a gap in the trees. An old white man tramped through tall grass with his labrador, probably totally unaware of the underage magicians a few metres to his left. “I get that north of the river is a whole other universe, Hermione, but we are technically still in the same city.”

“They’ll expect us to get as far away from our original location as we can manage,” Hermione explained, kneeling to dig tentpoles out of her small handbag like Mary Poppins. “Besides, London is rather large, you know.”

“Is it,” said Harry. Hermione’s smile was catching; Harry couldn’t quite tamp down on his own.

“Besides,” Neville panted, “There are registered witches and wizards living around here and the Ministry can’t Trace us.”

“Can’t — what?” Harry stared down at Neville. “What is this, *1984*?” He thought of CCTV, only personalised: thousands of little magical cameras following Neville and Hermione around.

Neville squinted at him. “It’s 1997, Harry,” he said slowly.

“Wizards aren’t exactly familiar with Muggle literature,” Hermione said. “Or — or, really, any literature. Education at Hogwarts was frankly irresponsible even *before* Umbridge, and the Carrows.”

Harry tilted his head back to stare up at the gently moving leaves, and made peace with how he’d probably be vaguely confused and behind on references for the rest of his life. He was like someone who had been raised in a cult, or someone who *hadn’t* been raised in a cult but had instead been pulled *into* the cult after a comparatively normal childhood. Or, *not* a very normal childhood, but — a different one, anyway.

With a great crash, Ginny and Ron came tramping through the grass, batting tree branches away from their path. “*There* you are,” Ginny huffed, “We were all the way by some swimming ponds. The number of men’s penises I did not expect to —”

“*Ginny*,” said Ron.

“Dicks,” Ginny said staunchly, “Willies. Wangs.”

Ron went a sort of maroon colour. “I blame Fred and George.”

“You shouldn’t give *them* credit for my bad behaviour.”

Luna emerged from the woods next, followed closely by Malfoy. All of them began picking twigs from their hair. “I see we seem to have slight accuracy problems with Apparition,” Luna said. “If only Portkeys were unregulated.”

“Yes, a smaller government, even *less* regulation, that would solve everything,” muttered Hermione, digging the rest of the tent from her bag. “*Erecto*.” With a wave of her wand, the tent neatly assembled itself. Harry hoped she had another couple tents in that bottomless handbag, as the entire contraption looked only about large enough for three of them, if they squeezed.

“I reckon we should get some food,” Ron announced. “We’re running low, aren’t we? And who knows where we’ll be next.”

“Good idea.” Hermione sat back on her heels and squinted up at him. “Let’s get the protections up and then we can go. Harry, I was thinking we might start teaching you some magic.”

“Wicked,” Ginny said. “I wonder if he’ll blow anything else up.”

Harry looked down at his hands, remembering the overpowering fire feeling from before. Leaves swirled up around his legs like small tornados, or yippy dogs.

“Not like *that*, good grief, Potter,” Malfoy said, grabbing Harry’s elbow. “Unclench, please.”

Harry took a breath, and the leaves settled.

“It’s honestly a miracle you haven’t utterly blown up your workplace. Or any other location, for that matter.”

“It didn’t feel like this before,” Harry said. “Or — well, maybe it did, but I hadn’t... noticed.”

“Those of us without —” Malfoy waved his hand at Harry vaguely. “*Whatever* that is, use wands. Wands help us channel our magic, so it will do what we want it to do rather than cause unmanageable devastation in the inner city.”

Harry scowled. “The street looked fine when we finished.”

“Yes, after we *fixed your damage*.” Malfoy glowered at him.

“Oh, calm down, the both of you,” Hermione said, getting to her feet and fixing them with an impressively authoritarian moue of disapproval. She paced a wide circle around their campsite, waving her wand about and chanting nonsensical phrases. The air shimmered and fogged and then went still.

“Harry, you can borrow my wand. Draco, why don’t you teach him something simple to start? Wingardium Leviosa, maybe. Or Expelliarmus.”

Hermione handed Harry a slim piece of innocuous pale wood, unadorned except for intricate carvings around the handle. At first glance it was nothing more than a piece of wood, less than a foot in length. But there was a faint, sort of — well, a feeling. A buzzing. The wood was warm under his fingertips, almost as if it was alive.

“Oh, fine,” Malfoy sighed. “Potter, do you know any Latin?”

Harry laughed. “You’re joking.”

“Well *I* don’t know what they teach at your... schools.”

“No, Malfoy, my crap school hadn’t done Latin since about the nineteenth century. Back when they also enjoyed caning, and tuberculosis.”

“You don’t need Latin for magic, Harry,” Luna said over her shoulder, “Not all spells are of latinate derivation, anyway. You’ll be all right if you just understand the essence.”

“I thought it might save time,” Malfoy said primly.

“What you’re doing now certainly isn’t saving any,” Harry said.

Malfoy pinched his pinched face in Harry’s direction. “I’ll demonstrate. Repeat after me. *Wingardium Leviosa*.” Draco flicked his wand at a small twig, which obligingly rose up from the ground and hover in front of the tip of his wand.

“*Wingardium Leviosa*,” Harry said, and flicked his wand. A sudden blaze of fire consumed a host of twigs and a blanket of fallen leaves.

They both jumped back from the flames licking at their shoes, and Malfoy sent a stream of water at the impromptu bonfire.

“Oh,” Hermione said, hand over her heart.

Malfoy shot her an irritated look. “I have this handled, Granger. I don’t think Weasley does, though.” He nodded at Ron, whose shimmering protective wall was wobbling and turning violently green as he ignored it in favour of staring at Harry.

“*Ron*,” Hermione sighed, and corrected his grip.

“Pay attention, Potter,” Malfoy said imperiously, and waved his wand in a slow motion. “You see, it’s a swish, and a flick.”

Harry scowled and suppressed the desire to push Malfoy over. “*Wingardium Leviosa*,” he repeated and, then as flaming leaves shot towards the canopy of trees, “Oh, *fuck*.”

*

Potter could have been worse. The frankly frightening amount of power he had demonstrated against the Death Eaters — *Rowle and Thicke*, Draco’s brain supplied unhelpfully — covered over a lot of weakness in technique.

The fact that they were having to start with spells Potter should have learned when he was barely out of short pants, however, was more than a little dispiriting. The sun had set by the time Potter managed *Expelliarmus*, and whatever the hell forest they were in grew frost-cold in the span of an hour.

“That’s good, Harry,” Luna said blithely, having finished demonstrating a new technique to their bad-tempered pupil. “It’s a bit cold now, shall we go in?”

Potter eyed the small tent. “Who’s in there already?”

“Oh, everyone. Come see.” Luna ducked into the tent. Draco followed, just in time to see Potter’s chin drop open as he stepped through the tent flap, exposing a pink mouth and white teeth to their full and unbearable possibility.

Draco thought the decor looked rather like a down-on-its-luck seaside cottage, from the bleached wood floorboards to the shabby inglenook fireplace, but he supposed to Potter the

interior must look fairly palatial.

“Yes, yes, it’s bigger on the inside,” sighed Draco, flopping onto one of the threadbare sofas.

Hermione and Potter snorted, glanced at each other, and burst into uncontrollable laughter.

“*What?*” Draco snapped, trying not to notice the warm way Potter’s eyes crinkled.

“Don’t look at me,” said Neville, “I have no clue.”

“I think it’s from the fellytone,” Ron said wisely.

“Oh, Ronald, honestly,” said Hermione, wiping tears from her cheeks. “Yes, the telly. Or the television, whichever. There’s this programme — oh, forget it. It’ll take too long to explain.”

“You don’t have television?” Potter squinted at all of them as if they had simultaneously begun to step-dance on the ceiling. “Honestly? Not at all?”

“I think we all would have benefited from the Muggle Studies curriculum,” Luna said thoughtfully. “And perhaps maths.”

“Ugh,” said Ginny. “I remember those.”

Luna cocked her head. “Do you?”

“Can just use a calculating charm, can’t I,” Ginny muttered, popping the kettle on and taking down seven mugs.

“Well, Ron and I are up in the loft area,” Hermione said, motioning to the ladder against one canvas wall. She ducked her head, clearly embarrassed about their occasionally audible fumlings, as well she should have been. “It’s meant for storage, but there’s a futon. Everyone else gets the bunkbeds.”

“Joy,” Draco drawled.

“One bunk in there, that’s Ginny and Luna. Draco and Neville are in the other. There’s two bunkbeds, though; I’m sure you can have one, Harry.”

Draco trailed after Neville and Potter, forcibly wrenching his gaze from the latter’s arse. “I feel like we don’t spend enough time discussing my suffering,” Draco announced.

No one acknowledged him.

“I had never slept in a bunk bed before, you know. I had never even *seen* one.”

“Shut up, Malfoy,” Neville said mildly. “It’s not much, Harry, but it does the job.”

“You can hear Granger and Boy Weasley making horrific Gryffindor love. It’s, honestly, I think it qualifies as a war crime.”

“Is Gryffindor love different from any other kind?”

“More saliva,” Malfoy informed Neville, with dignity. “Slytherins would never.”

“I don’t know, I’ve seen you and Pansy Parkinson —”

Draco impelled a pillow towards Longbottom’s face before he could finish that undoubtedly touching memory of their schooldays.

“I used to live in a cupboard,” Potter admitted, like that was something people just went around saying. “This looks all right.”

“Well there’s no need to *jest*, Potter,” Draco huffed, sitting on his own bed. “Just choose your sleeping quarters already.”

“You can have the bottom bunk, Harry,” Neville said, taking his wand out to switch the sheets. “I don’t mind.”

“Cheers,” Potter said, and slumped onto his bed. The duvet sort of drifted down around him, curling around his legs like a fluffy cat. He patted it absently. Potter had abysmally bitten nails and long, brown fingers.

“We don’t have much storage space, unfortunately,” Neville continued, as if he weren’t damning Draco to night after night of sleeping *right across from Potter*, “But we’ll make some room in the wardrobe. Right, Draco?”

“Hm?” Draco forced himself to stop analysing stupid Potter’s stupid hands. “Oh, I suppose. If we must.”

Neville raised one eyebrow, but didn’t argue. It was one of the most annoying things about Longbottom, and there were many.

“I don’t have much stuff,” Potter said, as if they hadn’t broken into his flat and stolen his not very much stuff already that day.

Draco lay down and pretended he was dead. “Don’t fret, Potter. I’m sure you’ll inconvenience us in many, many other ways.”

“I live to serve,” said Potter dryly, and honesty, what the hell was Draco supposed to do with *that*?

*

Hermione’s nerves pinged at every sound, every rustle in the dark. She slept at the knife-edge of waking until, finally, a dog barking somewhere in the dawn summoned her brain to full and unbearable anxiety.

Ron, Hermione had learned in the past few months, slept like an old cat. She could rouse him enough that he would answer a few questions in a raspy, half-conscious voice, but he’d slip right back into sleep if she didn’t keep prodding him. She smiled at his dear, slack face, and shuffled out of the bed, making far too much noise. She pulled on an extra jumper on her way out of the tent and wished she had grabbed two — the air was damp and chilly.

“Hermione?”

Ginny sat on an overturned log at the edge of the trees, just outside the network of protective charms that shielded them from Muggle view. Her long hair was pulled into a braid and she had a hat with earflaps pulled low over her eyebrows.

Hermione stood next to her, looking out at the stretch of heath ahead.

“This reminds me of home,” Ginny said, nodding at the landscape. “It’s weird we’re in the middle of the city.”

“We have to get Harry a wand,” Hermione said. “It’s dangerous to have any one of us without; what if we got separated? And if the Death Eaters realise we’ve found him — it’ll be even more dangerous now. We won’t just be a Mudblood and some truants.”

“Hermione,” Ginny said. “Don’t say —”

“We have to plan more carefully. Our first goal has been accomplished, but this is — god, this is only the beginning. There’s so much more to do; I can’t believe I’ve given it this long before really considering a plan of action!” Hermione brushed her hair out of her face, heart pounding. “We need someplace safe, away from people, but where the Trace won’t be detected. A source of food, and we’ll need a way to get to Ollivander’s, or someone to bring Ollivander’s to us. Luna’s father knows Ollivander, but I don’t know if he —”

“Hermione!” Ginny stood up and punched Hermione lightly on the upper arm. “Don’t count your owls before they’re delivered. Just, you know, take it one owl at a time. Let an owl in, pay the owl, let the next one in. Like an owl assembly line, minus the assembly.” Ginny wrinkled her freckled nose. “Lovely, now I’m imagining actually assembling the owls. Loads of guts and feathers. Must smell incredible.”

Hermione laughed and shook her head. “Your brain is rather an interesting place.”

“Good morrow, cauldron, I am kettle.” Ginny doffed an imaginary hat, bowing slightly.

“I thought one would replace kettle in that idiom. For syllables, I mean. It scans better.”

Ginny squinted at her. “You’re doing that thing where you leapfrog about eight steps and assume I’m following. I am not following. I am about twelve feet behind you.”

“Wizards really ought to switch to metric,” Hermione mused, watching the long grass move with the wind. “I understand as a culture we’re a bit backwards but it simply makes it more logical for everyone involved.”

“Again, twelve feet. Maybe fifteen feet.” Ginny put her hands in her pockets and leaned against a nearby tree. “I never thought we’d actually find him,” she said. “It’s so — it’s like discovering a secret passageway at school. One no one else found, and Fred and George hadn’t filled it with dungbombs yet.”

“It’s like magic,” said Hermione. She glanced at Ginny, who had never known magic as anything other than oxygen in the air she breathed. “Wonderful, but actually rather tricky

when you get down to it.”

Hermione could hear steps before she saw anyone, but before she could fully go into panic-mode Ron ambled up next to them, rubbing sleep from his eyes and yawning hugely. “What the fuck,” he rasped, “Are you people doing awake.”

“More cauldrons for the kettle,” Ginny noted.

Ron made a face at his sister and turned to Hermione. “You worrying again?” he asked, quietly, as if Ginny couldn’t hear every word they said. This had been rather a running theme for their adventures so far. There was not a lot of privacy in a tent, as it turned out.

“I’m all right,” Hermione told him. “There’s just — rather a lot to do, as it turns out.”

“We did it, though,” Ron said. “We found Harry Fucking Potter.”

“Plus none of us have died,” Ginny pointed out helpfully. “We’ve not even almost died. I’d say that’s a rousing success so far.”

“There was that time we all accidentally ate poisonous mushrooms,” Ron shrugged. “But we all came out of it all right in the end.”

“I doubt the toilet will ever be the same,” Ginny said gloomily.

“I thought we made a pact to never speak of that again. Or — no, you said you’d never speak of it again if *I* would stop saying I told you so. Well, I absolutely told you so.”

“We should never have trusted Neville,” Ron said. “He’s a bastard in disguise.”

“Oh yes, that dastardly Neville Longbottom. All deceit and malice.” Hermione laughed and leaned slightly so that her shoulders touched Ron’s upper arm. He was a steady source of heat in the dewy air. She thought of her To-Do List, which grew ever longer with every passing breath. She couldn’t help mentally adding tasks, even as she tried to joke. They had found Harry Potter, but now — now they actually had to find a way to win the war.

This was, by all reckonings, a rather less straightforward goal.

Chapter 2

Potter was having a nightmare.

Draco could see him twisting under the duvet, his face contorted. “No,” Potter gasped, over and over. “No, *no*.”

In the rickety bunk above him, Neville slumbered on, his reassuring half-snores rhythmic and untroubled. Draco wished he would wake the hell up. Neville would undoubtedly have something reliably compassionate to say or do in this situation; Draco had no idea what *he* was meant to do.

Draco did know about nightmares — he’d had them ever since his father had brought *it* home, after all. The nightmares were bad, but the dreams were worse. He dreamt of waking up in his bedroom, and the past three years had been nothing but a long nightmare from which he had finally escaped. It would be an unusually sunny day, and Draco would walk down to the morning room to find the usual spread of breakfast and his mother, smiling, asking him how he’d slept. Then he’d wake up in a shitty tent in some piss-stained part of the country gasping because it had all been real after all.

He usually woke up just before he managed to eat any of his breakfast, too. His unconscious was a dick.

“Potter,” Draco ventured, from the safe quarters of his own bed, “Potter, wake up.”

“Don’t,” Potter murmured, “No, don’t.”

“I’m not doing anything,” Draco muttered. Why wouldn’t Neville wake up; didn’t he know Draco would be useless at this? Draco started banging noisily around his bed, fumbling through books. Nothing. Potter kept twisting in his bedding. Sweat gleamed on his high forehead. Draco jolted the bed so that the top bunk banged against one of the walls, then knocked three books and a mug off of his side table.

“Wha —” Potter lifted his messy head. Without glasses his eyes were even greener, red-rimmed and shining. He rubbed his forehead with one hand, wincing at the contact. His scar stood out reddish and irritated amidst clear brown skin.

“Sorry,” Draco lied, righting the mug. “Accident.”

*

Magic itself was intoxicating: a blistering burn of joy, a shot of straight adrenaline, his own personal firework. Being *taught* magic by a bunch of teenagers who had never taught anybody anything in their life was something entirely different.

Harry had begun to rank everyone by preference of tutelage: Ginny was the worst, no patience at all and seemed to derive most of her enjoyment out of Harry accidentally

exploding unsuspecting vegetation; then Ron, whose imprecise explanation of wand movements led to quite a bit of destruction around the tent area. Luna, though absolutely useless at actually teaching anything relevant, was highly entertaining. Neville would be good if he could stop looking at Harry with something that verged, frighteningly, on pity. Malfoy and Hermione came top. To his great irritation, Malfoy actually made *sense* about magic, and he didn't coddle him. Hermione often went too quickly but she quit it on the attempts at empathy after about twenty unproductive minutes, for which Harry was unbelievably grateful.

"You're used to using magic as this great emotional tidal wave," Hermione said, extinguishing Harry's fourth unintentional bonfire. "You need to channel it through the wand, not through your..."

"Dick?" Harry suggested.

Hermione snorted. "I was going to say chest, but if you like." She pursed her lips, thinking. "This'll be easier once you have your own wand. It really isn't the same with someone else's."

"That still... sounds suspect, actually."

Hermione half-covered her mouth when she laughed. "I *meant*, I think you're used to using magic as this deep well within you, that you have to drench buckets up from when you need it. You don't have to try so hard. You don't have to bring so much up for one go. You've got a lot of power, Harry — I'd bet the spell will work even if you're not fully concentrating on it."

Harry's magic had felt, originally, like a forest fire. It felt strange to imagine it as a well. "But you keep telling me to concentrate!"

"Perhaps I was —" Hermione shut her eyes in a mockery of dismay — "*wrong*."

"Never," said Ron, coming up to sling one freckled arm over Hermione's shoulder. "Listen, it's getting dark. We thought we might wrap up magic tutorials for the day and sort of — talk through what comes next."

Harry didn't like the way his stomach soured at that, but Hermione nodded in agreement. *What comes next* — he was just starting to like how this felt. From what information the others had dropped about the rest of their — his — world, it didn't sound much like cake and ponies. *Well*, Harry thought, *not like I'm not used to change*. He squared his shoulders and forced himself to just — deal with it. Carry the hell on.

Hermione led them to a patch of ground that remained within eyesight of their camp, but far enough that Harry could just glimpse a church spire over the swell of the heath. They sat in a loose semicircle, picking at grass and lying looking at the sky in turn. Periodically someone would come tramping along their sightline, usually alongside some scuffling dog, but for the most part the Heath was still in the dying light.

Harry, feeling very strange at the end of the line, drew his knees up to his chest.

“We really ought to have a three litre bottle of shit cider to pass around,” Harry said. “For verisimilitude.”

“Verisimilitude,” repeated Malfoy dubiously.

“Just because I didn’t go to posh school doesn’t mean I can’t read a fucking dictionary, mate,” Harry snapped.

Malfoy raised an eyebrow that was as pale as his skin. “Why on earth would you read a dictionary.”

Harry plucked a piece of grass. “Long nights?” He began folding the grass into a miniature, structurally unsound fan. “I meant it’s what kids do in parks, right? Drink half a bottle of fizzy drink then fill the rest with the kind of vodka that incinerates your internal organs?”

“Do they?” Neville looked interested. “I’ve never done that.”

“At Hogwarts, kids mostly drank at the arse end of the lake. Or there was this secret dungeon —”

Malfoy frowned. “Through the cupboard? Who told you about that one? That’s a Slytherin secret.”

Ginny snorted. “Mate, everyone knew about the secret dungeon.”

“I didn’t know about the secret dungeon,” Hermione said.

“You represented the abstract concept of authority.” Luna smiled sympathetically. “Plus, with the chance that the Prefect badges were all charmed to record everything they encountered, no one would risk the sanctity of the secret dungeon.”

“Secret dungeon forever,” Neville agreed. “Sorry, Hermione.”

“I can’t believe I was never invited to the secret dungeon,” Ron muttered. “This is a fucking outrage.”

“A Slytherin *secret*,” Malfoy groused. “Which arsehole let that one slip. I bet it was Greg; he has absolutely no sense of discretion.”

“They won’t be using the secret dungeon now, anyway,” Ginny said glumly. “Ever since — well.” Everyone’s faces fell in unison.

“Didn’t get much use last year either,” Malfoy admitted. In the fading light his grey eyes sunk into blue-black shadows.

“Yeah, well,” said Harry, “Secret dungeon’s no rusty play structure from 1954. You lot missed a big one. Tell you what, I’ll nick us a few bottles of Frosty Jack’s and we can all be sick in new and interesting places.”

“How kind,” Hermione said sarcastically, but her smile was warm.

They fell quiet as wind rustled the grass. Malfoy jolted like a startled cat, looking back into the trees. “What was that? I heard something.”

“I think it was a deer,” Ginny said, craning her neck to get a better look.

“It didn’t set off any of the alert charms.” Hermione frowned, one hand to the wand laying alongside her. “And we can see the tent — er. Don’t men...” Hermione’s brown cheeks flushed dark red. “*You* know, hereabouts?”

“Cruise, and that’s West Heath,” Harry said instinctively, and then bit his lip.

“They sail about? Is it on the ponds? How lovely,” Luna said.

“That definitely wasn’t a boat.” Neville cocked his head to the side. “I think — do Muggles use boats differently than us?”

Hermione winced. “No, cruise doesn’t mean sailing. It means... They, er...”

“They fuck,” Harry said baldly, slightly relishing the collective shock. The lot of them had spent the last couple of days upending his entire life and sense of reality, so it felt rather nice to make their eyes go all massive for a change.

“You’re very worldly, aren’t you?” Neville appeared almost envious. “You’ve really seen things, and been places. I’ve only been to, like, Tinworth.”

“Tinworth is lovely,” said Luna. “Did you have a look for Bridget Wenlock’s invisible notes? Once I thought I had found one but it was just a napkin.”

“So are you —” Ron made a waving gesture that could have been awkward for homosexual.

“About half,” Harry said. He did not really want to go into how the solitary time he’d gone cruising, he’d just wanted — god, he’d just wanted to be touched. It was embarrassingly, laughably awful. There was nothing cool or worldly about that at all. Plus, for the entirety of the experience he’d stood frozen on Clapham Common, and when someone approached him he pretended he’d just been on his way to the tube station. He’d walked for over an hour to be vaguely close to some practising homosexuals for five minutes, that’s the kind of winner he was. “That a problem for you?”

“Why would it be?” Ron asked, bewildered. “What, is that a problem for Muggles?”

Harry found himself in the very odd position of someone who might have to explain homophobia. There was, he found as he considered phrasing, no way to do it which didn’t sound bizarre. “Er — yes. Some of them, anyway,” he said.

“That’s weird,” Ron said. “Like, sure, some purebloods don’t like it, as it’s hard to perpetuate the name or the bloodline or what the fuck — what’re you coughing about, Malfoy, did you swallow a bug or something? — But I’ve never heard of people really, like, having a problem with who people fuck aside from that.”

“Purebloods?”

“Witches and wizards from families with no known Muggle relatives,” Hermione explained. “They’re very proud of that.”

“Inbreeding, it’s for winners,” said Ginny. She pumped a fist. “Represent.”

“I wonder which of us is most inbred,” Neville mused. “Oh —” He looked at Malfoy. “Sorry. Wasn’t thinking.”

“No offence taken,” Malfoy said dryly. “My webbed feet and I have made peace with each other.”

Harry glanced at Malfoy’s shiny leather shoes. They looked the same as ever — rather long, a bit narrow. The shoes narrowed dramatically at the toe, but maybe that was the style. “Are you all — purebloods?”

“Nearly,” Luna said. “Hermione and I aren’t purebloods. I really wish I had webbed feet, though, that’d be lovely. Though really, it is a rather disproportionate number, especially for an underground resistance group opposing a purist regime, wouldn’t you say?”

Ginny raised one shoulder. “I’ve always thought it was suspicious that if we’re blood traitors — that means Weasleys are *personae non gratae* in respectable pureblood circles, Harry, we’re like fancy vermin or prize flobberworms: you can’t deny our pedigree but no one really wants us around — isn’t it a little questionable that we’ve somehow managed to stay pureblood? Wouldn’t one of our illustriously rebellious forebears have porked a Muggle or at least a half-blood and popped out some nice less inbred babies?”

“*Ginny*,” Ron said, looking shocked.

“You need to stop thinking I’m twelve, Ronald. Porked. Pigged. Shagged. Fucked. Happy?”

“No,” Ron said, over the communal burst of laughter, “Mum would —”

“Oh, don’t talk about Mum, I feel guilty enough as is.”

Luna had fallen back into the grass and needed to pick bits of straw from her long hair. Hermione, still giggling, put a soothing hand on Ron’s knee. Even Ron was starting to see the funny side of things, but was doing his best to keep himself from actually smiling.

“That actually reminded me of something I meant to talk to you about,” Hermione said, once the laughter died down. “Communication. I was thinking — since we have to somehow get into Diagon Alley anyway, if we have the opportunity we should pick up an owl. They’re quite self-sufficient and it’d be so helpful to have a means of communication. Don’t you think?”

“I wouldn’t mind being able to tell Gran I’m alive,” Neville said.

“Daddy has probably been worried sick,” added Luna. “Of course I’ve tried to find the Quibbler whenever possible, so that I know he’s all right but I have noticed he’s been running quite a lot of rather sad stories.”

“And Mum...” Ron and Ginny exchanged loaded glances.

Malfoy, conspicuously, rubbed invisible bits of dirt off of his shiny shoes. He glanced at Harry, who glanced back. The two of them were the only ones who didn't seem to have anyone to contact. The company was unexpectedly comforting.

“Right, that's what I thought,” Hermione said. “So it's settled. We've got to take Harry to Diagon Alley — for your wand, Harry. It's the wizarding district in London.”

Harry perked up. “We'd have to go into your part of the city? Really?” He imagined floating buildings, shop windows filled with fantastical goods, dragons soaring overhead. In his mind it was always sunny, which was unbelievable even for a magical London. “Brilliant.”

“Yeah, brilliant,” Ron said dubiously. “Although — what, should we Polyjuice ourselves?”

Hermione winced. “Damn. I knew I should have had a store in advance. *Stupid.*”

Ron shrugged. “So? We can just brew some, right? You're a genius, Hermione, we can handle —”

“No,” said Malfoy firmly. “Polyjuice takes about a month to prepare correctly, and that's not accounting how the knotgrass needs to be gathered at the full moon, which could extend the timeline. After this whole — if we *survive* this whole catastrophe, we ought to develop a store. But —”

“But we shouldn't be in London much longer,” Hermione agreed, face drawn. “Certainly not the full month.”

“Cosmetics charms,” Ginny said. “We'll use cosmetics charms. And no one knows what Harry looks like now, so we can just, you know, paste his hair down over his forehead and call it good.”

Hermione nodded. “And any of us could go with him, so long as we disguise ourselves sufficiently.”

Harry could see almost everyone gearing up to volunteer but before anyone could get a word out, Malfoy spoke up.

“It should be me,” Malfoy said. “It should be — short of my father literally showing his face, which is unlikely, they won't question a Malfoy if I'm discovered. Besides, if — if something goes wrong, there's less on the line.”

“Less on the — Draco, that isn't true.”

“It is,” Malfoy insisted. “For all *they* know, I'm just a deserter. They don't know who I'm with. They can't use me to torture information out of my loving family; they won't put me on trial with the Muggleborns. They're not interested in spilling much pure blood and, again, my family isn't at risk. I'm an embarrassment to them, that's all. It's the logical choice.”

The derisive way that Malfoy said '*loving family*' ignited some familiar spark in Harry, which he did his best to suppress. He didn't want to like Malfoy, or feel a *kinship* to him. He was an arsehole. Just because he might be doing a decent thing didn't make him not an arsehole.

"We'll do cosmetics charms," Hermione told him. "Change your hair, at least — it's far too distinctive."

Malfoy touched his offending follicles and, with a pained sort of expression, agreed.

The fading light had died away completely during their conversation and left them alone with the trees and the stars. Puffs of clouds blew across the sky, covering and revealing constellations in turn. Harry had spent a lot of time hiding in libraries as a young teenager: he tried to pick out the Plough, Vega, Arcturus. The trick with seeing stars in the city or the light-drenched suburbs was that you had to give time for your eyes to adjust. You had to stare up for going on twenty minutes until your pupils dilated into massive black saucers. One errant torch light and you were finished, you'd have to start over. Harry used to lie amidst the bushes in the Dursleys' back garden, training his eyes to see the stars. Harry had imagined escaping upward, outward. He never imagined you could turn a corner and find a wizarding bank, a magic school, witch friends.

Maybe that's how it was with magic: you could see it, you just had to give your eyes time to adjust.

*

Draco looked gloomily at himself in the mirror. His face was newly awash with wrinkles, and a brown beard swallowed the entirety of his lower face. His once platinum hair had been charmed dull grey-brown, and his eyebrows had doubled both in mass and length and were threatening to intrude upon his eyesight. He was hideous. He did not want to leave the lavatory and face the others whilst hideous. He did not want to enter Diagon Alley whilst hideous. He especially did not want to die whilst hideous.

"Draco?" Luna knocked at the door. "Are you ready? If the mirror has stolen your voice, answer in claps."

"No," Draco told the stranger in his reflection. His unfamiliar face shone with nervous sweat. He'd die hideous and stinking, whilst Harry Potter and his beautiful jawline watched with dispassionate interest. This was a marvellous idea he'd had. He was ever so glad he had suggested it. He washed his hands, and forced himself from the room.

Hermione fussed over Potter's forehead as Ginny handed what appeared to be joke shop items to Ron, who then hid them all over his person, which left Neville and Luna to watch the newly transformed Draco emerge from hiding.

Luna looked up at him, blinking lazily. "Do you think this is what you'll be like when you're old?"

"Do I think my hair will spontaneously go brown?"

“I meant your mood,” Luna said. She absently stuck a quill behind her ear. “Your eyelashes are very long, aren’t they? I hadn’t noticed before.”

Neville peered at Draco’s transformed face, then examined him from the side. “Gosh. You look just like my Great-Uncle Algie.”

“The deluded puff-skein breeder? Cheers, Neville.”

Neville shrugged. “It’s the whiskers, I think. Maybe the nose.”

Draco touched his nose, mildly horror-stricken. He had not altered it at all. “I do not.”

Neville smiled and clapped him on the shoulder. “You know, I think it’s really brave, what you’re doing.”

Draco grimaced.

“Tell him he’s being very cunning,” Luna advised. “He’ll like that better.”

“I’d like it better if I didn’t have to do this incredibly foolish thing at all,” Draco muttered.

“You’ve done lots of foolish things. This can’t be worse than that time when we were seven and you —”

“No,” Draco demanded. Across the room, Potter’s head had perked up and tilted towards them, like an intrigued owl.

“Stole Pansy Parkinson’s pinafore and —”

“Do, *do* shut the fuck up,” Draco hissed, pushing Neville towards the lavatory and away from Potter’s gleaming eyes.

“You were the one who wanted to join the mermaids,” Neville reasoned.

“I can’t believe *you* were permitted to attend.”

“It was one of those Ministry benefits. Who *wasn’t* permitted to attend?”

“I wasn’t invited to that,” Luna said. “I’m very disappointed. I would have helped you negotiate your mermaid identity, Draco.”

Draco became rather glad, seeing the look on Ginny Weasley’s face, that the handful of pureblood children who were frequently shoved together at such events did not include Weasleys.

“Are we ready to go yet?” Draco faced the room at large with arms akimbo. He had to get this thing over with or he was going to go running into the late afternoon, never to return. Every organ in his body went on spontaneous strike whenever he contemplated just what his evening plans were. He found it best to steadfastly ignore all of his problems, and live in a deluded world of his own creation. That strategy had carried him this far, after all.

“Wow,” Potter said, eying Draco up and down. “Unfortunate.”

On second thought, his strategy was crap. Fuck his strategy.

“You look perfect,” Hermione said, beaming in an encouraging way that made Draco uncomfortable as to what his facial expression might be communicating. “Your own family wouldn’t recognise you! Oh, not that they’d be there, or...” Hermione clasped her hands together tightly, wincing. “I’m really putting a foot in it, aren’t I.”

“She means you did a cracking job with the disguise,” Neville said. “Well done, Draco.”

“You look almost as bad as you normally do,” Ginny added cheerfully.

Draco would be offended, but he was getting the sense that that was Ginny for praise. “Well? Are we ready?”

Ron finished wedging what appeared to be firecrackers into his socks and stood up. “Affirmative.”

Potter shrugged. “I guess.”

Hermione ushered the three of them together. “Harry, just remember to stay calm. If you feel any surges of magic coming on, do that measured breathing we talked about. Draco, you’ve reviewed the rendezvous points so that’s settled; Ron, do you really need a Fanged Frisbee?”

Ron considered this and settled on, “You never know, Hermione. Better prepared, and all that.”

“Oh, fine.” Hermione looked them over. “I don’t like being so far away from all of this. Are you sure I shouldn’t take either Ron or Draco’s role?”

“We’re sure,” Ginny and Neville said, in almost perfect unison.

“You’ve got the most to lose if you’re discovered,” Ginny said.

“And if you’re not with us, how are we going to last a day in the Muggle world?” Neville grinned.

“I think we would do rather well,” Luna said. “I’ve learned a lot about Muggle culture.”

Hermione sighed. “Luna, mood rings are not Muggle culture.”

“Muggles like them,” Luna insisted. “I think they’re a microcosm for the culture as a whole.”

Hermione’s face visibly warred between arguing with Luna and getting the operation on its way. “When you’re in Diagon Alley, you’re not to call him Harry, alright?”

“He doesn’t call me Harry now,” Potter said.

“Call him something else. A code name. John, or —”

“Archibald,” Draco said.

Potter snorted. “*Archibald?*”

“It suits you.”

Hermione glanced between Draco and Harry. “Right. Wonderful, Archibald. And we’ll call Draco —”

“Dave,” Potter said.

Draco’s mouth dropped open. “*Dave?*”

“Dave Wallis. Sixty-eight, from Basildon.” Potter grinned. He had a slight dimple in his right cheek, to add insult to injury. “You’re in sales. Wizards have those, I’m guessing.”

“Sales,” Draco echoed flatly.

“Or insurance.” The slight dimple in Potter’s cheek deepened, just minutely.

“We don’t have much of that in the wizarding world,” Hermione said. “Although in many ways wizards think they’re advanced, I’ve always thought our society is downright Jacobean. No insurance! And with the amount of property damage under our current power structure...”

“This is all fun and everything, but we should really be going,” Ron said. He looked meaningfully at Hermione.

“We’re not going to have a big scene,” Hermione said tartly, adjusting Ron’s jacket. “There’s no need to make a day of it. I’ll see you all at the rendezvous point or, if not, the second rendezvous point.”

“Right,” Ron said. He looked so affectionate that Draco did not want to look directly at the two of them. It felt unseemly. “See you later, then.”

With out so much as a by-your-leave, Ron grasped Draco and Potter by the arms and Disapparated them out of the tent.

*

Air flooded into the space Ron, Draco and Harry had just vacated. The tent suddenly felt downright cavernous, after having been chock-full of people five seconds before.

“Remind me never to help plan tasks I’m not directly involved in,” Hermione said. “This is horrible. Oh, I hate this already and it’s only been fifteen seconds.”

“They’ll be all right,” Neville assured her.

“They *may* be all right,” said Luna. She seemed to think this was just as comforting.

“We’ll go in and fuck shit up if they’re not all right,” vowed Ginny.

Hermione raised her eyes to the tent ceiling, and prayed to a god she did not believe in for patience. “Let’s pack up the tent,” she decided. “Then we’ll take it from there.”

Once the tent was safely stowed away in Hermione’s capacious handbag, they were left with a great void of time. Ginny wanted to rush straight to the rendezvous point. Luna was keen on a visit to one of the swimming ponds, where she swore they’d find a school of Gulping Plimpies. Neville was mostly interested in escaping the spurts of windy rain which had began to soak them in intervals the moment they had stepped out of the tent. Hermione had different plans — they had to get to a supermarket. The fruit and veg they’d been duplicating for the past week was starting to go off. Given the uncertainty of their next few moves, Hermione also intended to stock up on essentials.

“You’d really think leading an underage runaway resistance group would be more exciting,” Hermione mused, pushing the trolley through the produce department and into the rest of the supermarket. “But no, here we are doing our big shop, making sure we have enough apples for the week.”

“Speak for yourself,” Ginny said, picking up a packet from a display. “Frazzles? Brilliant, I love Muggles. Can we get these?”

“No.”

“Aw,” Ginny said, frowning. “Why not? C’mon, have a heart.”

Hermione felt an odd kinship to Mrs Weasley. “Oh, just the one packet, all right?”

Ginny pumped a fist in victory and tossed the Frazzles into the trolley.

“No chance I’m not going to get an O in Muggle Studies after this.” Neville said as they rounded the corner. “I mean — if I ever sit the exam.”

“Perhaps we’ll be in the same year, now, Neville.” Luna smiled dreamily. “We’d sit the exams together. Longbottom and Lovegood would surely be next to one another, don’t you think?”

“You forgot about Cornelia Lomble,” said Ginny. “She’ll be between you.”

Luna looked disappointed. “Well, at least we would be in the same section. Ginny is never in my section. It’s rather disappointing.”

Hermione thought of Harry. After this was all over, would he have to sit his O.W.L.s? She was concerned he was getting a very Defence-heavy education, if so. They’d have to spend some time on Astronomy and Herbology, just so that he wouldn’t be too behind. Potions, as well. At least the basics. History of Magic they could scrimp on; Hermione doubted Harry would be interested in the sort of career for which a History of Magic O.W.L. would be required — or was she assuming too much?

“Do you think Harry might like to be a historian at some point?” Hermione grabbed a small box of rice from one of the shelves. They could increase the quantity later on.

“Er — what?”

“A professor, perhaps. Or an archaeologist?”

Neville shook his head. “I’ve only known him a few days, but he’s — he’s *Harry Potter*. He’s not an ordinary person, is he? What could he go on and do?”

“Auroring, I’d bet,” said Ginny.

“I think that would be disappointing,” said Luna.

“*Disappointing*? An Auror?” Ginny twisted her face in disapproval. “Come off it.”

“He’d be a member of the Rotfang Conspiracy,” Luna continued, as if Ginny hadn’t said anything at all. “Which of course would be rather good now, given the current power structure, but I can’t see it as being very good for his oral hygiene. He has such nice teeth.”

“Should we be talking about this sort of thing in front of the Muggles?” Neville eyed a middle-aged mum and her daughter who were arguing in front of the tea.

“Possibly not, although I expect anyone will just think it’s the new teenage slang.” Hermione herded Neville, Ginny and Luna past the biscuits and towards the bread. “I brought it up because I want to give him as much of a well-rounded magical education as we can. It’s not as though we’ve been spending any time teaching him History of Magic, for example.”

“Other than the parts of history that involve him,” Luna noted.

“Mate, *we’re* likely to be history of magic if this lark doesn’t play out.” Ginny tossed a loaf of bread into the trolley like a Quaffle. “I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“I *do* worry about it,” Hermione muttered. *Someone* had to think of the long-term repercussions of their actions. If things had gone to plan, Harry would have been sat down in his sitting room with his guardians and a Muggle liaison from the Ministry, and then he’d have had seven years to complete his magical education, like Hermione. In their case, Hermione was the Muggle liaison, and she was somewhat concerned she’d done a crap job so far. She checked her watch. Harry, Draco and Ron had been in Diagon Alley — or, in Ron’s case, just outside Diagon Alley — for an hour.

“Let’s go pay,” Hermione said. “Then we’ll wait at the first rendezvous point.”

If everything went to plan, Ron would Apparate Draco and Harry there shortly. If everything did not go to plan, Ron would Apparate alone, and they’d decide on a course of action.

As Hermione pushed her trolley through the shop she was struck, as always, by the utter insanity that this whole supermarket had no idea what was going on just beyond the veils. Her adopted world had come crashing down around her ears and no one here had heard the sound. Hermione could be seized from her home, have her basic rights stripped from her at a

sham Ministry trial, have her wand confiscated, have her right to schooling revoked — and then she could go to this supermarket, and nothing would have changed. Hermione supposed that was an essential element of being human: that one could walk through the supermarket on one of the worse days of one's life and absolutely no one would know, or, perhaps, much care. Maybe the woman behind the till had recently suffered a personal tragedy. Maybe the mum arguing with her teenaged daughter by the biscuits had lost her job. Everyone just wanted to pay for their pint of milk and go home.

Or, in her case, go tent.

Hermione snorted, despite herself. "Wait," she said, "Let's get some Jaffa Cakes before we go."

"I have no idea what those are, but they've got the word 'cake' in them, so I reckon I'm pro."

"You know, there's rather an interesting story about —"

"*Hermione*. Not again. Cake is not meant to be educational."

"No, this is interesting! Just wait. So there's this thing called value-added tax —"

*

Potter strode down the Muggle road too fast, weaving around pavement signs and piles of rubbish as easily as if he was navigating his own sitting room. Draco kept getting distracted by either his pounding heart or the bizarre window displays some of these Muggles put up: there was nothing anyone could do about it, the unmoving photographs were *creepy*. Ron kept whinging about his shoes — apparently they were too tight. Draco now was privy to endless information about how Ron's feet were, apparently, still growing.

Despite Draco's imminent death, he couldn't help but feel some distant buzz of pleasure that he and Weasley were walking, undetected, amongst the Muggles. It still felt rather naughtily forbidden to look at all the Muggle shops and the Muggle wares in the shop windows, like he was rebelling in an ordinary teenage way rather than abandoning his people and his way of life for a mission that would undoubtedly lead to his youthful and tragic demise. Although in his current incarnation, it was more of an elderly and unflattering demise.

They paused outside the Leaky Cauldron. Draco eyed Potter, then traded glances with Weasley. "Don't look surprised by anything," Draco told Potter. "Don't stare, no gasping of awe. Alright?"

"Fuck off," said Potter, which Draco took as asshole for 'I have heard and understood you, my wise companion.'

"He's unlikely to gasp in awe, state of the place," Ron said, pulling the hood of his sweatshirt over the Weasley beacon of his hair. "C'mon."

Inside the Leaky Cauldron, Tom the barman stood behind the bar disconsolately polishing a glass with a greasy rag. He glanced up at them for a moment then turned back to his task.

Aside from two wizened women smoking long pipes in one corner, the entire pub was deserted. With a curt nod, Weasley ducked back towards the lavatories to wait. Draco hurried Potter along into the small walled courtyard.

“Don’t stare,” Draco reminded Potter. He donned his wizarding robes, then handed similar ones to Potter.

“Your saying that about seventeen times only makes me want to stare more,” Potter said. He eyed his robes dubiously, but pulled them on over his clothes without further complaints.

Draco was too terrified to make much of a rejoinder. He tapped the brick above the bin three times with his wand and stood back as the entrance ate away at the wall.

There was a quick intake of breath from Potter: Diagon Alley stretched ahead of them.

“I can’t believe this has been here the whole time,” Potter said. “I must have walked down that road a hundred times and I never even saw that pub.”

“You would have been able to see it,” Draco reasoned. “You must not have been looking properly.”

Draco scanned the area but he couldn’t see any obvious threats — not that he would. No one entirely knew where someone stood these days; any of these people could be reporting to the Death Eaters. They stepped through the archway. The sound of the wall sealing itself felt almost like a death sentence, but Draco kept moving.

He saw Diagon Alley anew through Potter’s eyes: the haggard buildings and ruptured cobbles; fearful shoppers scuttling from one shop to the next, keeping their heads down; broken windows and the dubiously legal stalls that had migrated from Knockturn Alley to the high street. Draco nearly bumped into one that was clearly selling malevolent artefacts in the name of ‘protection’. He steered clear of a particularly suspicious-looking amulet.

Potter’s eyes darted faster than a hummingbird, resting on each new sight for a split second before moving on.

“It didn’t used to look like this,” Draco told him in an undertone. “It used to — it wasn’t always like this.”

One of the Wandless reached beseeching hands out towards them, begging for gold. “I’m a wizard, I swear,” he croaked, “Please, I’m a wizard.” Draco could not look at him directly. Potter did. Draco could feel him staring back at the man and had to pull his elbow to make him keep up.

“It wasn’t like this,” Draco said again, hand tense on Potter’s arm. Even with his disguise he felt as if any of the Wandless would be able to recognise him as someone who did this, someone who helped this happen. “It was — it was better.”

“We have to help them,” Potter said quietly. “Do we have anything? Money? Food?”

Draco winced. “The way we can help them, *Archibald*, is to get out of here without being discovered and subsequently killed.”

“There has to be something.” Potter glanced back at the cluster of Wandless. “What happened to them?”

“Big picture. Think big picture.” Draco swallowed the sour fear burbling from his throat and kept them moving.

“Who are they?”

“Muggleborns, mostly, and a few dissenters. Their wands and property were stripped from them, because —” At Potter’s blank face, Draco grimaced. “You don’t even know that much. Merlin. Right, Muggleborns, they’re witches and wizards with Muggle parents, it’s very rare and considered not... done. They don’t know the world, you know, and they aren’t familiar with the traditions, and...” Draco had been speaking low, quite close to Potter’s ear. It made it difficult to hide the sudden full-body cringe of self-hatred. “I used to — anyway. Hermione’s Muggleborn.”

“So she could...” Potter looked back at the Wandless again, his eyes wide.

“She’d be on the run anyway, if she weren’t with us.” *With us*, as if Hermione hadn’t organised the entire party.

“What the fuck,” Potter said quietly.

Draco barked a laugh. “Quite.”

They walked on. Amidst the scattered shoppers in mottled grey and brown robes, a tall woman in a vivid blue cloak caught Draco’s eye immediately. She descended from the white monolith of Gringotts with a shopping bag dangling from one elbow, pushing back a curtain of long dark hair. She tilted her face, and her strong jaw and heavily lidded eyes caught the cloudy light.

Draco yanked Potter into the doorway of Quality Quidditch Supplies.

“What?” Potter poked his head out of the doorway, and Draco forcibly pulled him back. He kept a tense grip on Potter’s arm.

“My aunt,” he said tightly.

“You’re in disguise, or did you forget? With those eyebrows I can’t see how.”

Draco shook his head. “She can tell. She’d be able to tell.”

“What, does she have an all-seeing eye or something?” Potter glanced at Draco, then furrowed his brow. “Those are a thing. Of course.”

“No, she hasn’t got one, but...” Draco tasted bile but forced himself to consider the strength of the charms on his face and hair. He could indeed see the terrible eyebrows edging into the

corners of his vision. It was more suspicious to be huddled in a doorway clutching someone's arm. Draco dropped his grip at once. "You don't know my aunt. Her idea of a jolly good evening is recreational flaying followed by some light drawing and quartering."

"And I thought I had a horrible aunt," Potter said mildly. "You win this round."

Draco caught a glimpse of the blue cloak through the crowd. It was funny — he was so afraid he felt frozen, too numb to fully consider the implications of —

The woman in the blue cloak passed them without so much as a glance. Her light brown hair tumbled back from her face, and Draco took a breath.

"That's not her," he breathed. "That's — oh." Andromeda. It had to be. The Blacks did their best to hush up the stories about her, but Draco had seen the genealogy charts, and there was a black-and-white photograph of three young girls hidden in the bottom of his mother's wardrobe. *Bellatrix, Andromeda and Narcissa, 1967*. He had never seen Andromeda in person before. She was extraordinarily like Bellatrix, but for the lighter hair and softer face. He wanted to run after her, to say, *I'm like you — I left, help me, how do I do this*, but he stayed put. Andromeda had left, but she hadn't then idiotically joined a rebellion against the government.

He thought.

Still, Andromeda was one of the only people in the world who knew what it felt like to go from knowing the name of every fork and every dance step and every variation of dress robe to — not knowing anything. He'd never even made a bed before, which was bizarre in retrospect and certainly not something he'd *dream* of sharing with any of his current compatriots. He'd never hear the end of it, and quite rightly. It was hilarious. He was a joke. Andromeda had been a joke too, and maybe she'd know how to make it funny.

"Who was that? Do you know her?" Potter scrutinised Draco's transformed face.

"Long story, terrible punchline," Draco said, leaving the dubious sanctuary of the doorway. "Come on, let's get this over with."

At least he could be a useful joke. Draco led Harry further into Diagon Alley, past Fortescue's boarded-up ice cream parlour and a rather dilapidated second-hand robes shop.

"Our time is all right and it's not too busy," Draco said. He screwed up his nose and did his best to ignore reality. It was a normal day of shopping, that was all. Just a regular day of shopping for Dave Whatsit from wherever Potter said he was from, Dave who did sales. Hideous Dave and his horrifically good-looking sidekick, Archibald. "Let's — let's get the bloody owl, then. I can't believe we're risking our necks for a collection of itinerant feathers, but here we go."

Eeylops Owl Emporium was blessedly dark. Tree branches ascended towards the ceiling, oak and ash, bedecked with appropriate hollows for owls to nest inside. Their large eyes glowed at them from every direction. Draco's shoulders descended from his ears. It was too dark to even make out his horrible eyebrows, let alone beget some kind of discovery.

“May I help you, gentleman?”

A hovering marble of yellow light illuminated a woman with thick round spectacles and a small tawny owl perched on her left shoulder.

“We need an owl,” Potter said helpfully.

“Well yes, I had assumed that,” the woman said. “What sort did you have in mind?”

“We need a strong hunter, highly intelligent, able to fly long distances, self-directed and accustomed to a certain amount of rough sleeping.” Draco cleared his throat. “Please.”

“We have some top of the line screech owls, if you’d like to follow me to the back. Fifteen galleons apiece, and there’s a particularly strong female —”

Draco felt the coins in his pocket. When he was planning on fleeing Malfoy Manor, he’d stolen away to Gringotts every couple of days to slowly draw gold from his account. He’d hid it all inside his mattress and feverishly checked five times a day that it was still there. Just before he left, he had most of his running away fund converted to Muggle currency. He had not left very much ordinary money to spare. “What do you have that fits those parameters for...” Draco fingered the coins, subtracting the cost of the wand — “Nine galleons.” Draco felt an odd prickle of shame. He’d never not had enough money to pay for something before.

The woman considered this for a moment, as the tawny owl pecked absently at her hair. “We have a snowy owl — there’s nothing wrong with her, she’s just a bit on the older side. A little flashy, you know. Most people don’t want that these days.”

She led them further into the blackness of the shop. Ambient light from the windows faded away until all Draco could make out was the woman’s glowing orb.

“Do you think we’re about to get murdered?” Potter asked in an undertone.

“Well, I do *now*.”

They passed through the humid, vine-laden portion of the shop where a rainforest scops owl nearly got a hunk out of Draco’s left ear and into the chilly, forested recesses of the back. Draco could smell the tang of pine.

“Oh, I see her. She’s hiding just towards the back. Come on, girl.” The woman whistled low and held out her arm. For a beat, nothing happened, and then a rush of white wings obscured what little light emanated from the orb and a snowy owl was perched atop her forearm. The owl cocked her head at them, then winged straight to Harry’s shoulder.

“She approves!” The woman clapped her hands together.

“Oh,” Potter said softly. He gingerly stroked the owl’s head with one tentative finger. “Hello.”

“We’ve been calling her Hedwig,” the woman said, leading them back to the front of the shop. “Of course, name her whatever you like, she’s just a bit older and might answer only to

that at this point.”

Potter couldn't seem to take his eyes off of Hedwig. Draco paid for the owl, a box of owl treats and received Hedwig's complimentary traveling cage and still Potter had not yet looked away from the owl. He smiled shyly as she nipped one of his fingers. Draco hated taking this assignment. He never should have taken this terrible assignment, especially not made a detour for some sentient feather collection with fun biting capabilities.

“A real animal lover, isn't he?” The woman smiled. “Is he your son?”

“No,” Draco said, revolted. “Certainly — certainly not.”

Potter hid his laughter in the crook of his arm, the bastard.

It took a certain amount of wrangling to get Hedwig to release her hold on Potter's shoulder and settle into her cage. Once the door was shut, however, she tucked her face under her wing and went to sleep. Draco considered this an enviable response to their current situation.

“One more thing,” Draco said as they left the shop. “One more, and then we've made it.”

“I think you're overreacting,” Potter said, holding Hedwig's cage with careful attention. “It's been completely fine so far.”

Draco was getting the impression that Potter was actually a bit calmer and less irritable when he was risking life and limb. That in itself was terrible enough, but what was worse was the increasing possibility that Potter would have been a *Gryffindor*. If he got drunk and made an arse of himself jumping off something high up, Draco would know for sure. “Oh, good, now you've tempted fate. We are definitely both going to die.”

“Well, everyone's going to die eventually,” Potter said reasonably.

“*You're* going to die if you don't shut up. Also, you'll wake the owl.”

Bizarrely, this argument seemed to work.

Ollivanders loomed over them: crooked and narrow with a sign of peeling gold letters, unchanged but for the iron bars across the large windows. A bell rang as they entered the dusty room, and Potter sneezed. The owl stirred slightly, then went back to sleep.

Potter leaned close enough to Draco to murmur, “Is there anyone even here?”

“Just wait,” Draco muttered.

As if on cue, Ollivander made his customarily creepy entrance. His silvery eyes shone in the gloom. “Good morning,” he said quietly.

Draco cleared his throat. “Good morning. Although, actually it's late afternoon. Not sure if you've been out of your shop though; you might not know. Rather dark out, as well. Horrid weather we're having, isn't it? A real shame. Just taking my, er — nephew,” Draco improvised wildly. “Archibald! He's... foreign. Here for a visit.”

Ollivander surveyed them blankly. “You pick a strange time to visit our shores,” he said.

“I’m adventurous,” Potter said, in a flat American accent.

Draco clapped Potter in the shoulder in what he imagined was a very uncle-esque manner. “I have long told Archibald of how superior our wand purveyors are to the, er, North American equivalents. His wand is — er, malfunctioned, so here we. Are.”

Potter shot him a look. “I need a new wand,” he said. His American impression relied heavily on a nasal delivery. “You sell wands, so. Let’s get me a wand.”

“Hm,” said Ollivander, studying Potter carefully. “Very well.” He began to survey the rows and rows of thin boxes, humming vaguely to himself as he walked into the depths of the shop.

“You really are terrible at undercover,” Potter said in an undertone, looking almost amused. Draco was surprised his surly features knew how to do that.

“Hold out your arms,” Draco told him.

“Why — oh.” Potter held his arms out obligingly for the tape measure. It measured his arm, his height, the width of his chin. “The fuck,” he said quietly, as the tape measure stretched around his nose.

“Americans,” Draco said nervously to Ollivander, who had returned carrying several thin boxes. “Such *language*. Dreadful.”

Ollivander payed Draco no mind, and handed Potter a wand. “Ebony and unicorn hair, eight and a half inches, springy. Go on, let’s see.”

No sooner had Potter gingerly grasped the wand then Ollivander had yanked it from his fingers, replacing it immediately with another. “Mahogany and dragon heartstring — no, certainly not. Vine and phoenix feather, ten inches — no.” Ollivander pried the last from Potter’s fingers, and then spent rather a long time peering into his face.

“I wonder,” Ollivander murmured, “Oh, I wonder... Here we are. Unusual combination: holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple.”

Potter took the wand. At once, the room lit up with so many sparks that Draco temporarily lost his vision. Potter sent a slightly terrified glance back at Draco, but thankfully there were none of his customary magical conflagrations. The light was dazzling. What was also dazzling, more terrible still, was the shock of joy that transformed Potter’s face. Draco had to look away.

“Very good,” Ollivander said mildly, and took the wand from Potter’s unresisting hand. He began to wrap the wand in brown paper. “Curious. Very curious indeed.”

“What’s curious?” asked Potter.

“I remember all of the wands I ever sell, you see. Every single one. Make and model. Yours is a curious choice indeed. The phoenix that gave its feather for your wand gave one other feather — just one other. I sold it to a young man many years ago. Yew, thirteen and a half inches.” Ollivander placed the wrapped wand carefully in a long brown package. “Unyielding.”

“Oh?” Potter didn’t sound very interested. His eyes were glued to the package.

Draco counted out galleons and dumped them next to the till. Foreboding thudded in his stomach. They had to get going. His heart pounded painfully at every errant sound. Ollivander was too fucking old to be doing this still; it took him forty years to get one sentence out, let alone wrap a bloody package.

“Yes, just one other.” Ollivander handed Potter the box. “It gave you the scar that is surely hiding beneath your hair, Mr Potter.”

“The —” Potter froze, his free hand absently clasped over his forehead.

Draco could not move. He couldn’t speak. His stomach rolled like a ship in a storm. If he was sick all over Ollivander’s floor, would he have to pay for damages? Would that delay their exit even more? If it weren’t for the Disapparation Jinx over the majority of Diagon, and how he had actually never Apparated on his own before, Draco would yank them all the way to bloody Wales. Old and frail though he was, Ollivander had never looked more malevolent, and he was not at best of times a comforting presence.

“Powerful wand, very powerful. You look just like your father, Mr Potter. But your eyes — you have your mother’s eyes.” Ollivander’s faint smile did not extend to the whole of his face. “Very curious indeed. One must remember that the wand chooses the wizard. I think we shall expect interesting things from you.”

Draco stared blankly at Ollivander for what felt like at least half an hour, but couldn’t be longer than a heart-pounding fifteen seconds. Potter seemed beyond speech altogether. His cheeks were ashen, and he gripped his box with white knuckles. Ollivander did not seem to be in a rush to notify anyone of their presence, but —

“Got to go,” Draco said, his voice coming out strangled. He picked up Hedwig’s cage and held on so tightly the metal hurt his fingers. “Loads of, er, backup, at the Apparition stations. You know. Appointments. Thanks awfully for your assistance. Goodbye.”

With that ungainly rejoinder, Draco fairly dragged Potter from the shop. The chime at their exit felt like a shocking charm straight to his heart. Blue twilight spilled over the street, and several of the shops were beginning to close. Brick built itself over the doorway to Flourish and Blotts, and the windows of Madame Malkin’s shrunk away altogether.

“Keep up,” Draco demanded, as Potter stumbled on loose cobblestones. Draco couldn’t drag him as much as he would want to. That would cause too much attention. In an ideal world, Draco would put Harry in a bloody wheelbarrow and sprint him out through the Leaky.

“I look like my dad,” Potter murmured. He was still gripping his forehead like a moron.

“Stop talking,” Draco hissed. “And get your hands off your head, you’re only drawing attention to us.”

Potter dropped his hand from his face and, almost in slow motion, Draco realised his mistake.

An elderly woman in a raggedy cloak staggered and pointed a quivering finger at Potter’s exposed forehead. “Is that — could that be?”

A young man stopped short next to her, face white. “Merlin,” he whispered, eyes glued to Potter’s face.

“Put it — get it down,” Draco said, motioning frantically at his own forehead. Potter looked at him, face tilted in confusion. “Your *fringe*.”

Potter raised hurried fingers to comb his unruly hair back into place, but it was too late. People were circling around them, talking in low voices and looking at Potter with starving eyes.

“It couldn’t be,” whispered one woman. “He’s not been seen since —”

“I thought he was dead.”

“Bless my soul, *Harry Potter*.”

The whispering compounded in on itself and became talking, then raised voices, and the circle began to swell. They had given Harry a wide berth, as if he were contagious, but now they were starting to move in.

Harry looked at Draco as if to say *what the actual fuck is happening*, a sentiment which Draco would second if they had time.

“Come *on*,” hissed Draco. He grabbed Potter’s arm. They ran, and the voices followed them, echoing through the narrow street.

“Harry Potter?”

“It can’t be!”

“Have they found him at last?”

“Fuck me straight to hell,” Draco panted. Hedwig’s cage banged up against his leg. Hysteria bubbled in his lungs. “This is — oh, this is so great, time to die, come *on*.”

There was a sickening moment as they waited for the bloody brick wall to transform itself into an archway, and then they were through — they didn’t bother with discretion, just went racing for the lavatories. Draco knocked an elderly man out of the way. “*Really* needed the toilet,” he panted over his shoulder. “Terribly sorry. Blame my bladder!”

Potter started to laugh, and then Draco was laughing, and then they were stumbling over each other through the door to the loo.

“What happened to you?” Ron asked, after they’d rapped four times on the cubicle door.

“No time,” Draco told him, still hysterical. “Let’s go.”

Without another word, Ron grabbed them each by the wrist and Disapparated. In the vanishing darkness, Draco had never felt so grateful for a Weasley.

Chapter 3

At first, the landscape was still. Hermione sat in a tense crouch by an ash tree at the edge of the park, waiting. In the distance Ginny and Neville kicked a Quaffle back and forth like a football whilst Luna shouted out nonsensical rules. Houses peeked above the tree-line, and the roar of trains and traffic sharpened Hermione's anxiety. She knew, logically, that a city was one of the best places to hide, but it certainly didn't feel that way at the moment. If only for her stress level, maybe they'd try a less populated area for a while.

Hermione checked her watch every thirty seconds. She refused to let herself increase the frequency, and was studiously avoiding glancing down at the timepiece when, out of the corner of her eye, something orange caught the light.

Ron tumbled into existence first, followed closely by the collapsing figures of Harry and Draco. Both of them were laughing. A cage complete with snowy owl fell from Draco's hand and neither of them looked either injured or out of disguise, so at first Hermione breathed a sigh of relief.

"Fucking ballsack of a pregnant hippogriff," Ron swore, clutching his left hand. "Splinched myself."

"What?" Hermione rushed to her feet and careened over towards him, prying his right hand from his left. "Oh, Ron."

"It's just a few fingernails," Ron said bravely, his freckles standing out in his white face. "Though, also, can I just say, bollocking *wank* arse, it hurts like hell."

Draco and Harry stopped laughing. Harry peered at Ron's hand with a dismayed sort of interest. Draco, a bit pale, carefully averted his eyes from the blood. Hermione vanished most of the blood from the wound and added a few disinfection charms just to be safe. She hoped that Ron's fingernails would not be scooped up at the scene — his dragonpox alibi would not hold up in the face of genetic evidence.

"We were recognised," Draco said.

"*What?*" Hermione dropped Ron's hand to stare at him.

"Well, *Harry* was recognised. Ollivander knew who he was right away. He apparently looks just like his father."

"Got the wand, though," Harry said, waving it in the air. He looked rather ashen.

Hermione racked her brains, trying to remember the last time she'd seen a picture of the Potters. In *Modern Magical History*, maybe, or *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts*. She should have checked. She should have known. Oh, bloody hell, she could have blown this entire thing in one. A few simple cosmetics charms could have prevented this whole fiasco; she was clearly a dunce. "Only Ollivander recognised him?"

“Er — no,” Draco said, haltingly. “He had his scar uncovered. Some people in Diagon Alley caught a glimpse — maybe fifteen, twenty people. I didn’t know any of them.”

“Damn. Even chance it gets back to the Death Eaters in a few hours,” Hermione said. She knelt to put a Disillusionment Charm on the owl’s cage, for good measure. Across the park, Ginny, Luna and Neville had caught sight of the new arrivals and started to jog towards them, the Quaffle under Ginny’s arm. “Well. We’ll have to obfuscate our trail a bit, won’t we?”

“Eugh,” Ron said, clutching his hand. “Not that this isn’t pressing as hell but could you heal this first, please?”

“Oh, honestly,” Hermione said, getting back to her feet. “It’s just fingernails.”

“It’s only *just* fingernails until you don’t have any.”

“What happened to your fingernails?” Ginny appeared behind Ron, closely followed by Luna and Neville.

“Oh no, splinched?” Neville winced in sympathy.

“You could give him more interesting fingernails instead,” Luna said. “They could retract, like a cat’s.”

“*Episkey*,” Hermione said, and Ron’s fingernails did not quite grow back, as that was a different spell she had never seen the point for — she mentally apologised to Lavender and Parvati, either of whom would have been able to do it in their sleep — but the wounds closed up and the bleeding ceased. That would have to do for now.

The immediate crisis abated, everyone stared at Ron’s newly-healed fingertips with a sort of abashed silence.

“Now what?” asked Neville.

Hermione bit the edge of her thumb. “I had hoped we could keep Harry hidden for a bit longer,” she said slowly, “But, on the bright side, they have no idea who he’s with. For all they know, he’s with an older wizard.” She nodded at Draco’s hirsute disguise. “You two should get your robes off, by the way. Muggle area.”

Harry pulled the cloth over his head, looking a little dazed. Hermione took his and Draco’s robes and shoved them into her handbag. She made a mental note to reorganise its contents when they got to their next location; she was a little concerned that the robes had knocked over the books.

“Shouldn’t we get moving?” Draco eyed their surroundings nervously, as if Death Eaters were going to spring fully-formed from the ground. His disguised eyebrows really were rather frightening. “If they managed to track us to the lavatory, they could possibly trace our location.”

“Our *approximate* location,” Hermione corrected. “But first — Draco, you were spotted with Harry so let’s —”

“Get this beard the hell off of me?” Draco perked up.

“Modify it somewhat,” Hermione finished.

Draco, looking mutinous, ducked behind a tree with a hand mirror and his wand shoved up his sleeve, muttering counter-charms. “I’m getting rid of it,” he called from behind the tree, “If they’re looking for someone *with* a beard, surely someone *without* a beard is a far less of a suspect. It’s frankly logical and, also, more hygienic! I don’t know how anyone survives with this sort of facial pelt. Food particles, for Merlin’s sake! Trapping miasma from the surrounding putrefaction!”

Hermione felt it was best to leave Draco to whatever breakdown he was currently experiencing, and turned to Ron. “Ron, how do you feel about Apparating again?”

Ron blanched.

“Yes, I thought as much.” Hermione had chosen their location based on its proximity to a train station in the off chance Ron wasn’t feeling up to Apparition. Time wasn’t exactly a factor, after all, and it might be good to be on the move in a thoroughly Muggle fashion. And now that they knew Harry was at large amongst wizards, the Death Eaters would be amping up their search in magical areas. “We’ll take a train. Let’s just do a few superficial cosmetics charms to make sure we’re not so easily identifiable, all right? Just to be safe.”

“*Undercover*,” Ginny said gleefully. “Can I wear a mask?”

“Ginny, we’ve covered that. Muggles only wear masks to fancy dress parties.”

“I could be *going* to a fancy dress party.”

Hermione shot her a look that hopefully communicated both appreciation for her keeping the mood up and absolute firmness over the negotiation regarding masks. It seemed to work. They all retreated deeper into the trees to transform, keeping an eye on the surrounding park for Muggles.

With intense concentration, Hermione waved her wand over her head. She’d tried this spell once before, when she was about twelve and experimenting with different hair styles, and it still felt just as weird now. After the last of her hair wound itself into tight twists, and she had added a few centimetres to her nose, Hermione lowered her wand. “There,” she said, and fished a pair of clear glasses from her handbag. “That should do all right. Harry, you’re next.”

Harry squinted at her suspiciously. “You’re not going to make me white or something, are you?”

Hermione snorted. “Did I make *me* white?”

“Fine. Have at it then.” Harry shook out his unruly hair and closed his eyes, frowning in anticipation like he was expecting the charms to hurt.

Hermione considered Harry’s face for a long moment, then changed the shape of his nose, chin and straightened his hair. She forced almost all of it forward over his forehead and did a

few concealing charms over the spread of the scar itself just to be safe. The glasses could stay — Hermione thickened them a little bit, and repaired a broken hinge — but from what she could recall James Potter hadn't worn glasses, so it seemed a safe option. Or had he worn glasses? Hermione made a mental note to find a photograph to be sure.

"I think that should do," she said, stepping back. She drew a navy blue cap out of her handbag and passed it over. "Just to keep the hair down. Better safe than, etcetera."

Ginny, sporting a dark brown ponytail and newly protuberant ears, peered over Hermione's shoulder. "Don't worry, Harry. You're still reasonably fit."

"Cheers," Harry deadpanned. He felt the end of his nose. "Oh, that's *weird*."

Luna's long dirty blonde hair had been given a quite spectacular perm. "Muggles have this hairstyle," Luna said, feeling the mass of curls.

Hermione considered telling Luna that she was about five years out of date, but decided to pick her battles. Ron, oddly blond with a short turned-up nose, and Neville, with much fuller cheeks, were arguing with Draco over the hair they had clearly orchestrated.

"It's good," Neville swore, "I saw a Muggle poster of a boy with just that hair before."

Draco's hair had been lengthened to meet his pointy chin and fell into his newly freckled face. He looked disgusted. "Hermione, tell them that this hair is historically inaccurate."

"Sorry," she said. "You look about right, Honestly, you could go a little greasier."

Ron's face lit up, and Draco stepped hastily out of range.

"Sort of incongruous, though. Grunge on top, posh on the bottom," Harry said, nodding at Draco's shirt and trousers.

"Harry, has anyone mentioned lately that you're a genius?" Ron grinned even wider. "Let's get at your trousers, Malfoy."

Draco made a face. "Can't you buy me dinner first?"

Ron ignored that in favour of changing Draco's starched trousers to baggy, distressed denim. Draco insisted on changing his top himself, which was likely wise. Ron was looking far too pleased with himself, and even Harry was laughing by the end.

"Now the owl," Hermione said. "We can't exactly take her on the train, can we?"

"She's called Hedwig," Harry said, then turned away, shrugging in a poor imitation of indifference. "That's what they called her in the shop, anyway."

"We could Transfigure her into a dog," Neville suggested brightly. "Or a large cat, maybe! I've really been working on my animal Transfiguration, you know."

Neville's animal Transfiguration still left something to be desired, like species integrity. He had once transformed a mouse into a bird, but the mouse-bird still had paws and a long mouse tail, and also squeaked like a mouse. Essentially he had made a mouse with wings. Creative though it was, Hermione doubted that it would pass muster with Muggle observers. "Or we could just... have her deliver the post."

"Oh, right." Neville looked disappointed. "I guess that would work too."

They retreated deeper into the thicket of trees. Draco knelt down and unhooked the door in the owl's cage. Soon she was winging in lazy circles around them, finally coming to a rest on a low-hanging branch. Hermione considered her for a long moment.

"We have to change her colour, I'm afraid. She's too distinctive now — and if people saw you in Diagon Alley the Death Eaters will undoubtedly find out and be looking for a snowy owl. If she's tawny or, I don't know, short-eared, she'll be less obvious."

Hedwig winged to Harry's shoulder, looking at Hermione reproachfully.

"I'm sorry," she said, wringing her hands. "It has to be done!"

"Stop arguing with an owl," Draco advised, not taking his eyes off of Hedwig. "They're pets. You know what's best for her."

Luna shook her head gravely. "No, Draco. You should respect her agency. Owls are much smarter than people seem to think. How else can they always find what they're looking for?"

"Magic?" Ginny raised her palms skyward in a universal question.

"That's only some owls that can find you even when you're traveling," Ron said. "Some are duffers. We've got to wait and see how this one will do."

Hedwig swivelled her head to look at Ron. If she'd had eyebrows hidden amongst her feathers, they'd be raised in offence.

Ron raised his hands up in surrender. "Just the truth, mate."

"The woman at the shop said she was clever," Harry said gruffly, stroking Hedwig's feathers. "So. She probably is, right?"

"*Colvaria*," Ginny said, from behind Harry and Hedwig. Tawny colour seeped through Hedwig's feathers. She ruffled them irritably, winding her head around to peer at Ginny. "What? You lot wait too long."

"Lovely. Now who sends the first letter?"

Ginny tucked her wand into her jeans. "Ron and I should have first go. There's two of us, so it's the most efficient."

"That's not fair," Neville said. "We all have families we want to communicate with. It should be equal chances for all of us."

“We’ll draw lots,” Hermione informed them, picking roughly equally-sized pieces of dry grass. “You’ll all have even odds.” She plucked a long straw, then turned her back to mix them up in her hand.

Ginny, Ron, Neville and Luna took turns drawing bits of grass. Draco and Harry stood back from the scene, almost shoulder-to-shoulder, with matching looks of poorly-disguised envy. Hermione knew the feeling. If she thought Hedwig could get to Australia, let alone not terrify her memory-altered parents, she’d be fighting for her chance with the rest of them. Of course, it would be much harder for Harry and Draco to owl their parents — Hermione pushed the guilt down to the back of her brain and focused on the task at hand.

“Is this the longest?” Luna brandished her long piece of grass. “Shall we measure, to make sure?”

Ginny shot her a look. “That’s the longest one by about four inches. You can see that, right?”

“It could be a matter of perspective,” said Luna reasonably. She measured her grass against her hand. “Daddy always says to never trust your eyes completely. All senses are fallible, especially within range of an iris-targeting vapour. They have those in the north of England, you know.”

Ginny laughed, irritability elaborating like so much mist. “You’re a treasure, Luna Lovegood.”

“That’s not...” Hermione took a deep, cleansing breath. There was not enough time to get into anything with Luna. She would have to let Luna be wrong, and just... Continue being wrong, probably, for the rest of her life. Hermione got to her feet, brushing dirt off her hands. “Everyone will get a turn. We’ll draw lots again for the next go.”

“If we even *get* a next go,” Ron said darkly. “The owl could lose track of us easy, or get caught.”

“She’s a smart owl.” Neville nodded towards her. “You get that sense, don’t you?”

“She’s like your Royal Mail, only... Good?” Harry squinted one eye. “Can she read? Like, if you write an address wrong, will she know what you meant?”

“Royal Mail?” Draco looked interested. “Does your king ferry Muggle post?”

“Er — the queen’s about eight-thousand years old, mate. She’s not ferrying much of anything outside of geriatric corgis.”

“*Royal*,” Draco sniffed. “Don’t tell me they’re having some second cousin do it. That doesn’t count, you know.”

Whilst Draco and Harry bickered about the post, Luna had procured parchment and a quill from her rucksack and started scribbling away.

“Nothing about our location,” Hermione reminded her. “Or who you’re with, and *especially* nothing about Harry.”

“Daddy thinks I am on an exchange to the Icelandic school of magic,” Luna said, not looking up from her letter. “He knows it’s almost impossible to communicate because of their strict policy of confidentiality as well as the strong currents of Fierfingle Forgetfulness Ash over the island. I don’t see any reason he should know otherwise. I’ll just have a little talk about my hunt for Dweithogs, he’ll know that means I’m quite safe and happy.”

Draco raised his eyebrows. “I appreciate Ravenclaw’s lack of commitment to the truth.”

“Don’t be silly, Draco. There is no truth,” said Luna, laughing. She folded up her parchment, tucked it into an envelope and wrote her address. “Here you go, Hedwig. Remember to look like you’re flying to Iceland, all right? If you could manage to come from the direction of the Atlantic, to get that nice sea smell, that would be lovely.”

Hedwig held out her leg with the air of an owlish sigh.

Everyone watched as Hedwig took off into the sky, Luna’s letter a speck of white against her newly tawny feathers. Hermione did not know if they all felt the same niggling feeling of doubt she did, watching Hedwig disappear into the clouds, but she hoped not.

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Draco knew what to expect from a Muggle train station. The hoards of people, the frozen posters, the dull immobile architecture — even the smell was the same to King’s Cross Station, although this place was a bit smaller. It felt odd to walk into a Muggle train station in September and not go through the barrier to platform nine and three quarters, his parents right behind him. Draco put that thought to one side and concentrated on looking like a Muggle. He was not fond of his overly long hair — it reminded him a bit of his father’s, although whatever Neville had done to it made it a bit darker and more textured than Lucius’s stream of platinum.

If the train station was familiar, the train carriage itself was an entirely different story. Draco stopped short in shock. The garish moquette seats smelled musty, there was hardly enough legroom for a human-sized person and the aisle was horrifically narrow. Nowhere to be seen were neat compartments, comfortable benches or large windows to oneself.

“Are they packing the Muggles on like sardines?” Draco stood in the aisle, covering his nose with one hand. “This is inhumane.”

“Not too far off,” Potter said. His makeover, sadly, did little to obscure his looks, which was just further proof of general injustice. Even his awful cap looked good. Draco did not know what he had done in a past life to deserve this — aside, perhaps, from what he had done in his own, actual life.

“At least it’s not crowded. Come on, there’s a free table up ahead. Quickly! It’ll get taken if you don’t move faster.” Hermione prodded him until they came to a sad quartet of frowzy seats surrounding a plastic tray masquerading as a table. Hermione and Ron took two seats, and Draco hastily snagged one by the window. Sad plastic or no, he’d rather the slightly more capacious legroom. Potter sat next to him. Draco carefully edged towards the window so that their arms wouldn’t touch.

“Do I have to sit alone?” Neville looked longingly towards the table. He was sat, rather disconsolately, behind the pair of Ginny and Luna. “What if a Muggle sits next to me? What do I say?”

“How prejudiced, Neville. I expected better from you,” said Draco with distinct pleasure.

“Oh, I’ll sit next to you, go on.” Hermione tapped Ron’s elbow and moved seats, leaving the three of them in beleaguered silence.

Ron looked down at the hideous seat fabric. “Doesn’t hold a candle to the Hogwarts Express, does it?”

As much as it pained Draco to agree with Weasley, he nodded. “I knew the Beneath-ground was rubbish but this is, honestly, I think this is an assault on all of my senses.”

Potter rolled his eyes. “Fuck off, mate. This is cushy as hell — seats round the table? Come on.”

“I agree with Harry,” Hermione said, leaning forward from her seat. “Although the fabric could certainly do with a good clean.”

“Oh, go back to talking to Neville about railway history, would you?” Ron snorted.

Hermione, faintly pink, leaned forward to kick Ron lightly in the ankle and then turned back to Neville and resumed chatting.

The train lingered on the tracks for considerably more time than Draco thought appropriate, given their current situation. A cold, horrible part of his stomach felt certain that Death Eaters were about to burst in on them at any moment. Instead of Death Eaters, a few clusters of Muggles trickled onto the train, looking tired. Most of them carried newspapers or wore those ear things — Walkmen. What they had to do with walking men, Draco had yet to understand. Perhaps they ought to also carry newspapers and wear ear things. He suggested as much.

“Teenagers don’t carry newspapers,” Potter said. “That’d be considered highly suspect. Question on sight. Potential arrest.”

Draco nodded slowly, adding it to his list of Muggle social customs. Their culture truly was byzantine.

The train hissed, and the view from the window began to shift as the train pulled out of the station, slowly and then ramping up. Draco peered out at the Muggle city: the backs of terraces and overgrown gardens, washing lines and those strange black poles and strings Muggles liked to decorate their surroundings with, for some incomprehensible aesthetic reason all their own. Scrubby countryside overtook the city within minutes.

“This really does feel almost like we’re off to school,” Ron said, reflecting Draco’s thoughts in an uncharacteristic show of good judgment. “Let’s see what’s on the tea trolley and then we can really have a go of it.”

“There’s no tea trolley on this sort of train, Ron,” Hermione said, leaning diagonally over the aisle. “Are you hungry?”

“There isn’t...” Draco spread his fingers wide on the table, taking a long pained breath. “There isn’t even a *tea trolley*?”

Potter peered into Draco’s face. “A tea trolley,” he said flatly.

“I still think of it fondly,” said Ron, with a nostalgic smile.

“It’s a two hour journey,” Potter said slowly. “Do you really need snacks?”

Draco felt as though he was being deliberately misunderstood, which only made the horror of it all rise up in him like an unstoppable tsunami of petulance. “Sure, it’s a two hour journey *now*, until we get discovered halfway to Lesser Nowhere and then frogmarched straight to Azkaban, and you’ll be bloody regretting you never bought a Chocolate Frog off the trolley witch!”

Potter just blinked at him. Hermione had not changed his eye colour one iota, which was both rude and understandable.

“He may be a prat but he’s got a point,” Ron said. “*Oh*. Hermione, did you really have to chuck sweets at my *head*? Have you forgotten I’ve been injured, here?” He held up his fingernail-deficient hand as proof.

Hermione leaned over the aisle again. “Be careful with those, all right? There are Muggles at the other end of the carriage.”

Potter looked between them blankly. “Why do you have to be careful?”

Draco realised, with a cold burst of certainty, that Potter had lived a terrible life of deprivation. “Weasley,” he said slowly, “Potter has never had a Chocolate Frog.”

“Oh, *mate*,” Ron said, passing a packet over the formica table. “This is so formative. Have at it.”

The ensuing chaos as Potter broke open the packet and the Chocolate Frog made a heroic bid for freedom caused a certain amount of commotion that Hermione likely would have preferred not occur on a Muggle train, but was frankly unavoidable.

“Who’s this?” Potter spoke with his mouth full of chocolate. He held up the card. Dumbledore’s infuriating face twinkled out at them, as blithely unknowable as ever.

“‘Current Headmaster of Hogwarts.’ That’s the magic school, yeah? He’s your Headmaster?”

“That card’s out of date. He’s dead,” Draco said shortly.

“Oh.” Potter put the card on the table, chewing thoughtfully. “Too bad. ‘Defeated the dark wizard Grindelwald’. Looks like he’d be helpful against that Volde —“

Draco clapped a hand over Potter's mouth before he could finish. "*Stop*," he hissed. "Fucking *quit it*. I know you're new to this, or whatever, and we're meant to be *tolerant* and *patient*, but you need to *watch what you say*. You never know what could happen, who could be listening —"

Ron was staring at Draco like he had just thrown a crup out the train window. Slowly, Draco pulled back his hand. He couldn't really get out of this one with a joke — he hadn't been *wrong*, though, there was no reason for Weasley to look at him like that. Swallowing awkwardly, Draco crumpled up his Chocolate Frog wrapper for something to do. "Just watch it, all right?"

"All right," Potter said mildly. He went back to staring at the picture of Dumbledore.

As darkness fell the view from the windows became a blurry haze of singular lights and morasses of green. Draco began to feel almost... safe, which was both bizarre and illogical. He knew that the Death Eaters would know by now that someone had found Harry Potter, even if they did not know who that someone was. He wondered if they knew Potter had a wand now — hopefully that wouldn't sign Ollivander's death warrant. The creepy old fuck did knowingly sell Harry Potter a wand whilst under a Death Eater regime, even if Draco got the feeling he had done it more out of curiosity than out of do-gooder spirit.

The train felt apart from the world, as if they were ensconced in a protective sphere. The Hogwarts Express had offered a similar illusion. Hogwarts itself had been decidedly inconsistent as far as safety went, but on a train speeding in the opposite direction of Wiltshire Draco had, for the past several years, felt like he had finally escaped danger. Last September he had sat in the prefect's compartment, clutching a letter from his mother, subsumed by guilty relief. He'd had no idea what the coming months would bring.

Draco ripped himself from his reverie. "Weasley, chuck me another Frog, will you?"

Ron tossed him a packet without looking up from his own card. "Bloody hell, Agrippa. I looked for one of these for actual *years*."

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In his two hour journey Harry sampled the gamut of wizarding sweets. Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans were hit (treacle tart) or miss (earwax). Chocolate Frogs were slightly too anthropomorphised to be entirely satisfying, although the quality of chocolate was excellent, and cauldron cakes would likely be elevated by tea. He had acquired rather the useless stack of Chocolate Frog cards, which he expected would have been more exciting when he was eleven.

In truth, it wasn't the sweets' fault. Harry had never spent this much time with people who were not the Dursleys before. He had never spent this much time with people who wanted to hear his opinion on things, who asked him questions and looked at him directly. It wasn't unpleasant, but Harry felt strange all the same.

As they made their way out of the city, first on a bus with a deafening engine and then on foot, passing squat stone suburbs into a cold and morose countryside, he fell farther and

farther behind the rest of the group. Hermione darted worried looks back at him every couple of minutes, but thankfully left him be.

“No way,” Ron said, stopping short ahead of them. “There is *not* a village called Muggleswick.”

Hermione laughed. “I saw it on the pamphlet map when we were waiting for the bus; that’s why we got off when we did. I thought it was rather funny, don’t you? I wonder how the village was named — perhaps it was founded by squibs, or wizards themselves!”

“Wait, so you don’t have an exact plan?” Malfoy looked alarmed. He had also been hanging back during their walk, but pitched forward towards Hermione at the new revelation. “I thought you had an actual plan! You know, with steps, and eventualities, Granger, what are we *doing*?”

“Well, our next step isn’t exactly location-specific, is it?” Hermione seemed to wait for a response but, not getting one, plowed on bravely, “We want to teach Harry more magic, and possibly acquire a stock of Polyjuice Potion. We want to regroup and reevaluate. Right?”

Everyone looked at her blankly.

“Right,” Hermione said with forced cheer, like a young teacher facing her apathetic class. “So I thought, wouldn’t it be better if we chose somewhere randomly? That way there’s no possible way it could be traced back to one of us. Also, it’d be helpful to be in a rural area that was familiar with magic in order to obscure the Trace — so I thought of here. There’s plenty of space, and we don’t have to worry about Muggles stumbling onto our camp. It’s good, right?” Hermione’s encouraging smile began to wobble alarmingly. “Well, *I* thought it was all right.”

“No, that’s good,” Harry said, before her smile wobbled any further. “That makes sense.”

“It does make sense,” Ron said stoutly. “Seems perfectly sound to me.”

Hermione beamed at them. “Good. Now let’s go a bit further in and then find someplace to camp, shall we?”

Within an hour they settled on an area of upland moorland with a clear view of their surrounding. As the others began to throw up the delicate network of spells that protected their campground, Harry found the first excuse he could to duck into the bathroom. The cramped bathtub and toilet were irrelevant. He turned instead towards the smudgy mirror.

With his cosmetics charms removed, Harry imagined he was looking at a photograph — Ollivander had recognised him just by his face. How old was his father when he died? Petunia had been his mother’s older sister — this had taken quite a lot of sleuthing as a child, but he had found confirmation in some discarded baby photos in the garage — but he did not know if his father had been older or younger than his wife. Harry smoothed his hair over his forehead, trying to cover up his scar. Aunt Petunia had never said he inherited anything from his mother. The baby photos were in black and white. Harry did not look anything like Petunia.

Harry practised a smile, imagining he was looking at his father. Had his parents sat on the Hogwarts Express eating Chocolate Frogs with their friends? Had they spat out the Every-Flavour Beans they hated, had they made the same jokes about risqué flavours that he and Ron had made?

James and Lily Potter had not died in a car accident. Maybe if Harry said that enough times, it'd become more real. James and Lily Potter didn't die in a car accident. James and Lily Potter were murdered.

Harry stared at his reflection. His eyes burned: he realised, at once, that he was angry. Heat and water pricked his eyes; he was *furious*. He boiled over. The bathroom began to tremble, or maybe it was just Harry himself. James and Lily Potter had been taken from him not by accident, not by life's cruel inadequacies, but by a person. Voldemort had murdered them in cold blood. Harry had never even seen what his parents looked like, and Voldemort had done that to him. To hundreds of people, it sounded like. Voldemort had stripped people of their wands and their property and left them begging at the side of Diagon Alley, trying to catch the eyes of passers-by who desperately attempted to avoid looking at them. Harry gripped the edge of the sink with white knuckles.

"Potter?" Malfoy banged on the door. "*Do* try not to cause some sort of unnatural disaster, if you don't mind. We only have the one tent."

Harry jolted, wiping his wet face. He'd cracked the mirror. "Fuck off," he said.

When Malfoy spoke again, it was quieter. "*Reparo*, if you need it."

Harry glared at the closed door, but took his wand out of his pocket anyway. "*Reparo*," he muttered.

The mirror melted into one unified shape once again, and something small knitted itself back together in his chest at the sight.

"You can't coast on your looks forever, young man," said the mirror tartly.

Harry stepped back hastily. "The fuck?"

"Violent *and* prone to bad language." The mirror tutted. "What is the world coming to?"

Harry poked his head out of the bathroom. "Er, is it normal for the mirror to be talking?"

"Oh, did you fix it?" Luna smiled. "And you still have the power of speech yourself! Unless you've been possessed, of course. Have you been possessed?"

"I don't think so," Harry said.

"That sounds like something a possessed person would say," Luna said.

"Leave him alone, Luna," Malfoy said, not looking up from his book.

"Er. I'm going to have a bath." Harry ducked back into the bathroom.

Through the wall, he heard Luna ask, “Do you think we should watch, just to make sure he doesn’t drown himself? Since he might be possessed?”

“I will hex you,” Malfoy said mildly.

Luna’s voice came again. “I just thought you might enjoy that, as an evening activity.”

Shaking his head at nothing in particular, Harry began to fill his bath. Everything about his life was really quite strange these days. If it weren’t for the whole Lord Voldemort problem, he’d say it was — well, better than it had ever been, confusing companions aside.

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After a meagre dinner of stale sandwiches, Hermione reached into her bottomless handbag and groped around, her brow furrowed. Finally she emerged with a mouldy-looking book bound in brown leather. The binding was emblazoned with its title in spidery script: *Most Potente Potions*.

“You got that out of the Forbidden Section,” Draco said, mildly delighted. Hermione Granger, rule-breaker. Incredible.

Hermione’s eyebrows knitted together like remorse-ridden caterpillars. “I know. I really ought to have returned it, my fines must be *massive*, but the thought of Umbridge and who knows else at this point with access to these sorts of potions...” She shook her bushy head. “I thought it was the lesser of two evils.”

Ron guffawed. “Hermione, you’re a treasure. You’re genuinely wanted by the government, like on a sign and everything, and you’re concerned about library fines.”

“Wise,” Luna said, around the last of her sandwich. “You never know what Madame Pince is *really* up to.”

Draco narrowed his eyes at Hermione. “You didn’t just take the one book, did you? Go on. How many?”

“I do not have to answer that,” Hermione said primly, which sounded promising. She paged through damp-spotted pages until landing on one, tracing her finger down a list of ingredients. “Anyway, it’s kind of a funny potion to begin on, Harry, but it’s really rather fascinating and will give you an overview of preparation methods and ingredients.”

“You’re not actually having *Potter* prepare Polyjuice Potion, are you? You realise he has never so much as stirred a cauldron in his bizarre, unprepared life?” Draco could not even imagine. He was ready to lead a mutiny. He was ready to overthrow their fearsome leader in the name of his facial safety. How could she put his bone structure in the hands of an untrained idiot? And without easy access to St Mungo’s! He could be hideous for *weeks*. Nay, months. Or worse — he could die hideous. This was the Diagon disguise all over again. “One mistake and we’re disfigured for the foreseeable future, Granger!”

“I was actually going to ask *you* to brew it, actually.” Hermione looked up mulishly. “And have Harry observe. Do you have a problem with that?”

Draco settled back into his seat. A mutiny was not necessary. Their fearless leader saw sense, and knew that Draco was obviously best suited to the brewing task. He looked away rather than admit wrongdoing, which was a strong strategic move as Hermione had moved on to reviewing the instructions and did not require him to actually admit his mistake. Hermione was a wise and excellent witch.

“Let’s see, the lacewing flies should be a little tricky to stew — I’ll have to come up with a way to bind the cauldron to the reality of the tent, I think. Or we have to stay here for twenty-one days, which although *possible* is... not something we should rely upon. Leeches we’ll need to procure. Powdered bicorn horn I happen to have, as well as the knotgrass and the shredded boomslang skin... We’ll need to gather the fluxweed and then we’ll be set.” Hermione clapped her hands together. “Brilliant. Shall we start right away?”

Neville, who was half asleep propped up on one hand at the table, gave a faint groan.

“Oh,” Hermione said anxiously, looking around at everyone’s drooping faces. “Tomorrow, then.”

Ron smiled with disgusting fondness. “You may be able to hack it on four hours of horrible sleep a night, Hermione, but it’s definitely past midnight and we’ve been up for ages.”

“We’re terrible teenagers,” Ginny sighed, wiping her bleary eyes. “We should be giving it the big one just about now.”

“You can give it the big one if you want,” Neville mumbled, struggling to his feet. “I’m going to give it the unconscious one. See you all tomorrow.”

They divvied up the watch schedule and trickled off to bed. Neville was already asleep by the time Draco finished cleaning his teeth and getting into his pyjamas, but Draco slept lightly, waking every half hour with a cramp in his side or a pang of pain in his head. When Luna came to wake him for his turn on watch, Draco was already lying awake in the pitch-black room and cursing his horrible brain.

Draco had only a vague sense of their geography — Hermione couldn’t think of any wizarding villages nearby, so it was hard to get an exact sense of where they were — but the frigid chill at night was nearly as bad as Hogwarts. He grabbed his coat before ducking out of the tent. In the bluish moonlight rolling moorland stretched in every direction, uninterrupted but for fog, scattered ribbons of forest, sheep and low stone walls.

“What are you doing awake?”

Draco nearly fell over in his haste to face the voice — it was Potter. Oddly ethereal in the moonlight, he was sitting on a rock levitating a selection of pebbles with his wand.

“There’s a saying about kettles and cauldrons to be had,” Draco said, attempting to regain any vestiges of dignity he had thrown to the nightly winds. “But if you must know, I’m next on

watch. Why are *you* awake?"

"Cauldrons," Potter repeated dubiously. He turned back to his pebbles, sending them on a merry little dance. "I've been having... dreams."

"Nightmares," Draco substituted, then flushed. That made it sound like he had been watching Potter having said nightmares, which, whilst true, was significantly too humiliating to reveal.

Potter glanced at him. "Not really," he said.

"Okay," Draco drawled. He pulled his coat tighter around his torso. If Potter wanted to pretend that he didn't have nightmares, that was his private business. Draco did not give one fig or another; Potter could just sit there and stew in his adolescent angst. He could sit there with clearly not enough layers on, doing weird things to pebbles and fuming silently like a strangely symmetrical kettle. Draco did not have to indulge him. *Draco* was not responsible for Potter's hysterics.

Draco cleared his throat. "You said — er, in Diagon Alley, you said you had a shitty aunt."

If it weren't for the strong possibility of his imminent murder by Death Eaters, Draco's curiosity would be the death of him.

"She didn't engage in much recreational flaying, if that's what you mean."

"No," Draco said, feeling intensely stupid. There was something about the way Potter's shoulders hunched around his ears that made Draco want to — he swallowed hard. "The woman we saw in Diagon Alley, the one I thought was my shitty aunt, she was someone else. Another aunt. Potentially not shitty, although I have no real evidence to support that idea. Andromeda. I've never met her. She left."

"The others say you left too," Potter said. "Like you were in a cult."

Draco's bark of laughter startled himself. "Yes. It was absolutely a cult. Only I think Andromeda's motives were romantic rather than political."

Potter sent him an amused look over his shoulder. "Maybe you're romantic about politics."

"Yes, I'm engaged now to a fringe group of freedom fighters. I so look forward to our enormous wedding ceremony."

Potter snorted. His pebbles weaved through the air, tossing themselves higher and higher. "I left too," he said.

"Did you leave a cult?"

"Nah," Potter said. "Unless you call smug middle class suburbia a cult, which, an argument could be made I guess — although whoever makes it is definitely a wanker. The Dursleys just loathed me. Couldn't bear the sight of my face, they said that one a lot. I guess partly because I, er, look like my dad. That couldn't have helped."

Draco's stomach went sour. Once, Potter had said he'd slept in a cupboard. Draco had thought he was joking. "They hated you?"

Potter's thin shoulders went up and down again in his raggedy, overlarge coat. "It's not a big deal."

Draco felt slightly hysterical. "Yeah, all right. No, your guardians hating a child living under their roof. What *would* be a big deal? Definitely not that!"

"They always said my parents were freaks," Potter continued, as if Draco hadn't spoken at all. "I thought they'd meant they were hippies, or radicals, or something."

"They *were* radicals." Draco sat a safe distance from Potter, squatting slightly so that his clothes wouldn't get wet from the damp grass. "They went publicly against the Dark Lord. I'm not sure how involved they were in resistance, but I'd hazard a guess that the answer would be 'very', seeing as he sought them out to kill them in person."

In the moonlight, Potter's face was all cheekbones and intense eyebrows. "Radicals," he said slowly. "Like us."

"Fight the power," Draco said dully, raising a fist in salute. He wasn't sure how to interact with Potter when there was no one else around, when they didn't have a concrete task to accomplish. He cut a lonely yet disturbingly appealing figure in the night. The vagaries of his horrible Muggle upbringing, his history with the Dark Lord, whatever was working in his fine forehead — it all felt slightly too much for Draco to handle. It would probably be best for Draco to vacate the premises immediately, and leave Potter to his dramatics. There were plenty of lookout places surrounding the tent that were free of Potters. He would definitely go very shortly. Really, any minute, he'd get up and leave Potter to it. Any minute.

Potter spoke before Draco could really make a decision one way or another. "So, my parents are famous, right?"

"*You're* famous," Draco pointed out.

"I guess," Potter said, as if he had not been chased down by a mob of deluded citizens not ten hours ago. "Do you know much about them?"

"Er," Draco said, squinting at the hazy horizon. "Well, your father was a Potter — very old family, not as old as mine, of course, but certainly respectable — and *his* father was Fleamont Potter, who invented a bunch of haircare potions. Many people think that makes the Potters nouveau but I'm afraid they date back to around the fourteenth century at least; originally from India if I'm not mistaken. Fleamont Potter married a Shafiq — I don't know what her first name was. Potters aren't on the Sacred Twenty-Eight, but the Shafiqs are so that was quite a coup for him, although he claimed not to care much for blood purity. I've always found that rather suspect, as Ginny mentioned the other day regarding the Weasleys. *They're* not on the Sacred Twenty-Eight either. *What?*"

Potter was watching him with a highly amused expression. "Why do you know so much about my genealogy?"

Draco considered burying himself in the ground, but the dirt was almost certainly too cold to dig. “I know about any pureblood’s genealogy. I was questioned on it as a child. Neville’s, for example. His paternal grandmother is a Bulstrode by birth which my friend Millie Bulstrode is in utter denial about, despite the fact that Neville’s grandmother is a pureblood whilst Millie’s branch of the Bulstrodes is *notoriously* riddled with gaps in lineage — *what* are you laughing about?”

“Nothing, nothing, go on. What’s the problem with Millie’s branch of the Bulstrodes?”

“Well, now I don’t want to tell you,” Draco said sulkily. He was just enjoying knowing something for once, was that so wrong? Hermione got to know things all the time, first at school and now amidst the Muggles. Draco never got to be the expert anymore, and it was very irritating.

“Then tell me about your cult.” Potter’s pebbles danced through the night air. The waxing moon provided just enough light to see comfortably, which would have been more comforting if Draco did not have to see the slight dimple in Potter’s cheek or the gentle way his lips curved into a smile.

Draco yanked his eyes away from Potter and began to describe Sons of Slytherin and the two-hundred Promise balls he’d had to attend as a child, about the time Winnifred Selwyn disapproved of the cut of someone’s dress robes and had them exiled from society for three years. Draco could tell, although he was still decidedly not looking at him, that Potter was smiling.

*

Neville, Malfoy and Harry set out at nightfall. The full moon hung swollen and brilliant in the open sky, illuminating both the heart-stopping landscape and the proliferation of litter that lay amongst the scrub beside the path they trudged along. Somehow, Harry spotted no less than three McDonalds cups and a smattering of Tesco bags despite the fact they were in the middle of absolute nowhere.

“Fluxweed is actually a type of mustard,” Neville said happily, slinging his carrier bag over his shoulder. “It’s native to North America, but it can be found as an invasive species here. You can eat it as scurvy grass. Ancient Greek herbologists called it ‘the wisdom of the surgeons’.”

“Is it hard to find?”

Neville blinked at him. “It’s a weed,” he said.

Harry shrugged. “I’m not a gardener.”

“If you know where to look, it’s easy to find,” Malfoy said shortly. They were all nearly of a height, but Malfoy’s couple of inches gave him a leg length advantage. He kept a few feet ahead of them, leading them onto the moor.

“So they really didn’t teach Herbology at all at Muggle school?” Neville looked at Harry as if this was something to be pitied. “Not whatever the Muggle version would be — gardening?” Neville had spent much of the afternoon cheerfully pointing out various magical plants and their properties around the tent, continually surprised that Harry could not identify an oak from an aspen.

“You could study botany at university, if you signed on for that course.”

“Weird,” Neville said, shaking his head.

They trudged along the path for what felt like hours. Harry’s legs ached, but still Neville insisted that the soil was not sandy enough, or that they had entered a bog area which was no good. He had started to feel faintly worried that they would not find the promised fluxweed, and thus would have to wait for another full moon to brew the damn potion. Malfoy’s pale hair bobbed ahead of them like a beacon, trudging up and down hills.

As they walked, Harry’s thoughts turned to Voldemort. Every time someone said You-Know-Who — or, in the case of Malfoy, the Dark Lord — Harry had started to get a prickle of fear, as if someone was watching him. *Voldemort was after him*. Voldemort, who had his wand’s twin core. This had to mean something, but for the life of him Harry could not think what.

“Aha!” Neville pumped a fist in the air and went clambering off the path and into the brush. “Over here, lads.”

“Please do not call me *lad*,” drawled Malfoy, but followed after him.

Harry dodged prickly brambles on his way to where Neville stood, surrounded by long weeds with dying yellow flowers.

Neville beamed and clapped his hands together. “Let’s get a lot, in case we need to brew the potion again. It’s really tricky, isn’t it?”

“Are you saying I won’t brew it properly in the first place?” Malfoy looked offended.

“Let it go,” Harry advised him, and began yanking bits of fluxweed out of the ground.

They were quiet in the moonlight for a long time, but for the rustle of small animals in the grass and the sounds of flora in the wind. Neville wandered off, humming happily, filling his bag to the brim with fluxweed.

Harry cleared his throat, preparing himself. “What was Diagon Alley like before?”

Malfoy looked up from his task, hair falling into his eyes. “What?”

“When we were in Diagon Alley, you said it wasn’t like that before.” Harry thought about the hoards of people who looked at him with eyes like grasping hands, the raggedy people in doorways, the boarded-up windows. “You said it was...”

“Better,” Malfoy said. “I said it was better.” He sorted the fluxweed with long, skinny fingers. The moonlight caught his face in silvery splashes and shadows. “It was... bright. Busy.

Colourful. I know it was still London, so most of the time it must have been shitty and raining, but I remember it as always sunny. Like light through a rainbow prism.”

“Hard to believe one man took all that away.”

Malfoy’s sharp grey eyes fixed on his with an almost audible click. “The Dark Lord is not just a man, Potter. He’s... More, and less.” Something frightened and awful twisted in Malfoy’s face, and he looked away. “His followers, sure, they’re human. Nice to see how low an actual human person can sink. Quite low, as it turns out. But *him*... He’s something different.”

A faint memory rose in Harry’s mind: a flash of green light, and then a high, cold laugh. His old nightmare. He had once convinced himself that he was remembering the car crash. “What does... How does Volde — sorry, I mean You-Know-Who, kill people?”

“The Killing Curse. *Avada Kedavra*.” Malfoy spoke in a sing-song like someone reading mockingly from a textbook. “It kills instantly, so they say. No one can survive it. But you did. No one knows how.”

They fell silent again. The moor was still and freezing. Neville, still humming a cheerful little tune, had paid no attention to Malfoy and Harry’s conversation at all.

“Everyone thought you were with relatives who took care of you.” Malfoy did not look at Harry as he said this, which was a blessing. “You’re Harry Potter. Everyone thought... You know, that you’d be like a prince. Or something.”

The laugh that burst its way out of Harry’s unwilling throat was short and bitter. “My cousin was the prince.”

“So who were you?”

“Scullery maid?” Harry turned his back and tried to pick fluxweed apart from various other long plants. Hadn’t he already *told* Malfoy that the Dursleys hated him? Did they really have to go into specifics? “It’s fine. We really don’t need to talk about it.”

“You did the cleaning?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, feeling surly. *You did the cleaning* in that posh asshole voice. So surprised to find out that he was just a peasant, one of the hoards of scavenging masses. Yeah, of course he bloody did the cleaning. He was the help. Malfoy wouldn’t let him beyond the green baize door, that’s how it went for people like him. “I bet *you* ’ve never cleaned a thing in your life.”

“Once I was forced to clean my own dragon-leather brogues after I got them muddy during a Care of Magical Creatures lesson. My father thought it would build character.” Malfoy sniffed. “As you can probably tell, it didn’t work.”

Harry darted a look back at Malfoy. He was, actually, joking. There was the ghost of a smirk on his face; his eyes crinkled a bit at the sides.

“Hermione asked me to clean the bath a few weeks ago and I had to lock myself in with a book of cleaning spells so no one could tell I didn’t know my arse from a teakettle in that respect. I *still* fucked it up, if you can imagine. The bathroom smelled singed for ages.”

“So that’s what that smell was,” Harry said. “I thought there was something off.”

“Ta-da,” Malfoy said, gesturing to himself. “So, as you can see, I’m a rousing success.”

Harry thought of the couple hundred unintentional fires he had started doing magic the others described as fodder for eleven-year-olds, and felt considerably better about himself.

Neville fought his way through the weeds back to them. “My bag’s full. Do you think we have enough?”

“Probably,” Malfoy said, “It depends on the quality of the…” He tilted his head, frowning. “Did you hear that?”

They froze, hands clamped over their bags of fluxweed. At first, there was nothing, just the wind, and the faint sound of animals in the brush. Then Harry heard it: a long, echoing howl.

Malfoy and Neville went white.

“That doesn’t sound like a dog,” Harry said quietly, “That sounds like a… wolf?” But it couldn’t be, there had not been any in Britain for hundreds of years.

“Werewolf,” Malfoy said. “Brilliant. Love it. Perfect timing.”

Neville clenched his jaw. “Okay. Wands out, let’s get back to the tent.”

“I bloody wish one of us knew how to Apparate,” Malfoy said tightly. He looked like he was about to be sick. “Any of us. Even slightly. I’d take some mild splinching; I never needed toenails anyway.”

“Hold on — *werewolves*? We’ve got werewolves now?” Harry looked between Neville and Malfoy incredulously. “Next you’re going to tell me there’s a load of dragons somewhere nearby.”

“They’re more likely to be in Scotland or Wales,” Neville said, eyes darting around the moor. “Do you think it’s a pack? Could they be with the Death Eaters?”

“Possibly,” Malfoy murmured, “But… It sounds like just one, doesn’t it?”

“Maybe two,” Harry said, listening hard. “Is everything else about them true — you know, one bite and you’re a werewolf, silver bullets, all that?”

A howl rang across the moor again, closer this time.

Malfoy was shaking slightly, and doing his best to hide it. “Let’s have this conversation on the move,” he said shortly.

They drew their wands and crept back the way they had come. Harry's heart thudded in his ears. He scanned the horizon for alien shapes. As they drew closer to their camp the howls began to fade away. It all felt much less menacing when they were finally within the warm golden glow of the tent, but Hermione doubled up their perimeter protection spells all the same.

"Werewolves," Harry muttered from his bunk. "What the fuck."

"Wait until you see mermaids," Malfoy said, rolling over so his back was to Harry. "You'll shit yourself."

"Yay," Harry said dryly. He drew the covers over himself. The tent came with quite a lot of mod-cons for your standard tent, but it had not managed central heating. He closed his eyes and fell into an uneasy sleep. He dreamt of wolves and mermaids with mouths like great white sharks; of a flash of green light and a high, cold laugh.

*

The forests and moors surrounding Muggleswick were cold and humid nearly every day, with enough wind to disperse early fogs and blow Draco's hair into his eyes no matter in what direction he stood. Every morning Potter learned more magic: turning needles into matches and back again, levitating sticks and branches, throwing elementary hexes at whoever was teaching him. He seemed to be setting less flora aflame now that he had his own wand.

In the afternoons they worked on the Polyjuice Potion. Hermione had rigged up a special cauldron tied to the fabric of the tent, which would be handy if whatever had been howling at the full moon found them. The lacewings stewed according to instructions, and occasionally Draco let Potter shred boomslang skin with only mild supervision.

Ginny was teaching Potter a particularly nasty little hex when a brown shape in the sky came plummeting towards earth: Hedwig, whose feathers were significantly lighter than they were when she'd left them.

"Oh, I think the charm must be wearing off," Ginny said, looking disappointed.

Neville beamed up at the owl. "I knew she was as smart as she looked. Look at that, and she's made rather good time too, if she came by way of the Atlantic like Luna said."

They followed as Hedwig soared into the tent and landed near her cage, holding her leg out imperiously.

Luna, who had been reading on the threadbare sofa, ran to untie her: there was a thick letter in a pale blue envelope, and a newspaper. Luna ripped open the envelope.

"Ooh, Daddy's found a new element for Rowena Ravenclaw's diadem," she cooed. "Also, he's included a newspaper so I can know what's going on at home whilst I'm in Iceland."

"The Quibbler?" Draco eyed the newspaper dubiously.

"Yes, and a copy of the Daily Prophet as well, for comparison."

There was a minor storm as everyone tried to get hold of the newspaper at once. Hermione emerged victorious, and unfolded the newspaper on the kitchen table.

A pencil drawing of Potter — mostly accurate, although it didn't quite capture the full effect — spread across the front page emblazoned with the words UNDESIRABLE NUMBER ONE.

"Ten thousand galleon reward," Potter read mildly. "Nice. That a lot?"

"They're saying you've stolen magical secrets," Hermione said incredulously. "They're saying you're in league with known terrorists!"

"Is that all? I'd have thought they'd pin all of the Dark Lord's latest murders on him, at this point." Draco leaned over Hermione's shoulder and caught a glimpse of his father's name. Of course he'd given an interview. Lovely.

"They move quickly," Ron muttered, sitting down across the table from Hermione.

"Any mention of us?"

Hermione scanned the article. "Draco's father gave a few quotes, and they've run through the list of other people at large. Professor McGonagall, Remus Lupin, the usual. Known Mudbloods. Oh, damn. Neville, you're mentioned as an Undesirable."

Neville looked miserable. "I'm sorry I didn't come up with a good cover story. Gran's escape couldn't have helped either."

"Three out of seven isn't so bad," Ginny pointed out. "And it's not like they have a solid connection between the three of you."

Potter had retreated from the table and was refilling Hedwig's water with a spell he'd learned yesterday. Draco watched Hedwig give him an affectionate nip. Pretty soon she'd be bringing him dead birds as presents.

Ron drummed his fingers on the table. "Anything about Hogwarts?"

Wordlessly, Hermione passed a section of the paper his way.

"Oh, look, it's you," Ron exclaimed. He held up the paper where, sure enough, a drawing of Draco's disguise glowered out at them like a particularly hideous goblin. Underneath, the headline blared DO YOU KNOW THIS MAN.

Draco wrinkled his nose. "Burn that," he demanded. Had he really needed to go so far with the eyebrows? He looked *unsanitary*.

"I don't know why you're so interested in the Daily Prophet," Luna said from behind the Quibbler, "Did you know that the heliopaths have taken control of Cornelius Fudge and are on the march towards London?"

"Brilliant," Ginny said, and went to sit next to Luna on the sofa. "I love a good heliopath."

Draco pulled a discarded section of the Daily Prophet towards him and began to read.

*

Harry stole outside during the newspaper session. A cloud was moving in on the horizon that looked disturbingly like torrential rain, but he stayed put. There was a poet that had loved the Pennines — was it Auden? Harry had read “Stop all the clocks” in GCSE English Lit and been quietly electrified by the pronouns, even if his teacher had said it was actually about the narrator’s brother and also it had been satirical and also everyone had been misled by some ‘Hollywood monstrosity of a scene’, which had been a hilarious diversion from his planned lecture. No, it had to have been Auden: he’d loved the desolation, the dereliction. The old mining towns gone to shit.

Sounds like Auden might have loved Diagon Alley, if dereliction was what he was after.

Something rustled behind him. Harry turned back to see Hermione ducking out of the tent, carrying a book.

She sat down cross-legged in front of Harry and began flipping through pages. “Let me see... I know it’s here somewhere...”

Harry sighed. “What?”

“This.” Hermione turned the book around to face him.

It was a picture of Harry himself. Only — not quiet. The other Harry looked a bit older, with a slightly longer nose and hazel eyes. His glasses were large and old-fashioned. Other than that, the resemblance was uncanny: the same untidy hair with the same cowlicks, the same mouth, the same thin face. He had his arm around a very pretty young woman with dark red hair and bright green eyes. They were laughing and waving, beaming within an inch of their lives. The caption beneath read: James and Lily Potter, Godric’s Hollow, January 1980.

“January 1980 — she must be pregnant with you there,” Hermione said quietly. “Only a few months along. They’re so young, aren’t they? Only twenty. They say that’s how things were in the first war — people married young, had children young. I suppose it felt like they might not have had the chance otherwise.”

Harry had been forbidden from asking questions about his parents. He used to search through the whole house whenever Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia were out, ransacking every discarded box in the cellar and sorting through the stacks of debris that landed in the cupboard under the stairs once he outgrew it. Every time they moved he’d do it again, hoping that this time something new would turn up. The most he ever found were those crumbled childhood pictures. Here they were: his parents, young and happy. *James and Lily Potter, Godric’s Hollow, January 1980*. They’d be dead in less than two years.

Hermione patted his shoulder and then left him alone without another word. Harry touched the picture, his nose and eyes prickling.

“This won’t happen to anyone else,” he promised their smiling faces. “I won’t — I’m going to make sure.”

He felt abruptly stupid and turned his face to the sky, blinking back foolish tears. *James and Lily Potter, Godric’s Hollow, January 1980*, their faces simultaneously strange and familiar. They were younger than he’d always pictured them. His heart thrummed like a flock of startled pigeons. He felt both taut, pinging joy and a horrible plunging sadness. He didn’t understand why he was shaking so much. Harry stared at his hands like they belonged to some other person entirely. Maybe they did. Harry had spent seventeen years thinking he was one person and here he was sitting in the north of England with a magic wand and a moving picture of his parents and he was somebody else entirely. Maybe somebody good. Maybe somebody helpful.

“Pull yourself together,” Harry told himself, squeezing his eyes shut. “Pull yourself together, you fucking mess.”

He tore the page from the book, folded it into a tidy square and put it into his pocket. The wide sky arched over him pitilessly, the grey storm-cloud moving in on the winds. He’d give himself another five minutes, and then he’d go back inside.

Chapter 4

Harry Potter was cheating.

Draco did not know how exactly Potter was managing the aforementioned cheating, but there had to be more than a modicum of falsehood about. Draco could *smell* all the fraud, and also the dishonesty, and the low-down dirty tricks. There was no other way in which Potter and his motley team could be leading five to two in their makeshift game of Chasers-only ground Quidditch.

Ugh, *six* to two. Potter whooped loudly, slamming the Quaffle through the levitating hoop with the kind of practised ease one would expect from someone who had grown up *playing* Quidditch, like, for example, Ginny Weasley, who was doing a terrible job of living up to her Gryffindor Quidditch team pedigree.

“Fuck you, Potter,” Ginny said without heat, laughing. “C’mon, Malfoy, let’s trounce these sad bastards.”

Draco redoubled his efforts, weaving around Luna (who kept getting distracted by moorland vegetation) and Neville (the same, even though he was actually *on Draco’s team*) and made his way towards the opposite goal. Potter came out of nowhere. He popped up like a deluded groundhog to lope in front of Draco as easy as breathing, getting up in his face, green eyes lit up like sparklers. He wasn’t even panting, the twat.

“Trying to score, there, Malfoy? Come on, try me.” Potter gestured towards his chest, still beaming. “Try and get past me, go on. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Draco feinted left and went right, throwing the Quaffle towards the goal. There was terrible moment when he thought that Ron might block the ball but — no, it soared through.

“How do you like *that*,” he crowed, turning back to lord his valiant victory over Potter. “That’s what I call *technique*, Potter — something you would know absolutely nothing about. Only learned about Quidditch today, did you? It shows in your form — or lack thereof.”

“Actually, without the other players or the flying, this really is just modified handball crossed with a bit of rugby and basketball,” Hermione said from the sidelines. She had an enormous book propped up on her knees and was paying very little attention to their game. “So I really don’t think you have any advantage over Harry in that respect.”

“I don’t know what handball is, nor do I care,” Draco informed her. “All I know is that I am the king of the Quaffle.” He traded a bruising high five with Ginny, and made a face at Potter.

Potter just snorted, wiping damp hair from his forehead. “Sure, Malfoy. We’ll just ignore that you’re still losing by three, shall we?” The sinewy stretch of Potter’s forearm was agony, as was Potter’s sharp jaw as his head tilted back, the long span of brown neck. Draco looked away.

“Malfoy!”

Draco turned towards Ginny. “I’m fine,” he said, like an idiot.

“Okay,” Ginny said slowly. “I was just going to pass this to you.” She tossed him the Quaffle.

“Next round!” Ron clapped his hands, then motioned everyone in to the centre of their haphazard field. “Harry, want to start the ball?”

Potter pulled his wand out of his pocket to levitate the Quaffle above their heads. Everyone watched the red ball soar up except Draco — he couldn’t stop looking at terrible Potter’s terrible face, the horrific light in his damnable eyes and how *happy* he was to be playing shit Quidditch without brooms in spitting October drizzle. He didn’t understand how anyone could look away. It was like Potter had a eye-catching charm always on his person — honestly, Draco wouldn’t put it past him. He was, after all, a low-down dirty cheat.

Potter let the ball drop and they all rushed to grab it — Luna was first, but she fumbled her catch and Ginny scooped it up and ran full-pelt towards the opposing goal. Ron blocked her bodily and Draco couldn’t really see, but judging by Ron’s yelp Ginny had retaliating by biting him. This is why she was on Draco’s team.

Two goals later, Luna had wandered off and Neville was lying splayed out on the ground declaring his imminent death. The Weasleys, Potter and Draco remained, still battling it out for the final glory. Hedwig swooped overhead, a dead mouse in her beak. Draco considered it an excellent omen.

Ginny, at Draco’s urgent, was trying out some top Slytherin sporting technique. “I know who really melted Mum’s Celestina Warbeck record,” Ginny told Ron, blocking him from assisting Harry, “And it wasn’t Fred and George.”

“Big deal,” Ron huffed, trying to dodge her, “What Mum doesn’t know won’t hurt me.”

“And that dirty magazine I found under your bed? Does Mum know about *that*?”

Ron faltered and it was enough, Potter had attempted to pass the ball but Ginny intercepted it, running towards the goal in a ginger streak of motion.

“Ha! We are *victorious*!” Draco was dripping with sweat and so tired he could happily collapse to the floor like a dropped forkful of spaghetti bolognese, but it did not matter in the face of his team’s true superiority.

“Now you’ve lost by one instead of by two,” Potter pointed out.

“That’s still rather good considering how much *you* were extremely cheating.”

Potter spread his arms wide. “*How?*”

“I don’t know, but I will find out, and then I’ll copy your technique.”

“Rapidly losing the moral high ground there,” Potter said.

“Who has ever cared about the moral high ground, this is about *winning*, you tosser.”

“Good game, though,” Ginny said, jogging over from her victory dance. It had involved quite a few rude gestures and a bonus nasty pinch to Ron’s face.

The days had fallen into a predictable rhythm. Draco tended to the stewed lacewings, and then someone or other taught Harry some magic and then usually Ginny cobbled together some sort of attempt at athletics. They’d tried football, which Potter had been too good at — “We always used our legs for *flying*, not for kicking things about,” Ron kept pointing out, as he lost by a shocking margin — and Gobstones, which was not a sport no matter what Neville said, and every variation of ground Quidditch under the clouds. They played all Beaters Quaffle Quidditch and enchanted stone Snitch Quidditch and rolling Quidditch with long sticks, which Hermione told them was essentially something called hockey, albeit with an overlarge ball. The hours stretched on, deceptively boring, falsely safe. When Draco was on watch at night he kept thinking he could hear the howling of wolves, but he couldn’t be sure if he was conjuring the sound from sheer nerves.

It was early October by the time the lacewings had finally finished stewing with the knotgrass and the leeches, and they had not had to move their campground at all.

Potter had thrown himself face-first into his magical education, often literally. He’d become so proficient at duelling that he was consistently beating Neville and Luna, and had once beat Hermione by letting off some sort of bizarre accidental magic and setting her loafers on fire. He was less interested in potions, but he still watched as Draco and Hermione brewed. They added the boomslang skin and bicorn horn to puffs of smoke, both drenched up from Hermione’s mysterious handbag. How she had procured these ingredients in the first place, Draco did not want to ask — he was really hoping she’d stolen them from the school supply cupboards and did not want his dream to be punctured.

“It’ll be ready in a fortnight,” Hermione said definitively, looking down into the frothing mass.

Potter covered his nose. “We’re going to *drink* that?”

“Oh, no, Potter. We’re going to drink that once we’ve added bits of people’s *hair* and *skin*.” Draco grinned at Potter’s disgusted expression. “Yes, it *is* disgusting. You see, Granger? Potter agrees with me. It’s disgusting.”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t do it,” Potter said mulishly.

“Yes, but you also think it’s repugnant. Granger is too blinded by her characteristic single-mindedness to admit that salient detail.”

Hermione sniffed the potion cautiously and then consulted *Most Potente Potions*. “We need to add an anti-clockwise stir after every twelve clockwise stirs. Have you been doing that, Draco?”

“Stop questioning my competency and mock Potter with me, Granger.”

“I told you ages ago to call me Hermione,” Hermione said absently, running her finger over the page again. “I do hope the lacewings were stewed adequately.”

“She’s no fun at all,” Draco informed Potter.

On the day the Polyjuice Potion finished brewing, Hermione called a meeting at the kitchen table. The table fit six people at a squeeze and seven at an uncomfortable squeeze, but Hermione was too busy pacing to worry about seating logistics. Draco had become increasingly aware that Hermione did her best when they had a concrete goal, which made the near conclusion of the Polyjuice project a daunting prospect. At least there was one more task to complete.

“Disguises,” Hermione said, and if she’d had a blackboard she’d probably thwap it to underscore her point, “We’ll need a variety of samples. Of course we don’t need too many — we’ll leave the possibility open that we may need to transform into specific individuals — but a fairly large selection would not go amiss.”

“Where are we going to get bits of other people?” Neville wrinkled his nose. “We’re not just going to... ride the city bus picking up hairs, are we?”

“I had considered that,” Hermione said brightly. “But I thought of something better — universities. If we go into one of the halls of residence, we’ll blend in fairly well and lots of them have shared bathrooms! Hairbrushes, nail clippings, exfoliators, it’ll be simple!”

“Granger,” Draco said evenly, “Don’t take this the wrong way, but your singular focus is truly frightening. *Nail clippings?*”

“Statistically speaking, they can’t be more unsanitary than, oh, anything else. There’s faeces particles in everything, Draco.” Hermione smiled like she had been merely repeating a cute and familiar joke. “Anyway —”

“*Anyway?*” Draco leaned back from the table. “Hermione. You are our monomaniacal overlord, and I respect your autocratic bent. But *nail clippings?* Faeces? You have truly gone off your broomstick.”

“Well, *you* don’t have to go for the nail clippings then, all right?” Hermione turned to the rest of table. “And Harry, you can practise your retrieval spells!”

“I think the rest of us are more likely to be practising our Muggle Studies,” Ron said. “But yeah, I think that could work.”

“We’ll have to be very careful,” Luna said, her massive eyes blinking solemnly at them. “You never know who could be a hag in disguise.”

“I only want to be in disguise as a hag,” said Ginny. “From now on, I’m a hags-only zone.”

“Ginny, you know if you Polyjuice into a hag, you can never transform back — their warts strip your mental facilities.” Luna’s large eyes went even larger. “Although Daddy says hags are much happier than witches and wizards, most of the time.”

Hermione glanced at Luna, surprised. “That’s... not *completely* wrong, actually. Hags aren’t human, so it takes a great deal more effort to strip the effects of Polyjuice, but it’s not... it’s not due to the warts, Luna.”

“No, that can’t be right. Warts are the only thing that keep them from being classified as human,” Luna said peaceably.

“That, the entirely different anatomy and the *child-eating*.”

“Witches and wizards are so discriminatory sometimes.”

As Luna and Hermione argued about hag classification, Potter leaned close to Draco’s ear and asked, “How long does this typically go on?”

Draco suppressed a flinch at his proximity. “Depends on if anyone stops them. A few months ago Hermione spent three hours trying to convince Luna that the Blibbering Humdinger was a construct. Didn’t work, of course.”

“Right then. Excuse me,” Potter said loudly. A hush fell over the table as decisively as if he’d done a silencing charm. “What’s our end goal here?”

“Well, we have the Polyjuice Potion, and —”

Potter shook his head. “No, I understand that part. We’ll have identities to change into, great. What happens after that? What’s our end goal?”

Draco looked at Hermione. Everyone else, he couldn’t help but notice, had also looked at Hermione. Hermione blinked several times, took a deep breath, cleared her throat, and then fell silent once more.

“Or...” Potter frowned. “Or was finding *me* your end goal, and now that you’ve done that you figure you’d basically stay off the grid and teach me how to stun shrubbery and hope for the best.”

“No,” Hermione said hastily, “You weren’t the *end* goal, necessarily. There’s just — so many variables.”

“I don’t see how,” Potter said. “There’s a whole pile of Death Eaters, a sham government and Lord Volde — sorry, I mean, that great evil bastard you’re all so terrified of. Surely our next plan is to, you know, do away with them.”

“Euphemisms are nice for He Who Must Not Be Named,” Luna said, “But I think we ought to clarify that you mean killing them, rather than, say, transporting them to Siberia, or leaving them stranded in Greenland without their wands.”

Ginny leaned forward, elbows on the table. “How?”

Potter stared at Ginny. “How do we leave them stranded in Greenland?”

“No,” Ginny said patiently, “how do we find them, to kill them.”

Ron looked at his sister as if she'd grown an extra head. Or, more accurately, as if she'd grown an extra head after being diagnosed with an extra-head growing condition in her early childhood, but the chance of actually growing said head had been slim, and he was now surprised despite her prior diagnosis to find her sitting across from him at the kitchen table with two heads.

"We have someone who knows where they are." Potter looked at Draco. "You do, don't you?"

Draco had known Potter was not an idiot, at least not entirely, but he really hadn't expected Potter to know much about — surely he didn't know about Malfoy Manor. Had Hermione told him? *What* had Hermione told him? Draco wanted to go back in time and erase Hermione's memory of essentially anything Draco had ever done, then return to the current timeline unblemished and significantly less targeted by eyeballs that shouldn't naturally be that colour.

"We could use the Polyjuice Potion there," Ron said suddenly, "At Malfoy Manor, or wherever else they'd be. Infiltrate. Pick them off."

Neville looked pained. "Listen, I don't want to be the bearer of... I'm not sure I'm particularly comfortable with the killing part of the plan, first of all, but also we're teenagers. They're Death Eaters. How could we expect to survive?"

"We wouldn't," Hermione said grimly. "I agree. The risk is too high. We can't possibly just waltz in and *murder* people, surely."

"Hold on," Potter contended, scowling, "Didn't you all basically kidnap me so that you could teach me enough to kill Voldem — You-Know-Who? Since I defeated him once as an infant, you thought, for some bizarre reason, that I could do it *again*? Wasn't that your grand plan?"

There was a chorus of robust denials. Draco did not answer, because Draco's answer was "Yes, absolutely, also I thought we'd be more likely to find your corpse."

"We knew that you were out there, and that you were in danger," Hermione said earnestly. "We couldn't just leave someone without help! You were supposed to be in school with us, but you weren't, and we knew... Well, we knew *someone* had to find you, and why shouldn't it be us?"

"And if you ended up finding me, I'd be a pretty good candidate to save the world, wouldn't I?" Potter was unimpressed even by Hermione's most pleading and compassionate of expressions.

"Not if you didn't want to," Ron said.

Potter scoffed. "If I didn't *want* to?"

"I mean, sure, we thought about it," Ron said reasonably. "You're Harry Potter! Who wouldn't think it for a second? But that wasn't the driving force behind our rescue mission — and it *was* a rescue mission, by the way, you remember how quickly the Death Eaters found

you in London. We'd be daft not to consider the possibility that you'd be helpful in fixing what's been done here. Mate, our world is fucked. It's been fucked in every hole, up to and including our fucking ears. Sorry, Hermione, but you know what I mean. We wanted to keep the Death Eaters from offing you and bring you back into the wizarding world, and now the rest of us are still pretty committed to saving it. If you want out, fine. You haven't been given much of a choice and that's not fair play. If you want out, that's all right. We'll do it on our own if we have to."

Potter's tense shoulders slowly dropped from his ears. "I didn't say I wanted out."

"Good," said Ron.

"Good," said Harry. Slowly, and then all of a sudden, they were grinning at each other. It was bizarre. Draco chalked it down to having spent too much time on the same team during pairs-only ground Quidditch.

Hermione looked between Ron and Harry. Once it became clear that neither of them were going to continue speaking, she cleared her throat awkwardly. "What Harry and Ron are suggesting is an extremely high risk plan, but I think if we really narrow it down to certain parameters — not a nest of Death Eaters, but targeting important figures, possibly stunning Ministry officials under Imperius or under the Death Eater influence... We could effectively destabilise their sham government."

So Hermione was going to ignore the entire emotional confrontation entirely — a classic pureblood technique. Draco wanted to thank and congratulate her, but he'd only draw attention back to the emotional confrontation which would be too tiresome for words.

"What about the press?" Luna cocked her head. "What if we found a way to let people know what's really going on?"

"You mean the Quibbler," Ron said.

"Maybe. I think Daddy would help us, if we asked. Then he'd have to come on the run with us, of course, because I don't think the Death Eaters would be very happy with him. There's an extra bunk, so of course that's a possibility, although Daddy is not very good at camping with large groups of people." Luna stared briefly at the ceiling, considering this. "*Or* we could get into the Daily Prophet just before the printer takes them off, print an alternate newspaper or insert our own section, and send that out for delivery."

"Guerrilla warfare," Draco murmured, trying to remember the book on goblin rebellions his father had given him for his thirteenth birthday. His father had meant it as a way to solidify the importance of might and purity in Draco's mind, but Draco had mostly been impressed by the charismatic goblin leader. "It relies on a strong relationship to the populace. And if we got enough information out there, put a face on the resistance..." Draco glanced at Harry. It wouldn't hurt to have a face of the resistance that looked like *that*. The propaganda wouldn't hurt anyone's eyes, he supposed. Potter had a nose, for example, which was a leg up on the competition.

Hermione was nodding slowly, her eyes taking on that evangelical gleam that meant she had found her new cause. “I see what you mean. We’ve got to get the message out.”

“I still think we ought to do some real violence,” Ginny informed them. “It’s nice to put words out there and everything, but there are Death Eaters going up and down the country killing entire families for sport. Personally, I think it’s fair game to kill them right back.”

“Or at least strip them of their wands and memories,” Luna suggested, in a deceptively innocent voice. Draco knew it. Under her airy-fairy exterior, Luna was a slightly fanciful bear trap.

Neville looked at Luna like she had personally squashed several of his dreams, but in a resigned sort of way, like if the dreams were already fairly squashed to begin with. “How is that better?”

“Less blood?” Draco suggested. Personally he thought it might be worse.

“We can discuss specifics later,” Hermione said, quelling all other discussion with a glance. “What’s important now is that we decide on an approximate course of action.”

“Let’s start with the press,” Ron said. “It honestly hurts me a little to admit it, but Malfoy’s not wrong. We have to get the idea of the resistance out there before we do anything else.”

“For all we know there are loads of other resistance groups,” Potter said. “I’d be surprised if there weren’t.”

Draco shrugged. “Well, if there are, they’ve done a really shoddy job of advertising.”

“We’ll find out once we get our shit in the papers,” Ginny said, still looking faintly murderous.

“Great.” Hermione clapped her hands together. Her whole face was electric with planning. Draco could almost see the charts and maps buzzing to the tips of her frizzy hair. “Disguises first, and then we move on.”

*

Harry and Hermione poured over a list of universities and a map at the kitchen table, muttering things to each other like “they’ll definitely have too many en suites” and “I’ve never been there, but I’ve heard they’re all twats.” Hermione’s parents had apparently spent a decent chunk of the last few years giving her brochures from Muggle universities and encouraging her to pursue a versatile education. Harry had never planned on university — he knew he’d be getting away from the Dursleys far before he sat his A Levels — but he’d absorbed a certain amount of information by osmosis.

Two days later, they packed up their camp and Apparated onto a sad circle of dying grass in front of a cement eyesore of a library. Harry assumed that there were more picturesque parts of the university somewhere but architects in the sixties took it upon themselves to really fuck up the aesthetic.

“This shouldn’t take long at all. The only problem is,” Hermione said, a tinge of worry seeping into her determined features, “We don’t have a map of where the buildings are.”

“There’s got to be a map somewhere around here.” Neville craned his head around the concrete perimeter like one would pop out of the ground at his leisure. Harry wondered if that was how it worked in most wizarding areas.

Hermione set her shoulders, an army general giving orders. “Right. Let’s split up and see what we can find. We’ll meet back here in two hours.”

Ginny, Neville and Luna went to the left, and Hermione and Ron went to the right. Harry glanced at Malfoy. “Through the library, or away from it?”

“I don’t want to set foot inside that horrific monstrosity,” Malfoy said, looking revolted.

“I actually agree with you,” Harry said, eying the library. “Which disturbs me. Let’s go.”

They had brought bags to blend in with the students, and Malfoy had his longish hair and grungey jeans again. Harry’s forehead felt sticky with all the charms to cover his scar, and the hair plastered down over it, and the cap atop that like a layer cake of identity obstruction. They walked without speaking, or really looking at one another. Most of the buildings were cement monstrosities or dull brick blocks, with the odd glimpse of beautiful gothic stone construction thrown in for colour. Eventually the monotony broke out into a car park and a smattering of trees. Malfoy had started to look slightly panicked.

“How large *are* these places, actually?” He craned his neck to look back the way they had come.

Harry thought about Diagon Alley, apparently the British wizarding world’s bustling city centre. The entire thing was about the size of his secondary school. “Just track somebody who looks exhausted,” he said.

They followed a girl with a harassed expression and large dark circles under her eyes for about ten minutes until they approached a few likely-looking brick blocks.

“Follow my lead,” Harry muttered, and increased his pace until he was right behind the girl, catching the door on the way into the building. He schooled his face into a casually bored expression, looking down at his wristwatch for something to do.

The girl disappeared up the stairs, so Harry led Malfoy down the corridor and into a drab but relatively clean shared bathroom — currently unoccupied, luckily enough.

Malfoy wrinkled up his nose and gingerly plucked a long blond hair from a hairbrush, and put it into a vial. Harry found some beard trimmings in the sink which, whilst bad form for a shared space, would be fairly helpful for them. They moved quickly and wordlessly through the bathroom, then exited as nonchalantly as they could manage and headed to the next floor. The search was less fruitful, but they still exited with a respectable stash of stolen identities.

“I feel dirty,” Malfoy said, pained. “I feel degraded. Why couldn’t we have done the respectable thing and, you know, stupified a few people and cut their hair ourselves?”

“Respectable,” Harry echoed skeptically. “Yes, I can see how that would be respectful as hell.”

They took the drab stairs to the second floor where the scent of a truly pungent kitchen told tales of many a Pot Noodle ruined. The bathroom was in a similar state. Malfoy complained at length, possibly in verse about the state of one of the showers, but Harry got a decent number of hairs and he counted it as a rousing success.

“Right,” Harry said as they exited the bathroom, “I think we should be able to get into the next building from the ground floor.”

“Oi!” A tall boy wearing an enormous shirt jogged towards them. “Who you here for? I can help you out. I know *everyone* on this block, so go on. Test me.”

Harry glimpsed Draco’s pale face from the corner of his eye, but refused to give in to panic. This was no different from any other time Harry had lied to get into the loo in a pub that wouldn’t serve him. “We’re looking for, er — Mark,” Harry attempted.

“Mark?” The boy squinted. “Big bloke, squeaky voice?”

“That’s the one,” Harry said, praising a nonexistent god and reliably common names.

“Yes, Mark,” Malfoy echoed faintly. “Marcus. Lovely company. A dear friend. Never litters, you know. A credit to his family line.”

Harry jammed his elbow into Malfoy’s side and hit bony ribs.

Luckily, the kid wasn’t all that interested in Malfoy’s contribution to their stilted conversation. “Yeah, *no* idea where he is. Saw him last night though — he sicked up over my mate Bevvers and then cried because his kebab fell into the toilet. Classic. I’m Martin, by the way, are you freshers too?”

“Yeah — yes. Freshers.” Harry glanced at Malfoy, who looked completely lost. “Definitely. I’m Harry. This is, er, Dave.”

Malfoy trod on Harry’s toe. Harry’s bland smile took a severe dip in sincerity.

“Cool, mate, cool.” Martin bounced on the balls of his feet. “What’s your course?”

Harry swallowed hard and pasted on his blandest expression. “I’m doing, er, sports science. Dave’s in for... classics. He goes totally wild for Latin, god knows why.”

“Hic manebimus optime,” Malfoy said, with a weak smile. “Little Latin humour for you. No one knows what I’ll do with all the Latin in the future, but you know, I’m sticking with it. Sticking right with all the Latin, despite adverse circumstances.”

“Huh,” said Martin, squinting at Draco. “I’m doing Geography. Anyway, I’ve been drinking since, like, eleven this morning but I’ve got a fucking Film Soc meeting to make if you can believe it, *legend* — you boys coming out tonight?”

“Maybe,” Harry said, just as Malfoy enthused, “When are we *not*?”

“Brilliant. Me and some lads are headed to that pub with all the specials, maybe we’ll see you. Should be a laugh, right?” Martin thumped Harry on the shoulder hard enough that he wobbled. “I’ll tell Mark you came by if I see him.”

“Thanks, mate,” Draco said, thumping Martin’s shoulder like he had just learned the traditional parting gesture of the university lad. He said ‘mate’ like it was a vocabulary word for which he would receive extra credit.

With a last odd look at Draco, Martin disappeared down the corridor, carting a ripped box of Strongbow the size of a labrador.

“Malfoy, you are the worst at undercover I think, possibly, in the world,” Harry said.

Malfoy rubbed his forehead and looked faintly maligned, which was his favourite expression. “The man was speaking an entirely foreign language, Potter. Kebab. Freshers. *Film Soc*? I improvised. I improvised *brilliantly*.”

“Oh, shut it, *Dave*.”

“You should have said your name was Archibald,” Malfoy grouched. “It’s only fair.”

“Archibald’s too memorable. Similar to Draco, which is a bloody *bizarre* name and there’s no chance we wouldn’t have had to waste another ten minutes explaining how your parents are massive fans of stargazing and shit before Martin fucked off to his meeting.”

Malfoy looked over at Harry, surprised. “You knew that about my name?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I’m not a *complete* idiot, you know.”

“I’m aware you’re not a complete idiot.” Malfoy folded his arms over his chest, leading them down the corridor towards the stairs. “I just meant — the Muggles don’t normally teach Astronomy, right?”

Harry shrugged. “I liked space as a kid.” He did not need to get into the whole hiding in libraries element of his childhood and adolescence. Nor did he have to get into the long and devoted Star Wars fixation or the elaborate daydream of all the Dursleys dying in a bridge collapse and the Millenium Falcon swooping down to catch Harry Luke-style and whisking him off for a life of adventure and empire saving.

“The Malfoys usually favour Roman names,” Malfoy explained. “It was my mother who insisted on Draco — her family are all traditionally named after constellations. Maybe she felt left out; she didn’t have an astronomy name herself. She told me her cousin used to tease her constantly, you know, say that she must be a bastard with a name like that. A Brown, maybe. They always name their children after plants.”

“So what’s her name?”

Malfoy’s bent head cut a lonely shape in the dim stairwell. “Narcissa,” he said. “She was called Narcissa.”

Harry paused on the stairs. “Was?”

“She died a year ago.” Without elaborating, Draco pushed through the doors to the street. “Where is it we’re meeting the rest of our motley companions?”

“Motley crew is the usual phrase,” Harry said, reorienting himself. They had come out a different way they had gone in, and it took a minute for Harry’s brain to catch up. “By the library, remember?”

“Oh good, the distressing architectural monstrosity. I remember, and wish I did not.”

They wove their way back through brick block buildings and clusters of students. Harry glanced at Malfoy, who was striding decisively forward as if he knew exactly where he was going, even though he had to stop every fifteen feet to check that Harry had them pointed in the right direction.

“How did your mum die?”

Malfoy glared back at him, mouth set in a tight line. “No one taught you anything about appropriate conversational segues, did they?”

“No,” Harry said honestly.

“Well, let me enlighten you. One doesn’t just *launch* a conversational starter about the death of someone’s parents out of nowhere, Potter.”

“Er,” Harry said, “That’s pretty much exactly what you lot did to me.”

“Oh,” said Malfoy. His mouth twisted to the side, and his ears went a little pink under the overlong sway of his disguise hair. “Sorry.”

“That might be the first time I’ve ever heard you say you’re sorry.”

“It’ll be the last,” Malfoy promised. “I’m ashamed of myself. How uncouth. I’d apologise for apologising if I could.”

Harry stifled a smile, and sped up his pace. Malfoy was starting to favour right turns — they were meant to be going to the left.

Luna, Neville and Ginny were waiting on the patch of grass when they finally reached the horrible library, all sat cross-legged chatting about humdingers or something, Harry couldn’t quite follow. Hermione and Ron joined them ten minutes later. After a good five minutes comparing their success rate, Ginny cleared her throat in a prepared sort of way.

“Listen,” she said, “Neville, Luna and I were talking, and we thought it might be fun to go to a pub, you know, to celebrate.”

Hermione frowned. “A *pub*?”

“Or a nightclub,” Luna suggested.

Malfoy made a small, hilarious noise of shock.

“A small nightclub,” Neville added. “A low-key... sort of nightclub. Or pub. Either one.”

“A nightclub,” Hermione repeated flatly. “Have you completely taken leave of your senses?”

“We could try our brand new, never-been-tested Polyjuice Potion,” Ginny suggested persuasively, waggling her eyebrows.

“Nah, mate, no chance” Ron said. “We’re in the same city as the people we’ve pulled from, and presumably we’d be attending the same pubs as them, which is just asking for trouble.”

“*Exactly*,” Hermione said, shooting Ron an approving look. “Good *god*. This isn’t a holiday, you know!”

“Oh, come on, we’ve got disguises!” Ginny tugged her dark ponytail demonstratively. “And the place would be packed with Muggles. Wasn’t it *you* who said the best place to hide a person would be in a city teeming with people?”

“That was sort of a needle in a haystack sort of analogy,” Hermione reasoned. “And that didn’t really include getting inebriated and putting our guards down. Honestly, Ginny. Be logical.”

“We can’t be on all the *time*, Hermione! Do you see any imminent danger?” Ginny threw her arms out wide. “Look, we’re fine. We’re fine, but we could be dead tomorrow, so can’t we just live for, you know...” Ginny took a breath, clearly aware she was about to go full cliché but committing to it anyway, “The moment?”

“We could be dead tomorrow because of what we are doing right *now*,” Hermione hissed. “The moment is not worth this big of a risk.”

“I’m not really one for the moment either, Hermione,” Malfoy agreed. “The moment is overrated. I’m more interested in the medium term. The entire season, one might say.”

“One doesn’t,” Ginny said, scowling in his direction.

“I do think the pressure valve argument makes sense,” Neville attempted, “Plus, you know, I’ve never been to a Muggle pub before.”

“You literally met me in a Muggle pub, Neville,” Harry pointed out.

“That didn’t count,” Neville said. “I barely enjoyed it! I was too busy, er. Well, I’d never met *the* Harry Potter before; I was distracted.”

Harry shook his head, squinting. “What does that even mean?”

“It’s all right, Harry. He sees you as a human person now,” Luna said, laying a gentle hand on his arm.

Ginny was not deterred. “Hermione, if we don’t let off steam we are going to explode, and it’s not going to be cute.”

“Surely the rest of you don’t think this is a *good* idea,” Hermione said, turning round to fix imploring eyes on them.

“I don’t,” Malfoy said. “I think we should go back to the middle of nowhere and be very bored in the tent some more. It’s been going really well, I think. Any minute we’re going to be in the middle of a gobstones game and Longbottom is going to absolutely *lose* it and smash the game to pieces. On second thought, I am not as adverse to this plan as I thought I was five minutes ago.”

“It sounds incredibly dumb, strategically,” Harry admitted, “But I can see the appeal.”

“How about we just check it out? Go for a few hours, then leave. We’ll be careful, Hermione.” Ron slung an arm over her shoulder. “We do need to let loose a little bit and, well, I won’t drink, how’s that. I can Apparate us out safely if we need a quick exit.”

“You splinched yourself the last time you Apparated,” Hermione said, arms crossed. The corner of her mouth twitched. “This is so stupid. If we all get killed, I *told* you so. All right?”

*

An hour later, they were in a dark, smokey pub whilst Ginny delightedly ordered the most colourful thing she could find on the menu. Draco ordered exactly what Hermione ordered — a cider of some variety or other — because he got too baffled by the Muggle drinks. He didn’t want to break the Statute of Secrecy over something as stupid as a gillywater.

“This really is a terrible idea,” Hermione said, but she had started to smile.

“First stop the pub, second stop total government overthrow,” Ron said.

“One last drink before we really put it to the Man,” Ginny added. She brandished her enormous martini, which was violently pink and possibly smoking. Luna had managed to procure herself something with so many fruit skewers emanating from the rim that it doubled in mass. Neville had acquired both an amber pint and a knot of admiring girls giving him the eye. He did not appear to notice the latter.

The pub was packed with students, and it wasn’t long before crowds of excitable blokes separated their convoy into several distinct groups. Somehow Draco and Potter had ended up on the one side of the sudden influx of testosterone, craning their heads over everyone to catch a glimpse of the others on the opposite side.

“Oi, Harry!”

Potter went slightly ashen, and whipped his head around. It was Terrifying Martin, surrounded by four nearly identical copies of himself. “Oi, lads, look what we have here! Haz! Dave-o!”

“What is he saying,” Draco asked Potter in an undertone.

“Our names,” Potter said. “Hey, Martin.”

Terrifying Martin exchanged a baffling interchange of hand thumps with Potter. Draco made sure to be busy too busy with his drink to attempt any hand thumping or shaking of any kind. “Lads, I met these two in my Hall. They were looking for Mark.”

One of the Martins nodded enthusiastically. “Mark! Incredible.”

“Classic,” added another Martin.

The original Martin beamed like Draco and Potter were his oldest friends in the world. He was wobbling a little bit; his pint had its own personal tide with occasional waves lapping up to the edge. “Oh, mates — did you see that we drew with Italy, we’re in for the World Cup? We’re in it boys. We’re *in it*.” His pint spilled right over the side, splashing beer almost onto Draco’s shoes.

“England never wins the World Cup,” Potter said, dodging the overflow. “I mean, we did the once but that was in the sixties. Everyone was doing a lot of drugs.”

“You never know,” Martin enthused, spilling yet more of his pint, “We never win Eurovision either, and we got one in this year! Brilliant. Mad. Love *shines* a bloody *light*, man.”

Potter examined Martin curiously. “Martin, you have hidden depths.”

“Thanks, mate,” said Martin, tipping his drink in Potter’s direction. It sloshed over his hand. He didn’t seem to notice. “What’s your team, by the way?”

Draco bit back his reflexive “Wimbourne Wasps” and took a quick drink to cover up the aborted sound. His cider was going quickly out of sheer conversational avoidance.

“Arsenal,” Potter said.

Martin traded glances with his friend and then leaned in conspiratorially. “Be straight with me, mate, are you *really* for Arsenal or are you just a glory hunter?”

Potter didn’t budge even though Martin was rapidly making personal space a fond memory. “I am rarely straight and I am really for Arsenal.”

Martin swayed on the spot, blinking at Potter like he was trying to process the English language. “Rarely... Well, what about *you*, Dave?” Martin jabbed a drunken finger into Draco’s sternum.

Draco’s mind went staticky. “Er,” he said, trying to dredge up the name of a Muggle city. “I like... Aberdeen.” He drank the last of his cider so he didn’t have to elaborate. Did one

elaborate that sort of thing? He supposed Potter didn't, so it was probably fine. Aberdeen! Lovely city. Draco was entirely committed to it. Aberdeen forever.

Martin squinted. "Are you Scottish? No. You're not Scottish, are you? You don't sound Scottish, Dave."

"He's posh Scottish," Potter explained, jabbing Draco in the side with one bony elbow. He was always doing that. Draco would have to lodge an official complaint.

One of Martin's friends whistled. "Disgusting. Do you live in a castle? Do you know the queen? Did you, like, go off hunting together at Balmoral?"

"Between you and I, Martin's friend," Draco said, "The queen's a little outré, if you know what I mean."

"I don't," said Martin's friend. "What's that, French?"

"Oh, look, it's Ginny," Potter shouted, pretending to spot her in the crowd. "We'll just be going over there now, nice to see you, Martin."

Martin nodded vigorously, like a beer-soaked bobblehead. "Say hi to Mark if you see him. We'll be hitting that nightclub with the specials after this if you want to meet us. Should be a laugh, right?"

"Er — yeah, definitely," Potter said vaguely, already tugging Draco away, "See you later, yeah."

"Dave-o." Draco tested the name as they lost Martin and the Martinettes in the crush. "They wouldn't call me Draco-o, would they? Surely not. Surely that would be too many vowels. But would it? I don't think they fear over-vowelling, Potter."

"A glory hunter for Arsenal," Potter grumbled, not paying any attention. He sat down at an unoccupied table. "It's way too early for that. Sure, we're not the worst bet and we're up now but we can always find a way to fuck it up. Obviously I hope for the best, I think we can make it, but..."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Draco said, wiping his chair down before he actually exposed his trousers to potential horror, "but also I support your team's arch-rival and hate everything your team stands for. Just let me know what the your rival's called and I'll start purchasing memorabilia."

Potter glanced back at Draco and laughed, a sharp, joyful sound. "Fucking Aberdeen, you tosser. That's the first place you could think of? *Aberdeen*?"

The problem had to be Potter's face, mostly when his surly, unimpressed expression would slip. Sometimes he'd cast a spell or win a stupid improvised race or laugh at a Weasley's terrible joke and every ounce of cement cynicism would slide right off and he'd be all bright liquid eyes and a clear smile, so *young*, so *happy*. Every time Draco wanted to cover Potter's whole face up with his hands and tell everyone in the world to look away, look away. He

wanted to tell Potter not to *show* that to people, but the worst thing was that he thought Potter was completely unaware of what his face was doing at any given moment.

“What?” Potter looked at Draco, all that joy splashed over his face for anyone to see, for anyone to take. “What are you looking at me like that for?”

“You have something on your face,” Draco said.

“What?”

Draco cast his eyes to the ceiling for guidance. “I don’t know, optimism?”

“Sorry, what?”

“It’s, er, dirt,” Draco said, louder. “You’ve got a bit — by your nose.”

There was indeed a smudge of something on Potter’s brown cheek. He clumsily attempted to wipe it away. Draco’s fingers itched to do it properly for him, but he kept them firmly on the sticky table.

“Did I get it?”

“No,” Draco muttered. God, had Potter had that expression even as a child? His chest hurt. It was so awful, Merlin, he needed to fling himself off something very high up before this got any worse.

“No?”

“Your face is fine, Potter,” Draco told him. “I need another drink. Something that could strip paint in another life, or at least make me too sauced to stand for more than fifteen second intervals. Surely the Muggles have come up with some vile libation that reliably performs that function.”

“You’re in luck. There’s a special.” Potter nodded at a large chalkboard sign.

Draco squinted at it. “What’s ‘snakebite and black’?”

“Oh, you’ll find out,” Potter said, getting to his feet. “At length, probably with vomiting.”

“Excellent,” Draco called after him, but Potter had already disappeared.

“How are you doing?” Neville slid into the seat across from him. Neville was good-looking. Why didn’t Draco want to claw his eyes out every time he caught a glimpse of *him*? Life was bizarre.

“I’m going to drink so much that I cannot remember my name,” Draco informed him.

“You and Harry not getting on?” Neville’s forehead wrinkled sympathetically. “He’s a bit tetchy, but he’s been through a lot. He’s, you know, special.”

“Neville, Potter is not special. Potter is just a speccy git with a tragic backstory. There are half a dozen Potters probably right here in this pub.” Draco scanned the room. “Or, rather, Muggle versions, so a tragic backstory in addition to their being tragically deprived. Potter’s not special, he’s just... some *boy* who got famous by accident.”

“I dunno,” Neville said. “I couldn’t have done it.”

“Defeated the Dark Lord as a baby?” Draco’s laugh was half hack in the smokey air. “Neville, that wasn’t do to Potter being some special magic snowflake. There was obviously something else at work. Or someone. I don’t know, it couldn’t have just been him being, like, death-proof.”

“Who’s death-proof?” Potter had reappeared with a tray of glasses containing a lightly foaming reddish purple liquid.

“You,” Neville said. “Can I have one of those?” Potter passed him a glass and Neville eyed the drink with eagerness crossed with trepidation.

“Was your year in Gryffindor abnormally abstinent? I’ve never seen so many Gryffindors with so little experience in vomiting up their internal organs.”

“We had Hermione as a prefect,” Neville said, which was sufficient explanation. “Oh, this is vile. It’s like weird cordial.” He looked delighted.

“So, your houses,” Potter said.

“Slytherin, Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. They’re nonsense, obviously, but also just about the most important classification in the entire world. Before I got on the train for my first year my father said he’d disown me if I wasn’t in Slytherin.” Draco sampled his drink. It was disgusting, sweet in that dangerous way where he knew he’d drink too fast and be off his face within minutes, which was perfect. He looked forward to not remembering a damn thing. “He was joking, but also he was not joking even slightly.”

Neville nodded seriously. “Gryffindor’s meant to be brave, Hufflepuff’s loyal, Ravenclaws are clever, and Slytherins are cunning. Everyone says Hufflepuffs are a bit silly and Slytherins are evil —”

“And Gryffindors are drunken autocratic louts and Ravenclaws are delusional antisocial weirdos.”

“But those are just the stereotypes. There are common threads in everybody but...” Neville shrugged. “Everyone in my family could have sworn I’d be a Hufflepuff but the hat insisted on Gryffindor, so.”

“Sorry — the hat?” Potter raised an eyebrow.

“Just accept it, Potter. There are dragons, and werewolves, and every September a talking hat announces the destiny of every firstie who’s just come up for magic school. Accept it and move on.”

Potter laughed and reached for his drink again. His Adam's apple bobbed with every swallow. "Right, so which would I be?"

Neville and Draco eyed each other. "Gryffindor," they said at once.

"Sorry," Draco added. "I had you down for Slytherin, but I think in the end you're with the drunken louts."

"I thought you said those were just stereotypes."

"They're stereotypes for a reason, Potter," Draco said wisely. Neville burped loudly. "See?"

Potter just shook his head and grinned over the rim of his drink. He had that slight dimple still, rudely. Draco turned his attention to his beverage. It was a lot less confusing, even if it did taste like cordial.

*

She did not want entirely to admit it, but Hermione was having a good time.

Neville, Harry and Draco were bickering amiably about Hogwarts houses as Luna explained something about enchanted wombats — Hermione really was trying not to get involved — to a highly entertained Ginny. Ron eyed their drinks with palpable jealousy.

"Don't even think about it," Hermione told him.

"I can think about it, Hermione, I just can't actually *drink* anything," Ron said waspishly. "I said I'd do it, didn't I? When do I go back on my word?"

Hermione could think of quite a few examples, but most of them were three or four years old. "I was just making sure," she said.

"Drink your cider," Ron told her. "If I can't, you ought to enjoy it."

"You're such a tosser," Hermione said fondly, drinking. Neville and Luna had wandered off during their conversation, and now Ginny was beckoning Harry and Draco up away from their table. Hermione watched them curiously. She had not missed how Draco's eyes tracked Harry wherever he was in the room. The moment Harry looked back, Draco would look away, feigning indifference.

"That's interesting," she said, nodding at their retreating backs.

"What's interesting?" Ron was flipping through a Labour pamphlet someone had left on the table.

"Harry and Draco."

Ron looked puzzled. "In that they are interesting individuals?"

“No, I meant... Never mind.” Hermione sighed and looked down at his brochure. “How are you enjoying Muggle politics?”

“Did you know there was something called the minimum wage? Once we’re done with this whole maniacal fascist dictatorship lark, we should look into that, I reckon.”

The smokey room pulsed with pheromones and sweat. Hermione couldn’t help but grab Ron’s hand, grinning up at his handsome face. He was a tosser, but also such a lovely person. He really tried so hard, and did his best, and at his core he — he was just *good*, all the way down to his toes. He had twelve knuts in his pocket and he’d give them all away, just to help.

“What?” Ron asked, looking amused.

“Nothing,” Hermione said, feeling her face go hot. “I’m just very happy you’re here, that’s all.”

“Aw, *Hermione*,” Ron said, kissing her cheek. “I love tipsy Hermione. You’re so demonstrative.”

“Am I not normally?” Hermione frowned. She really wanted to make a point of making sure Ron felt secure in their relationship. He always made *her* feel secure, and if she didn’t reciprocate she’d have to revise how she’d been addressing him in the past.

“No, no, you are — stop worrying.” Ron squeezed her shoulder. “You’re just extra demonstrative. It’s nice. You do get... Like, caught up in things, sort of tunnel vision. And I don’t mind your big leader, action-lady bit, mind. I get that, plus it’s pretty sexy. But it’s like you don’t have to be in charge right now, and that’s nice to see.”

Hermione patted Ron’s cheek soppyly. “Toilet,” she said, and weaved her way to the back. Maybe Ginny had been right. Maybe Hermione spent too much time being on, and she was also a kettle about to boil over. Downtime was important to everyone, and apparently downtime within sight of their tent didn’t count as much. She thought their little fake Quidditch games and football tournaments had been sufficient amounts of fun, but maybe in the future she would have to schedule a bit more. Maybe it didn’t count when they were waiting for Polyjuice to finish brewing. Maybe it only worked when they were in the flush of success, which would be significantly harder to arrange, considering Hermione had only a nascent plan of where to go from here.

The toilet cubicle was as disgusting as one would expect from a student pub. She wasn’t one to shy away from a little prospective germs — also, urine was sterile — but she cast a few sterilisation spells before she sat down. Bum protected, Hermione zoned out, peeing and reading the graffiti over the door. *Alice is a SLAG, Princess Di always in our ♥s , Poppy wuz here.* Over a neon green advert for a club night she spotted something else — a little lightning bolt, and underneath, in an untidy scrawl: *Potter lives.*

Hermione froze. She looked down at her shoes, patches of polished leather amidst discoloured tiling. She looked back. The graffiti didn’t change.

She washed her hands so quickly there was a chance she had forgotten adequate soap and barrelled through the crowd.

“Oi!” shouted a boy in a rugby shirt, who had toppled into his friend after Hermione pushed by him.

“We have to get out of here,” Hermione told Ron urgently, grabbing him by the jumper. “Someone — there’s wizards here, I don’t know where.”

“What?” Ron rose to his feet, eying the crowd. “Did you see someone?”

“No,” Hermione said, and explained about the graffiti.

“All right,” Ron said. “Listen, it’s more suspicious if we all just run, right? A witch could have been, you know, passing through. Besides, they don’t know who *we* are, and Harry’s under so many forehead concealing charms I’m surprised he doesn’t have a migraine.”

“I suppose.” Hermione furrowed her brow, trying to remember the list of qualifying universities. “Is one of the magical departments here? I thought they were all in Scotland, but there could possibly be an exception — Ron, still, we have to get out. We can’t take that sort of risk. If there’s a magical presence, the Ministry has to be around in some capacity.”

“They all are in Scotland, but yeah, point taken.” Ron drained the remainder of Hermione’s cider and stood up, craning his neck to get a better view of the crush. “Luna’s back there playing darts with Neville. Let them finish up and we can go out and find the others, all right?”

Hermione stared down at the oak of the table, forcing her heart to slow. “I suppose we don’t have to run out. It *is* just — just a bit of graffiti in the loo.”

“Interesting graffiti, though, right?” Ron raised one ginger eyebrow. “Potter lives, huh?”

“Potter lives,” Hermione echoed, starting to smile. “That’s not bad, is it?”

“Not bad at all,” Ron said, grinning now. Hermione could tell that they were thinking the same thing — that they were picturing the headlines, the murals all across Diagon Alley, the words whispered in the streets. *Potter lives*.

*

Ginny had been the one to steal the cigarettes — though it wasn’t so much stealing as it was eliciting donations from drunk uni boys. She did a trick with her hair, and all of a sudden there were free drinks and she’d bummed several cigarettes for everyone. Harry had gone through his smoking phase for about three weeks when he was fifteen, until it became prohibitively expensive and also faintly useless, but he’d had a few drinks and was unfortunately persuadable.

“You’re leading us down a path of lung cancer,” Harry informed her as she led him and Draco outside. “Do you have a cure for that, by the way? Wizard doctors?”

“Doctors? Pfft. They’re cracks with knives.” Ginny lit her cigarette with her wand, despite being in full view of about eight Muggles. “We’ve got Healers, mate.”

Malfoy squinted at his cigarette. “These look different to ours,” he said suspiciously.

“Do they?” Harry surreptitiously lit his with the tip of his wand — that trick was never going to get old. He could do *magic*. “I can do magic,” he informed Malfoy.

“Yeah, and the sky is blue, did you know?”

“It’s pretty cloudy at the minute,” Harry pointed out, gesturing up at the dark clouds. “And *you* knew I could do magic, but *I* didn’t know that I could do magic. Not until recently. So there.”

Yellow light spilled over the narrow flagstone road. Across the street, the half-broken windows of a vacant shop were plastered over with hand-lettered flyers. Knots of smokers huddled up and down the road, huffs of smoke and condensed breath emanating from their mouths. It was cold — and then, with an odd jolt, it became *very* cold.

“Do you feel that?” Harry looked left — and the street lights all went out. “Power outage?”

“Maybe,” Malfoy said, voice tense.

“Do you think it’s —” Ginny pulled her wand from her pocket and looked up and down the street. “Do you think it could be...”

Harry realised he was shivering. The cold night had gone arctic. Harry’s eyes adjusted to the moonlight: the long row of buildings in front of them, the shape of the dead streetlights against the sky. There was something at the end of the street. A man in a robe — no, the figure was too tall to be human — a cloaked figure, its face swallowed by its hood, drifted towards them as if floating.

“What the fuck,” Harry said faintly, his chest like ice. He couldn’t move. His feet were cement blocks.

The figure hovered closer, nearly as tall as the street lights. It took a long, rattling breath.

“Shit,” Ginny said, and now even their cigarettes were snuffed out in their hands. She shouted something, and a misty white shape emanated from the tip of her wand. “Fuck, Malfoy, a little help?”

“I’m trying,” Malfoy said tightly.

Another white shape flowed up to the tall figure. It brushed aside the mist with one long, greyish hand — the fingers were scabbed over, slimy like something dead and pickled. A damp chill sunk deep into Harry’s body. His heart felt leaden, like an anchor sinking him to the bottom of a frozen lake.

“Harry! Harry, what’s — Malfoy, catch him!”

He was so heavy; he was falling. Blackness ate away at his vision from the outside in, and far away — far away Harry could hear screaming. Someone was pleading — *Not Harry, please not Harry.*

Then another voice: almost inhuman, coldly familiar. “Stand aside, you silly girl.”

“Not Harry! Please... have mercy... have mercy...”

A high laugh, and the woman screaming again — it was so cold. It was so easy to just — fall. Blackness swallowed him whole.

“Come *on*, Potter, come on!”

Someone slapped him sharply across the cheek — Harry eased his heavy eyelids open to see Malfoy’s white panicked face. Harry’s head swam. Darkness still ate at the corners of his vision, and street lights lit a blurry halo around Malfoy’s pale hair. “What... what was that?”

“A Dementor — Weasley, get Hermione. We have to get out of here *right now*.” Malfoy was gripping Harry so tightly it hurt.

“On it,” Ginny said, and in a hazy flash of red hair she was gone.

“Fucking *Patronus*,” Malfoy said, roughly pushing Harry’s glasses back from where they’d gone askew. “Took us each about four tries to get it — thank Merlin Weasley’s got power, or we’d all be *sans* souls by now.”

Malfoy had Harry half on his lap. Harry looked up at his pointed jaw, the soft drift of his hair. The street lights were back on, and he could see that the colour charm had worn off and it was back to platinum. “I heard screaming,” Harry remembered, frowning. He shifted up, trying to force his vision to get it together. “I heard screaming, Malfoy, we have to —”

Malfoy kept him from attempting to stand with an impatient tug. “I didn't hear any screaming.”

Harry felt cold and clammy. He touched his face and his fingers came back wet. He tried to remember what he had heard. “We have to help. I heard... A woman, screaming.”

“There wasn’t any screaming, Harry.”

Harry tried to stand again and collapsed against a knobby shape — Malfoy’s knee. “You don’t usually call me Harry.”

Malfoy’s pale, pointed face shone reflective in the light. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say anything someone was heaving Harry to his feet.

“Sorry about this, mate,” Ron said, and pulled Harry through the dizzying squeeze of Apparition.

After a horrible few seconds of pressure, the ground rose up solid and comforting against Harry’s hands and knees. He felt all right for a split second before realising that was a terrible

lie; he violently expelled the contents of his stomach onto a cluster of smooth stones. He sat back on his heels, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. A cold sweat swathed his entire body; he had never felt so sick before. Not once, not even the time he got the flu when he was thirteen and the Dursleys didn't get him looked at until it turned into pneumonia. Harry rolled over to his back and covered his face with his forearm as people popped into existence all around him.

"What's wrong with him," someone asked, panicky. "He hasn't been Kissed, has he?"

"Don't be stupid," said someone else — Malfoy.

"I'm fine," Harry croaked, unconvincing even to himself. "Just — give me a minute."

"Harry?" Hermione now, she had knelt beside him and was touching his arm. The tip of her wand cast a white glow around them both. "Harry, sit up. Eat this."

She pressed something into his hand. Harry saw that it was a Mars bar. "Seriously? I just sicked up all over."

"Trust me," Hermione said, and Harry was a little surprised to realise that he did.

He unwrapped the Mars bar and took an experimental bite. As he chewed, warmth seemed to spread through his body.

"There, see? That's better."

She was right — he did feel a bit better. Harry wiped his face with a shaky hand. "What was that?"

"A Dementor — a Dark creature. They used to be used to guard Azkaban — that's the wizarding prison — only now they have more of a widespread purpose." Hermione's face was grim. "You-Know-Who lets them roam around, gives them free reign. They're meant to be 'looking for Undesirables', so the papers say."

"Was it looking for us?"

"Amongst others. They've been at large ever since Sirius Black escaped, oh, about four years ago. Never found him either. Keep eating that, Harry. It really helps."

Harry kept at the Mars bar, chewing slowly so that his stomach didn't revolt on him again.

"We really need to work on the Patronus Charm," Malfoy said shakily. He was also eating a Mars bar, but Harry couldn't make out his expression in the dark. "That took us way too long to get right."

"At least it won't know who we are." Ginny flopped down on the ground, rubbing her face. She seemed all right — she had a little bit of chocolate at the corner of her mouth.

Ron was lying on the ground breathing hard. Harry realised he must have Apparated most, if not all of them.

“You want some Mars bar, mate?”

Ron flapped a hand at him. “You need it more.”

Harry flushed. “I’m fine,” he insisted.

“No, I don’t think so,” Luna said calmly.

“I *am*,” he huffed, clenching the stupid Mars bar.

“I see what you mean about him being a Gryffindor,” Luna said, examining him. “That wasn’t a value judgment, Harry. Do you know what Dementors do?”

“Obviously not,” Harry snapped. “I wasn’t brought up in your world, was I?”

Luna nodded thoughtfully. “I suppose you wouldn’t, would you? They suck the happiness out of people. They take everything good inside and leave you with all of your awful memories. For example, when I encounter a Dementor, I see my mum die. She died in front of me, you see. I was nine.”

“Oh,” said Harry. “I’m... I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right. I don’t say it to illicit sympathy. It was just an example.”

Harry thought about what he’d heard — the screaming, *not Harry, please, have mercy*. The woman must have been his mother. That must have been what he was hearing. The cold feeling came roaring back.

“Yes, I thought that might have been it,” Luna said softly. “You’ve finished your Mars bar, but we still have lots of Jaffa Cakes. Perhaps we should eat those, and Hermione can tell us stories about Muggle bureaucracy until we’re no longer thinking of how our various parents and guardians died or were rendered incapacitated.”

“Luna,” said Hermione, looking shocked.

“Not yours, of course, Hermione. Could you get the Jaffa Cakes, please? I believe they’re underneath the rice.”

Harry stifled a laugh. It sounded a bit like he was choking. “Go on, Hermione. We can set the tent up and have a cup of tea, all right?”

“Oh, all right.” Hermione looked faintly taken aback, but she went digging into her handbag anyway.

No one would let Harry get up and help with the tent, so he just sat there with his Mars bar wrapper and watched as the tent rose up in the darkness, and shimmery veils of protective enchantments circled their campground like a semi-visible bubble. He couldn’t stop hearing his mother’s voice, and that high mean laugh. He thought about Malfoy saying that Voldemort wasn’t like a man, that he was more, and less. He thought about the picture that was still folded up in his pocket: *James and Lily Potter, Godric’s Hollow, January 1980*.

A strong hand grasped his upper arm and yanked him up. “Come on, Potter,” Malfoy said, not unkindly. “The time for sulking is later, when we inevitably can’t sleep. Right now we’re having tea.”

Malfoy led him into the tent, and someone shoved a mug of tea into his hands, and they all sat squished together around the kitchen table eating Jaffa Cakes and digestive biscuits, trying to convince Hermione that it had not been the pub’s fault that they’d had a run-in with a Dementor. Harry didn’t join in much, but he felt better just sitting there with them all, Neville’s broad shoulder jamming him on one side and Luna’s hair almost in his mouth on the other, listening to the rhythms of their now-familiar voices.

Chapter 5

Dementors. Of all the rotten luck, *Dementors*. Draco wished there were somewhere he could lodge his formal complaint. Unfortunately, the entirety of British bureaucracy seemed to be a bit busy with the whole Dark Lord, second wizarding war, vast amounts of human and nonhuman rights violations business.

Nine Jaffa Cakes later, Draco had not quite managed to shrug the telltale post-Dementor spiritual dampness. He fell asleep in fragmented jolts, just long enough to see his mother's bloodless face and then tumble awake, sweating and nauseous. Still, he had not fared as badly as Potter. If Draco had been able to sleep at all, Potter's rather noisy nightmares would have put him off it at once. He envied Neville his ability to compartmentalise, but not his unfortunate snoring habit.

Sometime before dawn Draco gave up the ghoul. He read under his duvet by wandlight for an hour or two, before giving up altogether to go get a look at their environs. It had been dark the night before, and he'd been a bit preoccupied.

Rocks and grass, mostly. Grasses in a dizzying array of hues: reddish and gold and moss green. Grass, and rocks, and rolling upland moor. A green valley in the distance. They could be anywhere. Wales, or Scotland, or somewhere else in the Pennines. Wet wind whipped through Draco's clothes. As the sun shone meagre bluish light over the horizon, Draco spun in a slow circle and felt a sick sense of dislocation.

Merlin, this was a fool's errand. This was madness, this was utter idiotic folly. He wanted to go *home*.

Draco couldn't bear to think of the Manor with *Him*, with his vast slithering snake, with the grotesque starving faces of Fenrir's pack prowling the passages. He thought instead about the trees of the garden turning October bright; of crisp light shining through the diamond-paned morning room windows; of how it felt to close the door of his bedroom and feel utterly safe. He allowed fifteen minutes of a homesickness so intense his eyes burned, and then he turned around and went back inside.

During Draco's outdoor sojourn, the rest of his tent-mates had dredged themselves up from their beds. Ginny, Hermione and Luna sat at the kitchen table with the Daily Prophet, frowning and scribbling things in the margins. Hedwig rustled in her cage, tucking her head under one white wing. Ron and Neville played a quiet game of gobstones in the area of tent Draco privately thought of as the drawing room. The drawing corner, perhaps.

Ginny leaned back from the table, stretching so that her back crackled like Exploding Snap. "There you are. Is Harry awake yet?"

Draco shrugged. "No idea. Let's see."

The door creaked as they eased it open into the boys' bedroom. Neville's bunk lay vacant, blanket bunched at the foot of the bed. Potter's bunk, however, remained occupied. The

patched, lumpy duvet partially obscured the elegant line of Potter's golden back. Draco swallowed hard. Potter wasn't frowning, or making sarcastic comments, or going all surly and quiet. His face was lax in sleep, his mouth open as he breathed gently. He looked so young. He was just a boy. He was just some *boy*. He liked his stupid football team and winning at sport and doing household tasks with Hedwig on his shoulder. They should have shipped Potter to Australia to live with Granger's parents the moment they found him. They shouldn't have dragged him into this.

Harry Potter was not just fit. It was, frankly, infuriating. Just the sight of Potter sleeping, one hand open on his pillow, his long eyelashes dusting his cheeks, was enough to make Draco want to spell the entire tent on fire.

Unfortunately, they only had the one tent.

"Wow," said Ginny.

"Fuck off," hissed Draco, his face hot. "Not. Not one word, Girl Weasley. Not *one*."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Should we wake him up?"

"No," Draco said firmly, yanking her back into the main room.

"Is he awake?" Luna peered at them through neon yellow spectacles.

"No," Ginny said. "But you'll never believe what *this* one's face did when —"

Draco probably should not have jinxed Ginny then, and certainly not in front of four of her most loyal friends and his most recently former enemies. After Draco had finished washing the bat boogies off his face, Potter had emerged from their room with offensive hair and a rather careworn expression.

The effect was not really spoiled, unfortunately.

Hermione hovered around Potter like a solicitous gnat, fetching toast and overly sweetening his tea. Potter did not seem to know where to look. He mostly stared at the table and looked uncomfortable. Draco began to talk very loudly about logistics in an attempt to be merciful.

"We'll want to start right away with the Daily Prophet thing, if we still want to do that," he informed them, stealing a piece of toast from Potter's overly generous stack. "You know they have two locations for distribution, so that'll be double the work if we're really planning on inserting our own section in every paper. And are we planning on writing actual *articles*? Or just, you know, getting the message out? Cheeky illustration of the Minister of Magic with evil eyebrows and a moustache?"

"What *is* the message, exactly?" Neville craned his head away from his Gobstones game.

"Er... Sorry about your evil overlords?"

"Close enough," Hermione said, sitting back down and pulling the Daily Prophet towards her. "I would think we'd like a mixture of both."

“You said last night...” Potter’s voice rasped from his chest like he’d contracted a nasty cold. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Someone said last night that we should work on our... It started with a ‘p’.”

Hermione nodded. “Patronuses.”

Draco wrinkled his nose. “Patroni, surely.”

“You would think, given the Latinate origin, but unfortunately, no.”

“*Patronuses*. That’s really what we went with? It sounds horrific.”

“I know,” Hermione said glumly.

“Nerd about language on your own time, all right?” Ginny yawned, exposing her molars to all and sundry. “Let’s get on with it.”

“Patronus. Brilliant. What *is* it?” Harry asked, looking too tired to be as frustrated as he wanted to be.

“The Patronus Charm is very ancient magic,” Hermione explained. “When conjured, it becomes a kind of shield against Dementors — a shield made of everything the Dementors abhor. Love, happiness, friendship. It’s tremendously difficult, but I really believe anyone, given sufficient practise, can have a chance of learning it. We’ve all studied it, to varying degrees of success.”

“Will you teach me?”

Hermione sighed. “I’d love to, Harry, but I’m afraid — ”

“It’s the only spell she’s ever had trouble with,” Ron said fondly, from the drawing room area. “She’s an over-thinker. That big brain, you know. It’s a real liability.”

Potter looked at Draco then, green eyes sharp. “Malfoy?”

Draco winced. “Me too. Trouble, that is.”

“We’ll teach you,” Ginny said, nodding at Luna. “I’m brilliant at it. She’s all right.”

“So modest,” Draco said dryly. “Four tries last night, was it?”

“And *who* saved both of your arses, again?” Ginny pointed at Draco and Potter in turn. “And did I get a single thank you?” She tutted. “Not the one.”

“I rather like my Patronus. It’s very sweet. Some cultures call them spirit-guardians.” Luna absently stuck her quill in her hair, where it nestled amidst three barrettes and a striped ribbon. “It’s a hare, you know.”

Potter looked confused. “A hare?”

“They take shapes unique to the caster,” Hermione explained. “Mine’s an otter, for example. Most people will have non-magical animals native to their country, but there are exceptions.”

“Don’t tell me, they’re meant to reveal some ‘deep, hidden truth’ about you.” Potter actually made finger quotations, which was something Draco had only seen that Muggleborn Hufflepuff Finch-Fletchley do.

“Oh, good, I was so worried we had lost Ornery Potter to the Dementors,” Draco drawled. “I thought perhaps they sucked out your personality instead of your soul.”

“*Draco*,” admonished Hermione.

Potter’s mouth twitched. He couldn’t quite tamp down his grin. Draco preened.

*

“Concentrate on a happy memory,” Ginny said, wind whipping her braid into her face. “The happiest memory you can think of. It’s got to be really powerful.”

Luna sat on a low smooth stone rock with her dirty blonde hair in her face and her elbows on her knees, watching. “Just one,” she told him. “A singular memory. It doesn’t work if you choose several.”

Harry’s stomach went sour. A single happy memory — this ought to be easy, right? A happy memory. He thought of those times with Ali, just sitting together eating sandwiches in the school corridor. The time they had kissed, furtive and awkward in the supply cupboard. Was that happy enough? They never talked about what had happened, and then Harry had moved once again. Maybe the first time he successfully found his way in London without consulting the A-Z. How it felt to take the bus over the river, the spread of the Thames and the feeling of *being* somewhere, somewhere he could *be* someone.

He settled on the first time he’d successfully cast a spell: the way his whole body had felt lit up, almost chosen.

Luna nodded. “All right. The incantation is *Expecto Patronum*.”

Harry closed his eyes and thought very hard about his first successful spell. *Wingardium Leviosa*, and the pebble had flown right up to sightline. “*Expecto Patronum. Expecto — Expecto Patronum.*”

When Ginny and Luna had demonstrated, their Patronuses sprung from their wands as fully-formed silvery animals. Ginny’s horse Patronus had galloped around the rocks, so solid it could almost make hoof-prints in the dirt. What Harry had was — mist. A vague cloud of silvery mist.

Ginny looked slightly disappointed. Harry wondered if she’d hoped for a return of his destructive magical tendencies. Nothing went up in flames, or cracked into pieces. There was just mist. Harry lowered his wand. The mist evaporated into the daylight.

“No, that was good,” Luna assured him. “No need to do that with your face. Most people can only produce an incorporeal Patronus, you know. Producing anything on your first try is rather impressive.”

Harry tried again. And again. And again. He closed his eyes and concentrated so hard his head started to ache. He produced so much mist he could be a genuine weather event, but nothing that even remotely resembled an animal.

“Maybe try a different memory?” Ginny had sat down next to Luna sometime during the mist explosion. “Maybe whatever you chose wasn’t happy enough.”

Harry swallowed hard. A happier memory... The Dursleys leaving him at the house for a full week, alone. Going to the cinema with Tamika Barnes in year nine. Maybe the pub last night, before the Dementors had made everything go to shit. It had felt good to sit with everyone, to have a slight foot in those webs of inside jokes Harry had never experienced before.

He concentrated. The smokey pub, his hand around a sweating glass, everyone laughing at something Ron said. The way Ron had elbowed him after he made the joke, like he’d made it especially for Harry. Hermione rolling her eyes, mouthing *wanker* fondly at Harry, as if Harry had been allowed to call Ron a wanker too. Malfoy’s warm leg pressed against his beneath the table, Ginny leaning over them both to pull at one of Luna’s permed curls. Sputtering at her hair in his mouth. Neville protesting on his behalf — ‘Oi, Gin! Don’t smother Harry!’ — and everyone laughing again. They must have looked like any other group of students. They must have looked like friends.

He tried again. “*Expecto Patronum!*”

White mist poured from his wand, stronger than before. No, not mist — fog. Proper fog, the kind that swaddles you like your own personal cloud, the kind you have to use a torch to get through. Almost opaque, it pooled over his head like an umbrella, shining in the shadowy light.

“Oh!” Luna clapped briefly. “Oh, almost!”

Almost. Harry lowered his wand again, stomach plummeting. The fog dispersed as if it had never been there in the first place. What was he doing wrong? He’d concentrated. He’d followed the directions. There wasn’t even a Dementor here; he was *safe* and *fine* and it should have been dead easy to summon a bloody happiness spirit.

“Better,” Ginny said. She exchanged a look with Luna. “Maybe we should go in for a bit. Weather’s rubbish and you look a bit knackered, mate.”

Harry rubbed his scar. His head had been aching all day. He hadn’t slept too well. “Maybe you’re right,” he said, pretending that he didn’t feel like an enormous failure. “I’ll just... I may sleep for a bit.”

The entrance to the tent swung open, letting in a stream of frigid air as well as the wind-reddened figures of Ginny, Luna and Potter. Without greeting any of them, Potter slunk into the boys' bedroom and closed the door behind him.

"Bloody *fuck*, it's cold out," Ginny said, yanking off her gloves to rub her hands together.

"Hm," Luna said, eying the closed door to the boys' bedroom. Without looking, she absently cast a warming charm for Ginny.

"Better hope Neville's not jacking off in there," Draco said, nodding at the door. "He said he wanted a nap, but you never know with Longbottom."

Ron snorted. Hermione ignored them both altogether. "Patronus practise not go well?"

Ginny shrugged, still holding her hands out under Luna's wand. "Medium. He didn't explode anything."

"I wonder if it might be a better idea for someone who had trouble with the charm to teach him," Luna mused. "I don't think his problem is power or imagination."

"*Oh*," Hermione said, looking stricken. "The memory. Do you think that's the trouble?"

Draco cleared his throat and looked significantly at the very thin closed door. "He has ears, Hermione," he said in an undertone.

Hermione's brown cheeks coloured slightly. "Oh dear. Well, we were just discussing our next move, if you'd like to join us. We can't seem to agree on a headline."

"I couldn't give a hippogriff's bollocks, to be honest," Ginny admitted. "I'm going to go for a run and warm up. I'll go mad if I just sit here all day." She disappeared into her bedroom where the slamming of drawers indicated she was either changing or having quite the row with her furniture.

"I'm very good at headlines," Luna said, joining them at the table. "The trick is using unusual word choices."

"Is it?" Hermione frowned slightly.

"Oh, yes," said Luna, pulling the parchment towards her and beginning to read. "For example, 'putrid'. Unexpected, yet attention-grabbing. What's your favourite?"

"Word?"

"Headline." Luna tapped the parchment thoughtfully. "Of the ones you have."

"Potter Lives," Hermione said. "That's what I saw in the pub, you know."

Potter lives. Draco hated how electric the phrase made him feel — he *knew* Potter. Potter was a dick. Potter did not deserve to have a catchy slogan with accompanying imagery. "If it spread to some Muggle university, you know it's catchy," he admitted, despite himself.

Luna hummed, thinking. “It does sound good, although it’s not very active, is it? Harry lives. That is very nice, and I’m rather glad he continues to live, but does his living help us in a tangible way?”

“Potter lives to fight evil,” Ron suggested, eyes crinkled up and ready to laugh. “Shit, bagsy *not* telling Harry we’re giving him the lead headline. He will bloody hate it.”

“His living does bring us hope, however,” Luna continued, ignoring Ron altogether. “Which itself is an active choice. Potter Lives could symbolically infer that He Who Must Not Be Named is fallible.”

“Exactly what he’s going to hate,” Ron noted. He shook his head ruefully. “Whoever tells him ought to do it outside, all right? I don’t fancy that level of tent destruction.”

“Harry *is* a symbol of hope. He ended the last war. Not that he would necessarily end this one, but the idea that *someone* could...” Hermione spread her fingers out on the table, chewing her lower lip. “That’s what I thought too, Luna.”

This would be rather a good opportunity to tell the others what he’d overheard at the Manor, but Draco remained pointedly quiet. He’d kept it to himself for so long. He didn’t *want* to have to deal with it. The whole business would only give them all sorts of false expectations and ideas about Potter and his ability to *save them all*. That amount of pressure would never help. Better that everyone a little bit thought it was hopeless. If they knew, they’d all just want to set Potter up against the Dark Lord right away and then... Draco’s stomach rolled. He couldn’t tell them. He had to keep it to himself. No one needed to know about some sodding prophesy, anyway. There were thousands of prophecies; it wasn’t as if they all came *true*.

It *would* make the perfect headline, though. The one who has the power to defeat the Dark Lord — Draco couldn’t remember the exact phrasing, but it didn’t matter. The Chosen One would do just as well.

“I like Potter Lives,” Draco said. “Short. Catchy. Easy for delinquents to carve on a public bench or toilet cubicle. Also, Ron’s right, he’s going to hate this.”

“Leave that to me.” Hermione scribbled something onto her parchment. “I’m sure he’ll understand.”

*

Harry did not understand.

Hermione had taken Ron’s advice and told Harry halfway through a long morning ramble on the moors, which was lucky as Harry looked quite on the verge of an accidental magical outburst.

“It’s just a short article,” Hermione reasoned, “Just a little article outlining the basic untruths of the current Ministry regime. That, and a cartoon Luna’s drawing and then your headline, that’s all. ‘Potter Lives’, a short paragraph about you, and the lighting bolt I saw in the

lavatory. Honestly, who knows if we'll even be able to get it out at all! We might show up at the distribution centres and Luna won't know how to work the printing equipment, or we'll be caught straight away, or the security will be too tight and we'll be forced to abandon the idea altogether. It would be much easier to push these into people's letterboxes or distribute them by hand; I really don't know why we decided to go with such a dramatic plan." She laughed unconvincingly.

Harry was not paying much attention to her explanation. Rocks had started to shake out of the ground, hovering around his ankles like little yapping dogs.

"I don't want this," Harry said, arms folded tightly over his chest. "I'm serious, Hermione. I don't want this."

"I'm sorry, Harry," Hermione said. She wasn't lying — she *was* sorry. Well, she was sorry that he felt this way. She was not the sort of sorry that was willing to change their headline. "You don't understand. You're a powerful symbol in the wizarding world —"

Harry looked revolted. "I'm a *what*?"

"A powerful symbol, of hope, and possibility, and the idea that peace is obtainable. You defeated He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named when you were just a baby! Everyone celebrated in the streets, I've read about it. People still think of you as a hero. The fact that word has got out that you're alive, and now the Ministry is trying to paint you as an enemy, that's important cultural capital that we can use! That we *must* use!"

Harry staggered back, shaking his messy head. "I was a baby! I didn't know I was defeating Volde — sorry, You-Know-Who. Honestly, Hermione, I hardly know anything. I just started learning magic a few months ago; I can't even do a fucking Patronus Charm. And you want *me* to be some poster boy for the resistance?"

"I know it's not what you would have chosen," Hermione soothed, putting a tentative hand on Harry's arm. He didn't shake her off, which she considered a relative win. "First of all, the Patronus Charm is extremely difficult magic and you've only been learning it for a week — I'd be absolutely shocked if you could produce a corporeal Patronus at this stage. Secondly, it's not... what you would have chosen, but it is the hand you've been dealt. Do you understand? We've all been dealt different hands. I didn't choose to be Muggleborn. Draco didn't choose to be born into a pureblood family. You didn't choose to be the Boy Who Lived. But you *are*, Harry. You can't run away from that."

Harry deflated slightly. "I don't have to *use* people, though. That's what this is, Hermione. We're manipulating them. I don't want people getting hurt because of me."

"We're giving them hope, Harry." Well, they were manipulating them to give them hope, but Hermione didn't equivocate. It didn't matter. She was right. They were doing the right thing, and Harry just had to *trust* her. "People are getting hurt already. People are *dying*." Oh, she hadn't said that out loud in a long time. It hurt more than she thought it would. She blinked back hot tears, her voice going thick. "We have to help them. It's only going to get worse, and worse. We have to *help* them."

Harry turned away, head bowed. "I still don't like it," he said miserably.

Hermione rubbed his back. "I know," she said. "I know you don't."

*

The northern distributor for the Daily Prophet could be found within a ramshackle brick warehouse on a rubbish-strewn road somewhere within the outskirts of Manchester. Harry smelled petrol and iron. Rust red graffiti arched over the sooty bricks, and white scrawls covered the dark blue dented doors. The Manchester warehouse was the smaller of the two distributors, and the one not found within Diagon Alley, so Hermione had decided to target it first.

"That way, if we get caught in London, half of the country still gets the word out," Hermione had explained, pointing out the targets on one of their maps. "Hogwarts, too. Obviously, we're not going to be caught at all, but just in case."

Malfoy suggested that they split up, but in the end they all went together. Disguises on and wands out, they stood in front of the nondescript warehouse staring at the door and waiting for each other to make the first move. Harry's blood buzzed with adrenaline. It felt good to be on the move, to be *doing* something, so long as he didn't think too hard about what, exactly, they would be adding to the next day's news.

"Right," Ron said uneasily. "Let's do this."

"Should we do some sort of chant before? Like a Quidditch team?" Ginny put her hand in between them and brought it out again. "Unnamed revolutionary group!"

"We need to work on our branding," said Malfoy.

"We'll all go in at first for numbers," Hermione reminded them in a whisper. "If all goes to plan, then Harry, Draco and Ron will be lookouts. Luna will sort out the printers and the rest of us —"

"Will do what Luna tells us to do," Neville finished. "It's all right, Hermione. We've gone over this a thousand times."

Hermione nodded. She set her shoulders firmly and faced the door. "On the count of three. One, two, three. *Alohamora*."

The door unlocked with a series of loud clanks. They froze, waiting for an alarm, or a guard to come racing out. Nothing.

Harry looked around. "Do you reckon we should just open it?"

Hermione nodded tightly, but didn't move.

If an alarm was going to sound, it would have sounded by now. Harry yanked the door open to reveal a sterile waiting area with laminate floors and flickering florescent lighting. A solitary guard lay with his head on his hand, drowsing in front of an old wireless.

“*Stupify*,” said Ginny, and the guard slumped off of his chair.

The room was still but for the low sound of a radio play from the wireless. No alarms, no additional guards. Harry clenched his wand, feeling that this was going far too well for comfort. Maybe no one had ever attempted a guerrilla takeover of the newspaper before.

“Was that it?” Draco eyed the waiting area. “Honestly?”

Harry agreed. He hadn’t thought the Daily Prophet would have been a hotbed of security magic, but he’d assumed there’d be *something*.

“We haven’t gone in to the proper warehouse yet,” Hermione said, voice tense. “Don’t count your chickens.”

They filed past the unconscious guard into a bare corridor, then through a heavy door into long, wide room. Harry’s head began to pound. It was if an aeroplane mated with an industrial drill with a penchant for tap-dancing. Vast wooden objects clattered and clanged throughout the vast space: they looked quite like old printing presses. Cogs and wheels rotated without any visible means of motion. The machines ate infinite rolls of paper and spat them out as broadsheets. It was a factory without any visible factory workers.

Hermione raised her wand. “*Homenum Revelio*.”

Harry frowned. “What was that supposed to do?”

“What it did: reveal any other human presence. We’re alone.” Hermione turned back towards them, brown eyes wide. “Let’s get started.”

Wordlessly, Luna went up to the nearest printing press and began peering at the various parts with a bright, curious expression. Ginny jogged to the other end of the warehouse, looking for any additional rooms that could potentially contain guards. Ron jerked his head back towards the corridor. Draco and Harry followed wordlessly, though the corridor and the waiting room and out into the night.

“Wands out,” Ron told them.

Harry scoped the street. “Ron, you should go by the entrance,” he said. “I can go on the corner, and Malfoy around the side.”

Malfoy grumbled, but did as Harry suggested. Ron and Harry exchanged amused glances, and then went to their posts.

Harry didn’t like being on this end of the operation. It was mind-numbingly dull, for one, and slightly nerve-wracking, for another, since he couldn’t tell how it was going inside. The street light flickered above him disconcertingly. He counted bricks, then windowpanes. He stretched his shoulders so that they cracked. After about a half hour, Malfoy wandered over to talk to Ron about something, then wandered back to his post. Harry couldn’t decide if he was annoyed with him or not for very obviously not taking this seriously — sure, it was boring, and it didn’t *seem* like there was much to worry about, but that didn’t mean...

Harry blinked. Was that a trick of the light? There, in the distance — two figures. They passed under a street light. A gaunt face surrounded by masses of dark hair, and someone behind him... Another man, smaller, with an oddly-cut jacket. For a moment, Harry thought they were a couple of clubbers on their way home, until one of them lit his wand. They looked straight at him. The taller man said something to his companion. They were walking faster now, purposeful — right towards Harry.

“Oh, *fuck*,” Harry said, and raced around the building towards the door. Where was Ron? Where the fuck was Ron? Ron was nowhere to be seen, but Malfoy — Harry turned around and ran back the way he had come. Around the corner, Malfoy leaned against the brick warehouse, picking his fingernails idly.

“Your disguise wore off,” he drawled. “That was fast. Did you do it yourself?”

Harry grabbed his arm. “*Where’s Ron*,” he demanded.

Malfoy stared at him quizzically. “He went inside to look for the loo?”

“No time,” Harry said, looking over his shoulder. There they were again. They were getting closer — they were running. Two men. One sort of shabby-looking, almost professorial. The other with the wild hair. “We have to run, we need to distract them from the others — come on!”

Malfoy tried to look back and see what had sparked Harry’s panic, but Harry kept a firm grip on him. “What — what the fuck?” he gasped, stumbling as he kept up.

Harry made the sharpest left he could and kept running. He checked over his shoulder: both of them had taken the bait and followed Harry and Draco rather than checking out the warehouse, which was a relief. “I think — it could be Death Eaters. Fucking *keep up*!”

“*I am*!” Malfoy lengthened his stride as they attempted to lose their pursuers in the alleys and sharp turns but Harry could feel them gaining, could feel their eyes right on them. One curse and he and Malfoy were *dead*.

Harry aimed a hex over his shoulder. He wasn’t sure if it hit, but there was a cracking sound that could have been a brick wall, or possibly a bone, if he was lucky.

“Why does this keep happening to us,” Malfoy demanded, throwing a nasty-sounding hex behind him. “Every bloody time, Potter!”

“At least it’s not Dementors,” Harry said, his spine chilling at the very thought. Was there a chance Dementors wouldn’t be far behind? Could Death Eaters call them at will? “We have to get some cover, come on.”

They ran into a narrow street encrusted with cigarette butts and discarded cans of cider. Up ahead, a knot of Muggle teenagers were smoking against a wall. Harry stowed his wand away but kept running.

“You afraid you’ll miss the rave?” The girl laughed. “It’s that way, mate!”

“That way,” Harry agreed, panting. “Thanks!”

Harry followed the girl’s directions without thinking about it, nearly running directly into a burly bloke who could only be the bouncer.

“What the bloody hell are you two doing,” the bouncer said gruffly. “Cover’s a fiver. Each. And no more of whatever drug you’re on. You’ve had too bloody much already.”

“Right, brilliant,” said Harry, checking over his shoulder. He dug the notes from his jeans pocket and shoved them into the bloke’s hand.

“Come on, come on,” hissed Malfoy, shoving Harry’s elbow in an effort to get him to move forward.

“All these fucking drugs,” grunted the bouncer, but stood back to let them pass.

Harry nearly tripped over the stairs. His heart was about to bust out of his ears. Malfoy was just behind him, he could feel the heat of his body as they pounded down the stairs and into a pulsing basement crammed with people. The music shot straight down his spine. Walls streaked with UV paint and a sweaty morass of bodies dancing — Harry grabbed Draco’s arm and yanked him into the crush.

“What the fuck,” Draco shouted over the din, and Harry had to get close to his ear to respond.

“Blend in,” Harry hollered.

The lights pulsed pink and green, and the music shook his bones. Harry was already dancing, almost involuntarily, but Malfoy bobbed in a completely unconvincing way, his eyes wide and his mouth set in an uncomfortable line. Harry was not a very good dancer but he could sort of sway. He swayed as best he could, hoping that the crush of people and, possibly, the bouncer would be enough to deter the Death Eaters.

Was Malfoy attempting some form of two step? Maybe a ballroom dancing square? Harry laughed and pulled him closer, tried to make his hips follow the same beat. The music pulsed like a great heart. Draco’s cheek bumped up against Harry’s and stayed there, hot and smelling of skin.

Harry’s laughter died in his throat. This was, very suddenly, not funny at all. Malfoy’s neck shone sweat-damp in the flashes of neon light. If Harry touched Malfoy’s side under his layers of clothes it’d be slick. They’d slide against each other. Malfoy’s hand grazed Harry’s waist tentatively, barely enough for Harry to feel through his clothes. If they both leaned forward... If they both moved just an inch closer...

Death Eaters were after them, but Harry’s stomach lurched for an entirely different reason. He felt drunk. It was just the music. It had to be. It was just the party, a contact high. They had to get out of there; maybe there was a back entrance...

“We should get out of here,” Harry hollered into Malfoy’s ear.

Malfoy nodded. He was so pale he looked translucent. Harry wondered if he'd caught a glimpse of those Death Eaters, and that was why he looked so frightened.

*

The Daily Prophet's security was an absolute farce. The singular guard hadn't even seen their faces. The printing presses were similar enough to the one Luna's father used that she had little trouble modifying the content, and they had arrived early enough that the majority of papers had get to be printed. The first part of the mission was going smoothly. Almost *too* smoothly, Hermione thought, before Ron had run into the room like the Bloody Baron was after him.

"Harry and Malfoy," he panted, face white under his freckles. "They're gone."

Hermione froze. "*Gone?*"

"I went to have a piss and went back out and they were nowhere." Ron spread his long arms out in confusion. "Nowhere! What the fuck!"

Luna, Neville and Ginny poked their heads up from where they were finishing the last of their tasks to watch them, faces gone tense.

"It's fine," Hermione told them all firmly, feeling as if she was spelling the words true by speaking them. "We're going to have to assume the best. No one let off a flare or.... Maybe they saw something, they're investigating, or distracting someone from us. I don't know." Hermione shoved all her worry into a little box and tucked it at the back of her mind. She didn't have time, and Ron was clearly worrying enough for the both of them. "We have no choice. We have to focus on the mission."

Ron gestured wildly at the door. "Hermione, don't be daft. We have to go find them! Merlin's sake, they can't even Apparate! Draco hasn't taken the course yet!"

"Ron, they're both accomplished wizards who can take care of themselves. We have to trust them. We don't have time to argue about this." Hermione set her jaw, chest swelling with righteous indignation. "*We do not have time*, we have to *go*, do you understand? This is bigger than us!"

"She's right," Ginny said quietly. "The mission is more important right now."

Ron's shoulders slumped. "Fine," he said.

Hermione's chest hurt at that, but she couldn't let herself get distracted. Draco and Harry could take care of themselves. Hermione had to think of the mission. They had to get to London. "That goes for you two, as well," she said.

"Sure," Neville said reluctantly. "We'll trust them. It'll be okay."

Luna looked at her for a long moment. Hermione felt very uncomfortably scrutinised but she stood firm. Luna could not get into theoretics about this, there was no time and it was — well it was just *tacky*. If Luna got into theoretics about this Hermione would just not *let* her. She

would simply have to jinx her in the face. There was too much on the line. Hermione absolutely forbade it.

“All right,” Luna said finally, went back to her task. “I’m nearly finished. Five minutes.”

Hermione felt a bit silly. She internally apologised for taking her stress out on her brain projection of Luna.

“I’m going to go obliviate the security guard, and then we’re going to go to Diagon Alley.” Hermione rested her hands on her hips. “And *then* we’ll find Harry and Draco. It’s all under control. We have this all under control.”

As Hermione carefully obliviated the security guard — his name tag told her his name was Jim — she tried not to think about where Harry and Draco could be, or why they had run off.

“They’re fine,” Hermione told the unconscious Jim. “They’re very magically capable. They’ll be fine.”

*

The Death Eaters weren’t outside when Harry and Malfoy left the rave, but they ran anyway. Harry didn’t know if he or Malfoy had started it, but it didn’t matter — they ran.

Harry’s trainers caught on cobblestones and skid on slick moss. Flickering lights lit the way in jagged pulses, Malfoy’s hair shining white in brief seconds as they ran faster, faster. Harry knew that it was more suspicious to be running — they should be walking, acting normal, maybe finding somewhere new to hide. He knew they should stop but he couldn’t — his whole body thrummed with adrenaline. They ran under brick overpasses and across wooden bridges, past squat brick warehouses and quiet houseboats. They careened up ramps and into a narrow network of little streets until Malfoy skidded to a stop in front of a row of shabby terraced houses.

“What,” Harry demanded, looking feverishly behind them. He tasted blood in his mouth. His lungs felt like they’d burst.

“This is a wizarding house,” Malfoy panted. “We have to get to London. Meet the others.”

“*So?*” Harry eyed it. He wasn’t sure what tipped Malfoy off. It looked normal. Well — almost. The misshapen black bin in the front garden belched loudly, releasing a puff of smoke.

“So...” Malfoy said, eyeing the house. “Follow me.”

Malfoy jogged down the block and took a sharp right into a narrow alleyway. “We need to get into their back garden,” he said. “They *must* have a... It was the third house down, right?”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe?”

“Fuck it,” Malfoy said, and pulled out his wand. “*Alohamora.*” The door to the garden swung open, and Malfoy hissed in success. “Look. Shed!”

“Er,” said Harry, but Malfoy was already breaking in. Seconds later, he emerged with two gnarled brooms. He tossed one to Harry. Twigs stuck out at odd angles, and the wood was rough on his palm.

“It’s for the war effort,” Malfoy explained. “They’ll understand. Just a couple of Cleansweeps anyway. Hardly worth twelve sickles. Also, they really ought to have intruder charms. I can’t believe they don’t, it’s absolutely reckless...”

Without further explanation, Malfoy clambered onto his broom, pushed off from the ground, and shot into the night sky.

Harry watched him go with not inconsiderable alarm. He felt he ought to leave a note but there definitely wasn’t any time. He pulled a few notes and a two pound coin from his pocket and left them just inside the shed. It was Muggle money, but this was a Muggle area. Hopefully they could manage.

“Well,” he told his broom. “I guess I’ll just...” He swung his leg over the way Malfoy had, and, feeling incredibly silly, pushed off from the ground. He soared up, up — wind cut viciously through his hair and Harry realised he was beaming. Manchester shrank below his feet. The shoddy old broom dipped and looped with the slightest touch. He was laughing, *god*, this felt so good. No one had to teach him how to do this; it was *easy*.

“Oh fuck, Potter,” Malfoy shouted, plummeting towards him. “I forgot you couldn’t — oh. Have you ever...?”

“Never done this before!” Harry’s face hurt from grinning so hard. He pulled his broom up higher. “This is fucking brilliant!”

Malfoy watched Harry loop dizzy circles around him for a long moment, and then shouted, “Come here, you idiot! We need to do Disillusionment Charms!”

Harry gripped the broom with two hands and leaned forward — it jolted ahead just as he had somehow known it would. He made an abrupt about-face inches away from Malfoy’s broom. He laughed in victory, patting his broom as if it were his champion racehorse.

Malfoy looked at him with an unreadable expression. “Hold still,” he said roughly. His wand just brushed the top of Harry’s hair, and then there was the cold cracked egg feeling of Disillusionment. Harry tried not to look at his hands, as it would just unnerve him. “Do some warming charms. We have a long way to go.”

Harry had never been on an aeroplane, so he had never seen the country from above. Even in darkness it was beautiful: patches of murky green, dotted clustered towns like fairy lights strung from coast to coast. Malfoy stopped to check their direction about every half hour — they flew and flew, so long that Harry’s hands went numb even through the warming charms. Hours passed, and finally they encroached upon a wide puddle of light that could only be the outskirts of London.

“Where’s Diagon Alley?” Harry hollered over the wind. “Off of Charing Cross Road, right?”

“Are you mad? We can’t just *land* in *Diagon Alley*. There’s security! Dementors! Merlin knows what else!”

“Then where should we land? We can’t just fly onto Charing Cross Road!”

Malfoy shot him a furrow-faced look. The Disillusionment Charm was beginning to wear off: his eyes had gone back to pale grey. “How the hell should I know? *You lived here!*”

Harry looked down at the city, the flood of lights, the serpentine spread of the Thames. “I think we’ll just have to hope people are asleep,” he shouted, and led Malfoy down through the patchy clouds towards London.

They came to ground in Russell Square. Malfoy dismounted neatly as Harry hurtled towards the earth in a splendid, tumbling crash onto the grass.

“Brilliant,” Harry breathed, looking up at the trees. “That was *brilliant*.”

Malfoy looked down at him thoughtfully, his face a dark shadow. The Disillusionment Charm faded away entirely, like someone colouring him in from the inside out. “Good thing you never went to Hogwarts,” he mused. “I liked winning the Quidditch Cup.”

Harry spread his arms out on the grass. “Let’s fly everywhere. I only want to fly from now on.”

The bushes rustled loudly, and Malfoy froze. “What was that? Are there *people* here?”

“Probably,” Harry said, getting to his feet. “Rough sleepers, or people cruising. What should we do with the brooms?”

“We’ll just shrink them.” Malfoy flinched at another noise. “Well, go on then!”

“I, er. Don’t know the spell,” Harry admitted.

“Oh. Right.” Malfoy did the charm himself, and stored the miniature brooms in his pocket. “Now can we get out of this murder park, please?”

“You always think you personally are going to be murdered,” Harry mused, leading the way out onto the street. “Arrogant, don’t you think?”

“Potter, I don’t know if it has escaped your deeply lacking observational skills, but we are both literally hunted men. There is a genuine price on your head. There is almost definitely a price on my own, although it isn’t public so I can’t verify the amount.” Malfoy frowned. “Of course it won’t be as much as yours, but surely it’s more than *Neville’s*, right? It must be. I have secret enemy knowledge! I could do unspeakable damage!”

“Sure,” said Harry, leading them in what was hopefully the right direction. He had left his *London A-Z* in the tent.

“Then again they don’t know I’m working for the other side... No, four to one my reward is higher. Three to one? Neville’s parents were revolutionaries in the last war, after all. Maybe

they assume it's genetic. Preposterous. My father's the Dark Lord's right hand man, and that clearly wasn't transmitted through my family tree."

"Malfoy?"

"What?" Malfoy looked distracted, still wound up in his rant.

"You said Neville's parents *were* revolutionaries."

"Yes?"

"Are... Do all of us have dead parents?"

"Oh, mostly. Luna and I are both motherless, plus I assume I've been disowned. Ron and Ginny's father died two years ago — a great giant snake got him at the Ministry, of all things. Death Eater work. I reckon Arthur Weasley was involved in some sort of resistance movement, but whatever it was, their mum didn't have anything more to do with it after that. Neville's parents aren't technically dead, but they were tortured into insanity in the last war — my horrible aunt's work, you remember I told you about her. Hermione's parents are fine. They're *dentists*." Draco raised his eyebrows importantly. "That's Muggle for tooth Healer. Anyway, they're in Australia, which isn't death but also in practise is certainly not active parenting, wouldn't you say?"

"Oh," Harry said. He had thought of his orphan status as something particular to him, something baseless and ordinary and cruel. But James and Lily Potter had died fighting a war. They were all orphans of the war, in a way. All of them alone together. In another world they'd be at home arguing with their parents about what time they had to come home by, and whether they could have a pair of new trainers. They could go to that rave to dance, not hide from Death Eaters.

"Don't make it weird," Draco told him. "It's bad timing on your part. We have newspaper sabotage to do. Let's get to the others."

They walked. God, it felt good to be in London. The green-yellow lights and frigid air, the low roar of traffic, everyone walking fast and not looking you in the eye. Reliable, consistent rudeness instead of curiosity and friendliness from strangers: Harry's shoulders relaxed for the first time in what felt like months. In the comforting anonymity Harry could almost forget that they were fugitives on the run from a deadly evil wizard and his sham government. *Almost.*

Fifteen minutes later they stood across the street from the Leaky Cauldron, watching the dimly lit windows and hesitating on the pavement.

"This was a crap idea," Harry said abruptly.

"This was an incredibly crap idea," Malfoy agreed, screwing up his face. "I'm deeply ashamed and also embarrassed. For Merlin's sake, what the fuck. Let's never tell them we thought we could just... flounce into Diagon Alley and meet up, shall we?"

“Sure, but I don’t flounce.”

Malfoy snorted. “Potter, a black kettle can always recognise a cauldron of a similar hue.”

Harry elbowed him lightly in the ribs for something to do. “Now what?”

“Now we’re fucked.” Malfoy pasted an entirely unconvincing grin onto his pale face.

“Hurrah. Three cheers for fuckery. I have absolutely no idea how we’re meant to get anywhere. I can’t Apparate, and *you* certainly can’t, and I don’t know if trains even *go* to wherever the bloody rendezvous point was. Shall we spell out SOS right here on the pavement and hope for the best?”

“Oh! Right!” Harry pumped a fist into the air with a jolt of memory. “Hermione told me that if we ever got separated, there was a number I’m meant to call,” Harry said. “A number... I wrote it down.” He looked down at his feet. The black scratch of numbers bloomed over the grey-white of his shitty trainers.

“I shall give eternal thanks for Hermione Granger and her contingency plans,” Malfoy vowed. “Every morning, as I do my morning ablutions, I shall praise Hermione Granger and her contingency plans. Did you really write the information on your *shoe*?”

“I thought I wouldn’t ever forget it that way. I only have one pair of shoes.”

“We will come back to this later, Potter, because I understand we’re both in faintly mortal danger at the moment. But, also, as an aside — *one pair of shoes*? And *those* are the shoes you chose, with your own currency?”

Harry looked down at his trainers. He’d bought them second hand after the school shoes Aunt Petunia had begrudgingly bought him finally wore through. “Yes?”

“The sole is *peeling dead away*.”

“I glue it down,” Harry explained. “Sometimes it comes undone, right, but I just give it some more glue and that does it for a bit.”

Malfoy’s eyes went twice as wide. “I... Don’t have time to address this in entirety. Let’s do Hermione’s contingency plan. And then...” Malfoy waved vaguely at Harry’s feet. “Then I can express appropriate shock.”

Harry suppressed a laugh. “All right.”

They found a telephone box back up Charing Cross Road, one of the new ones with the domed tops, although it had already acquired the requisite faint smell of piss.

“How does this even work?” Malfoy eyed the door curiously. “When we step inside, where do we go?”

“When you step into the phone box, then you’re in the phone box,” Harry said slowly.

“You don’t go anywhere? What a racket. Why are we wasting our time?”

“It’s the telephone we want, Malfoy, not the box.”

“Oh, the feletoner! You should have said so before. I’ve used one once before. I’m an expert.”

“Sure,” Harry said, and got into the phone box to grab the phone before Malfoy could fuck it up. He fed the machine coins and dialled the number he had scribbled on his trainers, propping his foot up on the glass so he could see. Malfoy followed in after him, and shut the door. If Harry put his foot down now, he’d probably fall into Malfoy, so he sort of left it where it was. It was a bit odd, but no one gave them a passing glance as they walked past. This was one of several reasons Harry liked London.

A sleepy voice answered with a croak. “Hello?”

“Er — hello, this is Harry. I got this number from Hermione.”

“*Oh*,” said the woman, and although she had sort of covered the phone with one hand, Harry could hear a muffled, “Jane! It’s an *at risk youth* on the line.” There was a rustle of movement, and then the woman spoke again. “Hello Harry, this is Cynthia. Are you in trouble?”

“Er... yes,” Harry admitted. “Though, Hermione didn’t really elaborate on...”

“On who we were?” Cynthia laughed. “That’s unlike her, she’s so conscientious, isn’t she? We’ve known her since she was small, you know. Yes, Hermione had mentioned to us that she had several friends with precarious home lives and we might be hearing from one or another of them this year. Our home is a safe space, Harry, especially to queer youth.”

“To —” Harry fumbled the phone. “Sorry, what?”

“So sorry, love, are you in a different situation, or do you prefer another term?”

“No, er. I mean, queer’s fine. I usually go with bi,” Harry said dumbly, and registered Malfoy’s sudden jolt as surprise. Harry made an *I have no idea* face, gesturing wildly at the phone.

“Whatever you feel comfortable with, dear,” Cynthia said kindly. “I’ll make up the spare room and put the kettle on. Now where are you?”

“Charing Cross Road,” Harry said. “Is that... Is that far?”

“Oh, that’s just fine. Out all night in Soho, were you? Jane will just pop by in the Clio. Give us twenty minutes.”

“No, that’s all right, really,” Harry said. “There’s the tube, or the night bus, or —”

“Young man, it is nearly four in the morning. Don’t be silly. Jane will be there in a shake of a lamb’s tail. She’ll pick you up in front of the — the tube station, did you say, love? Yes, that’s right. The Underground. Jane, you need to specify which station.” There was a muffled

discussion, and then Cynthia's voice rang through the phone again. "Leicester Square, she says."

"Er," Harry said.

"Jane's off right now, Harry. Stay in a lit area, mind. There's all sorts out there." There was a click, and the line went dead.

"Er," Harry said again.

"*Well?*" Malfoy raised his eyebrows as if to prompt him via moving follicles.

"Hermione's told them that we're all queer youth with shit families," Harry explained, still holding the phone like an idiot. He hastily put it back. His foot had started to cramp where it was wedged up on the side of the phone box. "So they're... providing sanctuary? I guess?"

"That's not... *untrue*," Malfoy said slowly. "So where do we have to go? Are they in London? *Don't* tell me we have to go all the way to bloody Oxford or wherever and visit Hermione's childhood home in order to reunite."

"They're in London," Harry said, blinking at Malfoy. Not *untrue*. Did that mean... Harry shook his head slightly. His glasses had fogged up. "Er, they're actually on their way right now. Well, one is. Jane is taking the Clio."

"What's the Clio? Is that an animal?"

"A car," Harry said. "Can we get out of the phone box now? My leg hurts."

"Oh. Right." After an extremely tense moment of fumbling, they disentangled themselves from their cramped positions and spilled from the phone box to the cold pavement outside.

"C'mon, we're meeting her up here." Harry led the way down the rain-slick pavement, dodging rubbish and cigarette butts.

"One pair of shoes," Malfoy grumbled. "*One*. *One!*"

"Why would I need more than one pair? It's not like I have to go to the fucking opera or something."

Once they reached the station, Malfoy tugged him into an alcove. "Just let me —" He knelt down in front of Harry's fucked up shoe. Palming his wand, he did a spell Harry couldn't quite catch but at the end the rogue sole had properly adhered itself to the rest of his shoe. "*One pair*," Malfoy sighed, standing up. "And you didn't even fix it magically, you great gibbering idiot."

"Cheers," Harry said, examining his repaired shoe. "Thanks, though."

They stood in silence, watching the cars and the people stumbling along the pavement. Occasionally someone would shout something rude at them and Harry would have to look away so as not to laugh at the truly affronted expression on Malfoy's face. He looked like he

was about forty seconds away from giving them a good telling off about etiquette, or something equally daft.

A small green car stopped in front of them with a grinding screech. An older white woman with grey hair and large spectacles leaned across her seat to roll down the passenger's side window.

"Didn't know there'd be two of you," she called in a deep, tony voice. Cynthia had not sounded nearly so posh. "Or did you just pick him up?"

Malfoy took a half-step back. "Mother told me not to talk to strangers."

"Hello," Harry said, bending slightly to wave. "I'm Harry, and this is Draco, and I apologise in advance."

"Hello," said the woman, "I'm Jane, and I'm not keen on traffic violations. Get in the car"

"I ought to apologise for *you*," Malfoy huffed, starting forward towards Jane. "Your manners are frankly atrocious and you're constantly irritable."

"Just get in the damn car, Malfoy."

Jane drove fast, cursing slightly under her breath at every red light. Harry leaned his head against the cold window and watched the rainy streets rush by in a yellowish blur. He did not know where they were, exactly, but everything looked faintly familiar in that way it did along bus routes, or train lines.

Malfoy sat in the passenger's seat, very upright and perfectly still. If Harry had not noticed his tense jaw, he would not have been able to tell that Malfoy was bricking it. A jolt of pleasure ran down Harry's body — knowing felt good, like understanding an overheard conversation at the supermarket in a new country. Harry had not known many people before, besides the Dursleys. He'd had to know the Dursleys. If he didn't know the Dursleys, he wouldn't have known when he could make a sarcastic comment without missing meals for a week, or when he could sneak into the kitchen to steal from the refrigerator. He did not have to know Malfoy, but he did. Sure, half the time Malfoy made absolutely no sense, but Harry could still tell that he was five seconds away from clutching the seat and screeching at the top of his lungs.

Jane made an abrupt left turn and Malfoy gripped the edge of his seat with a white-knuckled hand. Harry hid a grin.

They parked in front of a terraced brick house with white bay windows and a green door. "This one's ours," Jane said briskly. "Got it for a song in the seventies; you wouldn't believe how the neighbourhood's changed."

Posh people loved to talk about how they bought something twenty years ago for nothing. Harry slid out of the car and waited for Draco to pry his fingers from the seat to join him.

A distinguished-looking black woman with very short curly hair opened the door. She was wearing a navy blue dressing gown and looked exhausted, but managed a toothy smile anyway. “Hello, hello. Do come in. I’m Cynthia and you’re — which one of you is Harry?”

Harry raised one hand. “Sorry, I didn’t mention that, er. Draco was with me.”

“They looked like a couple of rent boys,” Jane grumbled, putting the keys in a dish by the door. “Lucky nothing happened to them. I’m off to bed, goodnight.”

“Night, love,” Cynthia said, planting a kiss on Jane’s hollow cheek. “Thanks for driving. Come on, you two. Let’s have a little chat.”

Cynthia led them past the stairs and the doorway to the front room — Harry got a brief impression of quite a lot of books and a worn Persian rug — and into a cozy kitchen-diner. There was a conservatory built into the back but it was shut tight, glass doors keeping the colder air out. Next to the conservatory door hung a framed photograph of a young-looking Jane and Cynthia holding a grinning little girl. Harry went closer, peering into the frame. The little girl had large front teeth and very bushy hair.

“Is that Hermione?”

“Oh, yes,” Cynthia said fondly. She took three mugs from the cupboard and began making tea. Malfoy sat gingerly down at the small kitchen table, staring down at the blue floral tablecloth with the air of someone who was doing their best not to startle a nearby wild animal. “Jane’s her godmother, you know.”

Godmother. Was that a close enough relation that the Ministry might have this house monitored? Harry looked into the picture, the wide gummy grin of small Hermione. No, she would have thought of that.

“Milk and sugar?”

“Just milk,” Harry said, and went to sit by Malfoy.

“Same for me, please,” Malfoy said, kicking him under the table. *What do I do*, he mouthed.

Harry shrugged.

Wanker, Malfoy mouthed, with a gesture to match that disappeared as soon as Cynthia turned around. She set three steaming mugs down at the table and sat down.

“Well,” she said, wrapping her fingers around the mug. “I’m glad you called.”

“We really appreciate your letting us stay,” Harry said. “We’ll just be — we won’t be too long, anyway. Probably just tonight.”

“You’re welcome as long as you need,” Cynthia said. “I know how hard it can be, with your family.” She smiled sympathetically.

A wave of guilt swamped Harry and threatened to drag him into the depths of self-loathing. Cynthia really thought they were in trouble — well, they *were* in trouble, it just wasn't the kind of trouble she assumed. And Harry's family *was* hard, and awful, and if he *had* ever said anything about his identity they would have... But the point was, Cynthia thought she was providing a certain kind of sanctuary, and they were lying to her.

"Pot — *Harry's* family is the most crap," Malfoy agreed, kicking Harry's foot again. "He lived with his aunt and uncle, but they're horrible. *Really* horrible. They could win horrible awards for horribleness."

"Well, *Draco's* practically disowned," Harry said, kicking right back. "So we both aren't exactly winning the family department."

"At least you found each other," Cynthia said, and Harry realised with a horrible flash that she thought that they were *together*. "Are you both at Hermione's school? I can never remember what it's called, that school in Scotland... Hortons? Horbalts?"

"Yes," Malfoy said, before Harry could deny anything. "It's, er. Half-term."

It was too late now. Harry felt too strange correcting her. She hadn't even said anything outright, it had just been inferred, and Harry couldn't just say out of nowhere, *by the way, we're just friends — not even friends, acquaintances*. But that didn't feel right either — he supposed that he and Malfoy were more than acquaintances by now. Harry knew things about Malfoy, like how to tell he was scared, and what his horrible aunt was like. He wondered if they were friends.

"Harry?"

"Er, what?"

Malfoy kicked him yet again, savagely. "She was asking if we needed to telephone anyone."

"Never mind, you're clearly exhausted." Cynthia got up, patting his shoulder. "We can talk tomorrow. Or, later today I suppose! Goodness, it's late. I'll show you your room."

Cynthia led them up the first flight of stairs, pointing out her and Jane's room and then the bathroom, small with a tiled floor and a little elephant stand for books next to the old-fashioned toilet.

"You two will be up here," she said, leading them up another narrow flight of stairs to a postage stamp landing. "It's a double bedroom, although the eaves might feel a little cramped for you two."

She swung the door open and Harry went in, suppressing the feeling that he should perhaps duck. The eaves crowded them towards the centre of the room, where a double bed stood neatly at attention. "It's perfect," Harry said, putting the thought of the one bed aside for the moment.

Malfoy stood slightly behind Harry, as if he was using him as a shield. “Perfect,” Malfoy echoed weakly.

“Good then. I won’t be available if you need anything, because I’ll be asleep.” Cynthia’s smile undercut her words somewhat. “Well, I’ll leave you to it. See you in the morning.”

“Goodnight,” Harry and Draco chorused, and did not look at each other as Cynthia pulled the door shut behind her and left them alone.

“So what now?”

“Now,” said Harry, sitting on the edge of the bed to pull off his newly-repaired shoes. “We sleep. And then tomorrow, we’ll see if Hermione phones here seeing if we’ve been in. If she doesn’t, we’ll fly to the rendezvous point. Probably should have done that in the first place, to be honest, although I didn’t know the way. We can get some maps.”

“We were too busy being great big idiots,” Malfoy said, eyeing Harry’s shoes with disgust. He took his shoes off too, lining them up neatly by the door and putting his socks inside. Malfoy wasn’t often barefoot. In the tent, he nearly always wore socks — they all did. It was usually pretty bloody cold.

Malfoy had bony feet.

“I don’t have my toothbrush,” Harry realised.

“Just use a dental spell,” said Malfoy, folding his coat up and putting it next to his shoes.

Malfoy was never tidy in the tent. He left his things lying about everywhere. He tried to make his bed but it was always lumpy, and his clothes were all shoved together in the wardrobe. He never folded anything normally. Harry wondered why he was being so neat. He wanted to ask, but thought that might be a strange question.

“I don’t know those spells,” he said instead.

“Oh, fine. Open your mouth.”

“What,” Harry asked, alarmed.

“I’m not going to hurt you, you tosser. I’ll do the spell. You’ve never done it before; you could damage yourself.”

“Oh,” said Harry. Feeling immensely stupid, he opened his mouth.

Malfoy came closer, his wand raised. He gripped Harry’s jaw with one hand. His fingers were cold. “*Densturgeo*.”

A sort of vibration spread unpleasantly over Harry’s teeth. He grimaced, and Malfoy dropped his hand. “Eugh. Clean now, but at what cost.”

“It’s why most witches and wizards use toothbrushes,” Malfoy said, then turned the wand on himself to repeat the incantation.

Harry watched Malfoy take his jumper off, fold it, and lay it on top of his coat. His shirt rode up in the back. He had a brief, lightning-hot flash of memory: the rave, the pulsing music, Malfoy’s cheek on his. Face burning, Harry looked away.

They were too tired to wash, or do much of anything else. Harry shucked his jeans and got into bed with his jumper still on, curling under the duvet with a sigh. Putting his dirty clothes and sweaty skin on the nice clean bed felt deeply wrong, but Harry could not summon the energy to do anything about it. He put his glasses on the floor next to the bed.

A moment later, the bed creaked as Malfoy got into bed on the other side. Harry felt weirdly tense. This shouldn’t be so strange. They were friends, now, weren’t they? All the knowing things made them friends, he was pretty sure. Malfoy had fixed his shoes. Friends would do that. Malfoy was a posh arsehole, but he wasn’t so bad, really.

The room swayed like a ship. Harry felt almost delirious. All the running, and the flying, and the adrenaline. He felt wrung out.

“There’s something I haven’t been telling you,” Malfoy said quietly, in the dark.

“What,” grunted Harry, sleep already weighing him down.

“I overheard something at home. I wasn’t meant to hear it. It’s — it’s a prophecy. It has to do with you.”

Harry yawned. “A whatecy? You have those?”

“*We* have those,” Malfoy corrected. “Yeah. Divinations is a load of bunk, but real prophecies do happen. They don’t always mean what people think they mean, but...”

“Okay? Why d’you have to tell me?”

“Well, it’s your prophecy.”

“Is it that I’m going to be asleep in fifteen seconds? ‘Cos I could have told you that.”

“No,” Malfoy said, and he was quiet.

Harry drifted on the edge of sleep. The bed was so comfortable. He was warm, and relatively safe, and so *tired*. “Can you tell me in the morning? I’m so knackered. If we keep talking I might —” Harry yawned again. “I might actually have to murder you. Sorry.”

“Okay,” Malfoy said, with a strange laugh. “Yeah, tomorrow.”

After such a long time camping on moors and in fields and forests, the city streets sounded twice as loud as they probably were. It didn’t bother Harry. It felt nice, really, hearing the engines revving and the swishing sounds of cars driving through puddles. All the life outside.

“Goodnight,” said Harry, pressing his face into the pillow.

“Goodnight,” said Malfoy.

Chapter 6

Harry dreamt of a vast dark house.

He slithered through rooms filled with beasts and corridors flecked with blood. He was looking for someone. Downstairs, and through another corridor, and an arching doorway — there. Two figures were silhouetted before an ornate marble fireplace. A man with white blond hair falling into his gaunt face knelt solicitously beside a tall, thin figure seen only in shadow. Harry's forked tongue flicked the air and tasted fear, and ash.

"Lucius," the figure said, in a high, cold voice. "I am growing impatient. We must find the boy."

"We are searching, my lord," Lucius said, his words quavering. "We are searching, it just takes time —"

"That fool Pettigrew found him once, Lucius. Found him and took his blood and left him there, against my express desires. He left him with the Muggles, *defenceless* and still the boy goes free. We trace him to London and Rowle and Thicke manage to thwart my purpose yet again." The figure shook his oddly flat face. "As you know, they are all no longer with us. I wonder, Lucius, if you cannot even keep a handle on your own son, how can I possibly trust you with this? Another failure would be most unpleasant."

Lucius raised his hands to plead. One of his hands was milk-pale, the other glinted silver in the firelight. "My lord," he whispered, "My lord, remember, I kept you alive. Before the ceremony — remember, I fed you the unicorn blood, I —"

"Yes, Lucius. You finished what Pettigrew started. You kept me alive then. Your loyalty was touching, considering the years you spent feigning propriety, never searching for your master, tending to your own interests. Perhaps your son learned his behaviour from you."

"That was a mistake. My mistake, my Lord. My son will be dealt with," Lucius said fervently. "He is a deserter and will be disposed of as such. We will find the boy."

"The Malfoys have not been a credit to me, of late, Lucius. See that you do." The dark figure turned towards the doorway. "Ah, there you are, Nagini," he said, and met Harry's eyes.

Sudden, blinding pain tore Harry from sleep. He cried aloud, hand clamped over his aching forehead. "Shit," he breathed, "Shit, shit."

"Potter?"

Harry flinched, nearly falling out of bed in his haste to get away before he realised it was just Malfoy, sleep-rumpled and groggy.

"Potter, what the fuck are you doing," Malfoy mumbled, rubbing his face.

“Headache,” Harry gasped. His head was going to implode. It really was just going to cave in at this point. Oh, he’d had nightmares — for years he’d had them, snippets of scenes hazy as if seen through fog. He didn’t always remember them. Sometimes he could recall in flashes: a snake, oftentimes, and a tall figure — it hadn’t been that clear ever before. It had never hurt quite this much. Harry shut his eyes and saw the man, his red eyes, his inhuman face.

The Dark Lord is not just a man, Malfoy had said once, He’s more, and less.

“Potter?” There was some rustling of the duvet, and a hesitant hand on his shoulder. “Potter, what’s going on?”

“My head — I had this dream,” Harry croaked, and trailed off. He couldn’t finish. The world swam around him.

“Shit,” Malfoy said, “We don’t have any pain potion, or anything — do Muggles have that? Just, I don’t know, hit the bed if they do.”

Harry pressed his face into his hands. “Paracetamol. That’s what they call it — check the loo. *Fuck.*”

“All right. All right, just — it’ll be fine, Potter, I’ll be right back.”

Malfoy’s footsteps receded out the door and down the stairs. The worst of the pain started to fade, leaching away like colour from an old photograph. Harry still felt tender, and a little frightened. He wanted Malfoy to come back. He didn’t like being here in this unfamiliar room, alone, with Voldemort’s voice ringing in his ears. That’s who it was. Harry knew now. That was Draco’s father, and Voldemort. Something was very wrong. Something was very wrong with him. He groped under the bed for his glasses and shoved them on. The room came into focus, which helped a bit, and then it didn’t help at all. Harry shut his eyes.

“I got this bottle of something or other that starts with a ‘p’, and a glass of water. Hold your hand out, I’m going to give it to you.”

Harry had not heard Malfoy come back. The bed shifted, and then there was a cold glass sweating condensation in his hand.

“How many of these... capsules? Are you sure they’re not poison? I couldn’t remember the damn name you said, para-something. I can’t pronounce anything on this bottle.”

“You know Latin,” Harry said. “Three?”

“Well, some of this looks Greek,” Malfoy muttered darkly. Malfoy counted three pills out into his hand and Harry swallowed them. “Are you sure those weren’t poison? You look — you still look ghastly, Potter.”

“Thanks,” Harry said dryly. They sat there for a minute. Harry focused on the cold sweating glass, the cotton duvet under his free hand, the way the room swam a little bit as he came back into himself. “I have nightmares.”

“I know.” Malfoy did not say *me too*, but Harry could hear it underneath his words. He translated for him. *Malfoy says he has nightmares too.*

“Mine are... weird, sometimes.”

“Weird how?”

“They’re not really mine. I think they’re someone else’s. Or — or they’re real. It’s never been that clear before.” A bare winter tree outside the window cast skeletal shadows over the wooden floor. The street light was almost orange. The pale grey duvet looked brown. “Your father’s name is Lucius, right?”

“Yes,” Malfoy said. “Did you read that in the Daily Prophet?”

“No. I didn’t know until the dream. Your father was there, with the... with *him*. They were talking about us. He was angry that the Death Eaters hadn’t found me yet. He said, if Lucius couldn’t even find his own son, how could he find me? Then Lucius called you a deserter. He said you’d be dealt with. Volde — er, You-Know-Who threatened him. The Death Eaters we saw in London when we first met, they’re dead because I got away. So’s someone else, someone called Pettigrew.”

Harry dared a glance at Malfoy. He looked ashen. Harry looked away.

“Before, it had been... hazy. Fragmented. Not like that. That was *real*. I know it.”

“Oh,” Malfoy said.

Harry did not want to scare Malfoy. Why had he said anything? He was an idiot. He should have gone back to sleep. “That’s not normal, is it? Not even for wizards?”

“No,” Malfoy admitted. He was quiet, and then he added in a hopeful sort of voice, “It’s not unheard of, though. Maybe you’re a Seer.”

Harry snorted. It hurt his head. “Sure.”

“Or maybe it’s that scar. No one’s had one of those before, who knows what it does. Or maybe it’s to do with the prophecy.”

“You were trying to tell me about that before we went to sleep,” Harry said, in a rush of recollection. He sat up straighter. “What’s the prophecy?”

“I’ll tell you. Drink your water.”

Harry did, then set the empty glass on the floor next to the bed. “What’s the prophecy?”

Malfoy pulled his long legs in, sitting cross-legged in front of Harry. His sharp face went almost soft in the warm streetlight. It felt odd to be in a room with just Malfoy after the months in the tent, with Neville snoring and everyone just a cloth wall away. If it weren’t for the distant buzz of traffic, Harry would believe that they were the only people left in the whole world.

“I didn’t hear the original,” Malfoy explained, staring down at his hands. “Only snippets, from people talking about it at the Manor. The Dark Lord thought the prophecy would tell him how to destroy you. He thought it would explain why he couldn’t, when you were a baby. He infiltrated the Ministry to get a hold of it. It took ages, there were all these attempts that went horribly wrong until they finally got in and then it turned out that only you or the Dark Lord could take the record off the shelf, so the Dark Lord just went and bloody took over the Ministry so he could go in unencumbered. I’m sure that wasn’t the only reason, obviously, as he’s rather keen on turning the country into a happening new hellscape, but the prophecy definitely played a role.”

Harry rolled his eyes. Malfoy was many things, but ‘concise’ would never be one of them. “Just tell me what it fucking says.”

“The one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord was born — oh, when you were, to your parents, something like that. The Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he’ll have power the Dark Lord doesn’t have. That part really irked him, as you can imagine.” Malfoy edged one long pale hand closer to Harry’s, almost like he wanted to touch him but wouldn’t quite let himself. “This is — it’s just a prophecy, Potter. They don’t always come true.”

“What else,” Harry said. “There’s more, right?”

“It’s... Oh, it’s rubbish, but I suppose it’s your prophecy.” Malfoy took a deep breath and recited dully, as if it were multiplication tables, “One of you must die at the hand of the other. Neither can live whilst the other survives.”

Harry nodded. He wasn’t surprised, not really. That’s the way these sorts of things always went, wasn’t it? In all the stories, that’s what happened.

“It doesn’t have to mean it’s up to *you*,” Malfoy said, sounding almost sick. “It’s not a death sentence. It’s a prophecy; they can be notoriously unreliable. Everyone always misunderstands them, anyway. My cousin Cato heard a prophecy that all the grapes of his branch of the Malfoys would wither on the vine and went mad thinking they’d all be killed off, but as it turns out the vineyard in Provence had a horrible case of black rot or something and they lost the entire crop.” Malfoy cocked his head to one side. “Of course, then Aurors offed his older brother in the first war, and Cato caught dragonpox and died in Milan in the eighties, so actually this was a really shit example and I have no idea why I told you about it.”

“It doesn’t really change anything,” Harry reasoned. “We already knew he wanted to kill me. And I want to kill him. It’s not rocket science.”

“What’s rocket science? Never mind, I don’t care. You’re such a bloody *Gryffindor*, Potter.” Malfoy shook his head, smiling a little. “Do you want to tell the others?”

“No,” Harry said, and Malfoy looked relieved.

“Now I don’t have to confess my lies by omission,” Malfoy said. “This works out brilliantly for me. Do you know how truly honed and perfected Hermione Granger’s disappointed face is? Extreme guilt after thirty seconds, guaranteed.”

Oddly, Harry felt calmer. He didn't have a choice, now. He would have to kill Voldemort. There was a reason why Hermione and Ron and Draco had found him on the tube station and saved his life. It was his turn. He had to save their lives now. Nightmares or no nightmares, Harry knew what he had to do.

Malfoy seemed much happier now that he'd divulged what Harry supposed was rather a deep dark secret. Now it was their deep dark secret. And Voldemort's, he supposed.

"There was something he said — someone found me, once," Harry remembered, speaking slowly. "Pettigrew. He found me, and took some of my blood."

"Did he?" Malfoy yawned. "That's a bit creepy. I never met him, he was some Death Eater from before. Died before the Manor got invaded."

"I sort of..." Harry screwed up his face, concentrating. "I sort of remember. I woke up bleeding. I didn't know what had happened."

"Believe it or not, but he probably wasn't the creepiest Death Eater," Draco said, burrowing down into the mattress. "There's this one called Fenrir Greyback... Never mind, this isn't a conversation I want to have before sleeping."

Harry lay back down, and then winced. "Shit, I hadn't even thought about the others. Do you think they're all right?"

"They're fine," Malfoy said waspishly, pulling the duvet over his shoulders. "They have Hermione. *We* 've barely made it out alive."

"True," Harry said, and pulled the duvet up to his chin. Malfoy closed his eyes, and Harry studied his face. He had very long eyelashes, and a soft, slack mouth. "Hermione will bring them through."

"Go to sleep," Malfoy said, batting a hand in his direction. His long fingers missed Harry's nose by a centimetre. "Sleep now. Fucking hell, I'm sore. Those bloody brooms."

"Brooms," Harry echoed, his cheeks bunching up. "Flying. That was brilliant. I want to do that again."

"Sure," Malfoy mumbled. "Sure, whatever you want."

Malfoy was asleep in minutes, but Harry lay awake for a long time. When he finally slept, he dreamt not of Voldemort but of Malfoy's cousin's vineyard. All the grapes were people he knew and Harry ran around trying to keep the black rot at bay whilst Malfoy read monotonously from a book of prophecies. *He has power the Dark Lord knows not*, Malfoy trilled, as Harry desperately tried to get a hold of more pesticide. *Neither can live whilst the other survives*.

*

Hermione ignored the blood streaming from her nose and grasped Ginny and Neville by the wrists, pulling them through the crushing darkness until the ground rose up at them, freezing

and rocky and utterly comforting.

“Er, Hermione?”

With great effort Hermione managed to roll over to her back, looking up at the cloudy sky. She wiped her bloody nose on her coat sleeve. “Give me a minute,” she said weakly.

“Should we do — should we do something?”

“No. Sit there. One minute.” Hermione closed her eyes and counted to sixty. They had made it out. They had *just* made it out. She’d heard Ron and Luna land just after she did, and no one had screamed in agony at any point so she assumed none of them had been splinched. Hermione breathed in, and out, and then when her minute was complete she sat up.

“I need to find a phone box,” she announced.

“What the fuck,” Ron said, running anxious hands over her upper arms. He was smudged with ink and dust and a bit of blood, like all of them were. “Hermione, you are like — half dead. You need to sleep.”

“I need to ring someone about Harry and Draco,” Hermione continued calmly. “I’m fine, Ron.”

Everyone’s faces went pale again. “Balls,” Ginny said quietly. “Harry and Draco. I forgot.”

Hermione scanned them, cataloguing bruises and scrapes, trying to gauge which was the least injured. “Neville, come with me. We’re going to steal a car, and then we’re going to drive to a phone box, or a village with some form of telephone somewhere. The rest of you set up the wards and the tent, and get some rest. We’ll be back in about an hour, give or take.”

“We’re going to — *what*?”

“There’s a car over there.” Hermione pointed without looking; she’d seen it as she’d rolled over to her back. “I know it’s wrong, and I really do feel badly about it but we cannot Apparate right now, and it’s too far to walk. Harry and Draco are more important than private property.”

“I always knew you’d make a lovely communist,” Luna said. “Would you say we seized the means of production at the Daily Prophet?”

“I fully regret getting you all of those Muggle political leaflets,” Hermione said. “Not that I endorse capitalism in any way, of course, even in our world’s sort of primitive system. Sometimes I do wonder if capitalism’s isolationism contributed to the rise of You-Know-Who. As a society we no longer trust each other, although did that happen as a result of the First Wizarding War or was it a contributing factor? It’s a phoenix or the flame scenario, admittedly, although if you study the emotional effects of Grindelwald on the population —”

“Hermione. The car.”

“Oh, right. Thank you, Ron. Yes, we’ll need to steal that car, and drive to the nearest village.” Hermione wiped her nose again. It really ached now that she wasn’t hopped up on quite so much adrenaline. “Also, I think my nose is broken.”

“Luna?” Ron brushed Hermione’s hair back from her face. His hands were shaking. Hermione guessed this was why Ron wasn’t doing the spell himself.

“Stay still,” Luna said softly, and aimed her wand at Hermione.

“Don’t give me a more interesting nose,” Hermione said sternly. “My nose is interesting enough, thank you.”

“I never said your nose wasn’t interesting.” Luna’s gigantic eyes blinked calmly and then she said, “*Episkey*.”

The familiar white flash of heat, and Hermione’s nose knit itself back together.

“Say, Hermione,” Ginny called, from a distance.

Hermione looked up. Ginny had hiked over to where the car was, an old green Morris Minor half-submerged in a cluster of bushes.

“I don’t think we’ll be stealing this from anyone. Look at it.”

Hermione took in the flat tyres, the chipped paint and moss growing over the hubcaps. Damn. “Ron,” she said, “You and Ginny used to work on that Ford Anglia with your father, sometimes, right? The one the Ministry confiscated?”

“No,” Ron said, just as Ginny went, “Obviously.”

“*What?* He let *you*? That’s not fair. He never let me!”

Ginny shrugged. “You never tried the right persuasive tactics.”

“What, whinging for England? Ginny!”

“It’s not my fault you weren’t enterprising enough,” Ginny said calmly, kneeling down to inspect the car.

Light rain began to fall as Ginny taught them what mechanical spells she’d learned from her father, and Hermione contributed what she knew about cars. Although it was not an excessive amount, it was enough to see that the Morris Minor was not in quite so bad condition as she’d initially feared. The car was serviceable by the time everyone’s stomachs began to revolt against their lack of nourishment, and they sat down to eat baked beans from the tin and wax rhapsodic about Hogwarts food.

“The sheer number of sausages,” Ron was saying. “An absolute bevy of bangers. Not just the number, but also the variety — of course your standard sausage, great on a sandwich, but then you’d also get Cumberland sausage, Lincolnshire, blood sausage, kielbasa, andouille, Italian —”

“Bratwurst,” said Neville, through a mouthful of beans.

“*Bratwurst*,” agreed Ron. “Bloody hell, it was a sausage world tour.” He shook his head grimly. “We had no idea how good we had it.”

“Ron,” Hermione said, squinting up at the cloudy sky.

Ron was not listening. “Then you move on to your potatoes —”

Luna followed Hermione’s eyes up. “Is that an owl?”

“That’s a fucking owl,” Ginny said, putting her beans aside.

At first, Hermione did not recognise the owl that swooped down through the fog to land delicately on the car. Hedwig was charmed coal black, and she looked deeply unimpressed with the turn of events as she held out one leg. They all watched silently as Ron untied the Daily Prophet and laid it out on the grass to page through. Hermione caught glimpses of the usual words in the headlines: Public Enemy Number Whatever, Undesirables, Wandless.

“Shit,” Ron said, as he turned the page. Huge letters spelled out POTTER LIVES in jagged, anarchic scrawl. The lightning bolt beneath looked almost cheerful. Ron turned the insert over and scanned through their article and the irreverent political cartoon Luna had designed. “It’s all here. Hermione, it’s all here.”

“This is the southern distribution,” Hermione said faintly. “At least some of them went through, then.” She nodded briefly. “Good.”

“*Good?*” Ron whooped, bolting to his feet to hug her. “Hermione, we fucking did it. Spare a minute to celebrate!”

“We’ll celebrate tonight, if — *when* we get Harry and Draco,” Hermione said, loathe to remind him. Sure enough, the flush of victory seeped from Ron’s skin immediately. “Don’t worry. I’m ninety-eight percent sure I can find them.”

*

Draco woke up warm.

He did not realise *why* he was so warm for a long, comfortable minute. He started to stretch, and then froze. Horror swamped his entire body.

Draco and Potter were both curled up around their pillows like inverted commas, which would have left them capably separated by several inches at least of bed, were it not for the treacherous way the mattress sagged in the middle.

Draco shut his eyes tight, trying not to feel the comforting press of Potter’s spine against his own quite so acutely. The bed was *trapping* them together. The bed was a low down, dirty... Potter made a sleepy, snuffling sound, and turned over, stealing half of the duvet from Draco’s unsuspecting hands. Draco looked over his shoulder, and felt a deep need to immediately vacate not only the bed but also the universe.

He slunk carefully from the bed, found his socks and jumper, and peered out the window at the leafy street below. He didn't know what time it was. Potter had woken him up before the sun came up, they'd gone back to sleep and now it was light out. Draco pulled the curtain shut and turned to find the bathroom.

Potter's horrible shoes had been discarded by the door. Draco scowled at them. He had repaired the sole last night but it hardly made a difference — what had been white was grey or brown, the laces were frayed, and the soles were worn thin as parchment. They were a disgrace. Draco could not be seen in the same room as them any longer in their current condition. Draco got his wand out and knelt down.

There was a sleepy grumble from the bed, and then a hoarse voice croaked, "Malfoy? What are you doing?"

"I'm declawing a lethifold, Potter, what does it look like I'm doing?"

"Are you incinerating my trainers?"

"I'm fixing them."

"Oh," said Potter. "Thanks."

Draco dared a glance behind him. Potter's sleep-ruined hair was perhaps the eighth wonder of the world. He had most of his face covered by the duvet, but his eyes were all soft.

"Just so you know —" Potter yawned extravagantly. His face was puffy, his eyes were swollen, and Draco thought he looked *cute*, which was just another facet of the gemstone of horror that was his life. "Cynthia thinks we're together. Sorry. Can we just go along with it?"

Draco's stomach did something awful that had nothing to do with how hungry he was. "Are you asking that because you didn't correct her assumption initially, and now you feel that it is too late and you're far too awkward to manage human language?"

"Er. Yes, actually."

Draco snorted, added a waterproofing charm to the horrible trainers, then stood up. "Well, no one need doubt your nationality."

Another yawn. "Yeah. So will you?"

"Who could it hurt," Draco lied, forever, because *him* the answer was *him*. "Go back to sleep."

Potter made a sound that could have been agreement in a language that was light on consonants, and burrowed back into the duvet. Draco watched him for a long, excruciating minute. If this had been their room, if this had been their bed, if this had been Draco's life, he would crawl under that duvet and reach under Potter's jumper to the warm skin beneath. He'd press him into the bed and bite his throat, he'd grind their hips together, he'd taste the sounds that Potter would make in the foggy morning air.

No, it was worse than that. If he could, Draco would press his face gently into Potter's warm neck and just stay there, breathing, for a little while.

"What the fuck," Draco said to himself, as quietly as he could manage. The lust he could deal with. It was uncomfortable, and slightly humiliating, but bearable. *This*... This was just ridiculous.

Draco left Potter sleeping and went to wash in the strange Muggle bathroom. It took him quite a long time to figure out the shower-head attached to the bathtub, which had some form of *switch*, and before he quite got it right he managed to soak half the floor and couldn't find enough towels to mop it up. Clean but increasingly humiliated, Draco shook out his hair and did his best with laundering charms to make himself presentable before slinking downstairs.

Jane was sat in the front room with the newspaper and a cup of tea, looking formidable.

"Excuse me," Draco said, his face burning. "I, er. Flooded the bathroom a little bit. Sorry."

Jane looked up and raised an eyebrow. "Did you?"

"I've never used a, er. Mu—I mean, a shower like that before. My school's rather old fashioned, and my house is practically medieval. I tried to mop it up, but... Er, it didn't work so well." Draco had never learned those sorts of cleaning spells, because he was an idiot of the highest calibre, and thoroughly unprepared for survival outside of the wizarding great houses of Great Britain. What was he doing with his life? How had he even got here? One day Draco was the reigning monarch of Slytherin, and the next he was standing in a Muggle's drawing room confessing to sins of insufficient cleaning knowledge. Everything was humiliating, all the time forever.

"Light on mod-cons, then? I know the type." Jane neatly folded the paper, set it on the side table and stood up. She was fairly tall, maybe of a height with Draco. It made him feel, abruptly, like a child. Comforted. Someone could fix the bathroom for him. It was all right that he was an absolute pillock. "I'll see to it. Cynthia's in the kitchen."

This was, Draco assumed, an order, so he slunk down the corridor.

Cynthia sat at the small table in the narrow kitchen, reading a Muggle newspaper with wire-rimmed glasses perched on the edge of her nose. "There you are," she said, smiling. She took her glasses down so that they hung from a string around her neck.

"Here I am," Draco said. He did not move from the doorway. Would she invite him in? He should have asked Hermione about Muggle etiquette when he had the chance; now he looked and felt like a dolt.

"Sleep all right?"

"Fine," Draco lied. Potter's nightmares were none of Cynthia's business, after all.

"You're a middling liar," Cynthia said, getting to her feet. "Your dark circles tell a different story. Tea?"

“Yes, please.” Was Draco meant to sit down? Did Muggles not observe protocol? *Where* was he meant to sit? Was he meant to comment on his prior lie? Or was Cynthia being rude even in Muggle culture — *Draco* certainly would have let someone get away with a lie in order to preserve their dignity. Unless it was Potter, but Potter did not deserve dignity.

“You’re allowed to sit down, Draco.” Cynthia looked at him over her shoulder; her brown eyes twinkled slightly.

Draco picked a chair at random, hoping there was no specific seating arrangements needed.

“Draco is an interesting name,” Cynthia said, banging Muggle appliances about. She even opened the short rectangular white cupboard, which he took to be a regenerator of some kind when he felt a wave of cool air. “Were your parents dragon enthusiasts?”

Muggles knew about dragons? Draco could have sworn they didn’t, weren’t they always going on about the Statute of Secrecy in the Hebrides, what with all those Hebridean Blacks running amok? “Er, astrology, actually. It’s a constellation. Almost everyone in my mother’s family has star names; I don’t know why.”

“You’ll have to point it out to me sometime,” Cynthia said. She set a plate of toast in front of him along with a butter knife, butter and jam. “London is a bit light on stars, but if it’s a clear night you can get a decent glimpse on Hampstead Heath.”

“I know Hampstead Heath,” Draco said, brightening. “I’ve been there before.”

“Have you?” Cynthia smiled. She was humouring him, and Draco didn’t even mind. “Where are you from, Draco? I know you all go to that school in Scotland with the funny name. Such an odd choice of the Grangers, but then again they always were rather keen on public schools and all the trappings.”

“I’m from Wiltshire.” Draco hunched over his plate. He didn’t know if he could ever go back there, really. Certainly not now.

Cynthia laid a hand on his. “I know you must have reached a point of crisis, and it can’t have been easy. Did your parents not take the news well?”

Draco choked on his toast. “Er,” he said. “My mum died, actually, before... Before I said anything about being, you know. Rather homosexual.” Draco had never said that out loud before. No one had ever asked him. He had always thought it was fairly self-evident.

“I’m so sorry,” Cynthia said, “And your dad? Is he in the picture?”

Draco grimaced.

“Ah. Bit of a bastard, then?”

“No,” Draco said defensively, and then thought about it for a minute. Draco’s father had promised to do away with him not twenty-four hours prior, if one were to ask Harry Potter, not exactly Top Father tactics by any account. “Well, yes. Also, he’d rather I vacate the earth’s premises. But he’s my father.”

Cynthia's eyes went wide and liquid. "He's entirely wrong to think so, and that's no way to treat your child. But you're still allowed to feel complicated ways about him, even if he's a bastard, Draco. He wasn't always a bastard, maybe. It's all right. You can feel however you feel about him."

Oh, humiliations upon humiliations, Draco felt a hot prickle of tears behind his eyes and had to stare determinedly at the floral tablecloth and recite the names of each flower before he could speak again. "You don't know how much of a bastard he is," Draco said, once his voice was steady. "He's really — he takes it to new and exciting places. There's your standard-order bastard, and then there's my father. Who is, actually, a bastard on a national scale." Possibly an international scale, if the Dark Lord had his way. Draco suppressed a shudder.

"And he's still your father," Cynthia said. "That's what you just told me."

Draco sunk low in his seat. "Can we talk about how fucked up Potter is now? He's really rather fucked, you know. He probably needs much more reassurance and, you know, tea and gentle hand touching than I do."

Cynthia laughed loudly and took her hand away. "You remind me of Jane, a bit," she said. "Have you reached your emotional quota for the day? I'll be giving Harry the same treatment when he wakes up, don't you worry."

"You have a lovely home," Draco said. "Where did you get this tablecloth? Your conservatory was tastefully done."

Cynthia kept laughing, and passed Draco another piece of toast. "Do you want to talk about the weather?"

"Oh, desperately." Draco glanced through the kitchen at the conservatory. "It looks like it's going to rain."

"Does it? The forecast was for sun, but you never do know, do you?"

Cynthia smiled at him, and he smiled back. She passed him a section of the Muggle newspaper. Draco couldn't understand half the words mentioned, only that something was going on in Bulgaria, but he appreciated the gesture.

Potter emerged a half hour later, wild-haired and rumpled, his eyes red behind his glasses.

"I'd ask if you slept well, but you look absolutely done in," Cynthia said, putting the strange Muggle kettle on.

Jane and Cynthia's kitchen was more of a glorified corridor. There was not really enough space for more than one person to be walking around, and with Cynthia in charge of finding something for him to eat, Potter was getting uncomfortably close to the Muggle appliances for Draco's taste. In his condition, he'd wind up accidentally touching one of those funny strings with the ecklericity and *die*, and then Hermione would give Draco disappointed face for the remainder of their short lives.

“Sit down,” Draco demanded, leaning over to tow Potter to the nearest seat. “You’re getting in the way.”

“Okay,” Potter said, yawning. He slumped into the chair and put his head down on the table.

“Sweet,” Cynthia said, watching Draco with a horribly knowing expression. “How long have you two been together?”

“I tried to pick him up on a tube platform a few months ago,” Draco said honestly. “He may be all right looking, but he’s a surly prat really.”

“He’s joking,” Harry said, half to the table.

Cynthia put a steaming mug of tea in front of his folded arms. “I assumed. Toast all right, Harry?”

“Please,” Harry said.

Draco spoke in a low voice, hoping Cynthia wasn’t paying attention. “Did you have any more... *you* know.”

Harry tilted his head to the side so that his violently green eyes emerged from his jumper cave. “Dreams? Not if you count the one about Ron and I in a flying car.”

Draco stared at Harry’s tousled head, the angle of his skinny brown wrists inside his overlarge blue jumper. “Drink your tea,” he said, and because — well, Cynthia thought that they were together, didn’t she, and what did it hurt — Draco brushed Harry’s fringe out of his eyes. It really was getting too long. Pretty soon he wouldn’t be able to see at all. Potter’s eyes fluttered shut. He leaned into Draco’s hand, a look on his face like — almost like it hurt him. Draco yanked his hand away.

“It’s all right, you don’t have to worry about that in front of me,” Cynthia said, and the Muggle toaster spewed toast from the top with a noisy scraping sound.

Draco had a little bit forgot she was still there. “Er, habit,” Draco invented. He could feel his entire face go red. Oh, horrors.

“I think I need a haircut,” Potter said. He was looking at Draco like he wanted to apologise for something.

“You look unkept,” Draco agreed weakly. “It’s horrible. Honestly, it’s an assault to my senses.”

Cynthia banged a plate of toast in front of Potter’s nose. “Flirt after breakfast, boys. You’re both too skinny and growing besides.”

Draco fought the urge to retreat into his jumper like an atrophied turtle and did as he was bid.

Hermione stood in the drizzle, arms akimbo, watching as everyone erupted into protests at her suggested plan.

"I'm all right with it. I just want to ride in that thing." Neville pointed at the ancient car. "I've never been in one before."

"Obviously you're all right with the plan; you get to go with Hermione! I am *not* waiting back here," Ginny insisted. "Sorry, but I will actually set fire to something."

"We've already been split up once," Ron added. "I'd rather not split up even more. It makes us more vulnerable."

"I want to ride on the top." Luna slowly circled the car, touching the windows reverently. "I think I'd feel like a sugar glider."

Hermione was too tired to argue. She was tired, and Draco and Harry could be completely safe but could equally be in terrible danger, and she did not know how long the enchantments on the Morris Minor would last. She had to prioritise her energy.

"Fine, that's a fair point, and not a chance in hell," said Hermione, addressing each of them in turn. "Let's get this over with."

They poured into the Morris Minor, closing the doors with walloping *cracks*. The key to the ignition went in the centre of the dashboard, not the steering column, and Hermione pulled the choke out a few inches and turned the key. She let out a breath she did not know she had been holding at the deafening sound of the engine. The clutch was weirdly heavy and the clutch pedal felt strange, but soon enough Hermione felt comfortable enough to get them chugging along.

"Keep a look out for a phone box," Hermione said, and then realised that none of them knew what a phone box was, and had to spend a good fifteen minutes describing one in minute detail.

The gears clanked ominously as Hermione attempted to drive the Minor along the narrow country lane. The trees and hedges were so overgrown they brushed the roof of the car, and every time Hermione had to change gears the scraping sound made everyone jump.

"Are you sure this is safe?" Neville did not actually sound particularly concerned. He was significantly more interested in fiddling with the radio, and kept leaning over from the back seat to poke at the buttons. The radio itself didn't seem very reliable; it was wedged in underneath the ignition key like an afterthought.

"Well, it's running primarily on haphazard magic, conjured petrol and hope," Hermione said. "So, no, I don't expect it's very safe at all." She swerved out of the way of a pothole. She wasn't sure if the Morris Minor's recently repaired tyres could handle much by way of impact.

"I could have put in the flying features," Ginny said brightly.

“Or wings,” Luna added.

Hermione snorted. “Yes, I do so love to break the Statute of Secrecy when I’m a fugitive.”

“I think we’re fine as is,” Ron said, clutching the side of the car as Hermione swerved around a tight turn. “Neville, choose a station, will you? You’ll distract her and we’ll all wind up in a tree.”

“You’ve gone soft,” Hermione said, laughing. “When we were younger you’d think that would be a fine Sunday afternoon.”

“Yeah, well, Malfoy’s not here, so one of us has to make sarcastic comments about our relative safety.” Ron tossed her a smile. He still had blood all over his forehead. “We can crash this thing into a tree once we get him and Harry back, yeah? Hell, I’d love a go at driving. I bet I’d be brilliant at it.”

“Brilliant at crashing it,” Ginny said, flicking the back of Ron’s neck.

“Oi!” Ron turned to swat at his sister, who just laughed and ducked his windmilling arms.

Neville tuned to Radio One just in time for the Breakfast Show jingle to start up, a woman’s lively voice sliding out of the static like light through fog. *Ten to seven! Just made it in at ten to seven, honestly I think that’s the earliest I’ve been in this week, wouldn’t you say, Kevin? Someone give me a medal, the night I’ve had. Right then, coming up next, the new track from the Spice Girls, so let’s have a spot of “Wannabe” to get us in the mood.*

They creaked up a slight incline onto a more recently paved road, the Spice Girls ringing in their ears.

“Zigazig ah,” Luna echoed pensively. “I like this song very much, but these women are advocating for a dangerous magical practice. The Zigazig is an occult American mind control enchantment.”

Ginny hummed in an interested sort of way. “You learn something new every day. What’s it do?”

Luna began to explain the nature of the Zigazig, which apparently was very popular in the twenties. Hermione tactfully ignored them both. She had quite enough on her hands, literally, what with the Morris Minor. The woman doing the Breakfast Show sounded so normal and happy, only worried about her hangover and whether the new Spice Girls would be rubbish. Hermione, covered in ink and blood, allowed herself several pangs of envious hatred.

“Their radio really isn’t too different to ours,” Neville mused. “I like their music better, though.”

“Less Celestina Warbeck,” Ron agreed. “If I ever hear about a cauldron of hot strong love again, it’ll be too bloody soon.”

“The WWN has very good radio soaps, though. Charms Over Notting Hill’s not bad at all, and it’s been around for decades.” Hermione had spent several years badmouthing it to

Lavender and Parvati, who loved it, but overhearing the episodes every night eventually led to a disturbing level of attachment to Glenys Stoutmorton and her misbehaving neighbours.

“Reginald did it,” Ginny said, then turned back to her conversation about the Zigazig enchantment before Hermione could argue.

“Reginald did not do it,” Hermione huffed. “He was in South America, and obviously the culprit was the dread hag Waldet.”

“Lies,” Ginny shouted. “Lies and slander!”

“I think Reginald’s been turned into a vampire,” Neville mused. “He hasn’t appeared during the day once in months. Not even for Ethelbert’s wedding.”

“No,” Luna said peaceably, “That’s not right. Time doesn’t exist in the wireless.”

“We haven’t heard the show in months,” Hermione pointed out. “For all we know, they’ve all been turned into vampires.”

“Quite like the idea of an all-vampire Charms Over Notting Hill spinoff. Can you imagine Wigstan out for blood? *Oh dear, what a bother, so sorry about the mess on your brand new lino,*” Ginny said, slipping into an uncanny imitation of Wigstan’s Welsh accent.

The Morris Minor filled up with laughter and a bit of steam from all the cold air outside. Hermione let her envy of the Breakfast Show host dissipate into the cold morning. They drove, and drove, and drove, until Hermione started to wonder whether they should pull over and replenish the petrol.

Halfway through a long rant about Reginald the possible vampire, Ginny choked on her own words and began pointing frantically. “There! Hermione, there!”

An old fashioned phone box was set in between a moss-covered wooden bench and a decrepit village noticeboard: Hermione swerved off of the road and parked halfway up onto the grass. She nearly fell out of the car and ran to the phone box, banging the door open and shoving coins in. She dialled the number with her heart in her throat.

“Hello?”

Hermione nearly collapsed with relief at the sound of Cynthia’s voice. “Hello, this is Hermione! How are you, I hope you’re well, sorry but I was just wondering if Harry and Draco were there?”

Cynthia laughed. “Oh, yes, they arrived late last night. Or very early this morning, depending on your reckoning.”

Hermione was nearly sick from relief. She made a thumbs up to the others, who all promptly collapsed onto the wet ground. “Oh, good,” she said. “I was so worried.”

“Never you mind, they’re all right. They’re having breakfast right now. Both a bit tired and unhappy, but that’s to be expected, isn’t it? Lovely couple. They’re very sweet together.”

“Lovely...” A bubble of hilarity swelled in Hermione’s chest and she had to stuff her fist in her mouth to get herself to calm down. “Lovely... Couple, indeed, absolutely. Right, er, yes. Would you mind terribly if I spoke with them?”

The phone made a rattling noise, and Hermione could hear Draco on the other end trying to get Harry to operate the phone. Finally, the rustling stopped and a voice came through the line, “Hermione?”

“We’re all fine,” Hermione said immediately, before Harry could incriminate anyone. “We got out all right, and ultimately we were successful. Take the phone somewhere private, would you? I have a few questions.”

“Just a minute,” Harry said to someone on the other side, and there was some muffled movement. “I’m in the conservatory. The door’s shut and I think it’s mostly soundproof.”

“Are you both all right? What happened?”

“Yeah, we’re okay. Er, we — when we were on lookout, these two blokes with wands came running at us. Death Eaters, I think.”

“Death Eaters,” Hermione echoed, frowning. “Do you think they saw Draco’s face?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “He was in disguise but it wore off. We lost them somewhere in Manchester, then flew to London. Then I called Jane and Cynthia. We’ve been here since the early morning, something like that.”

“Flew? Never mind, tell me later. Good. You’ll be safe with them. I did security spells over Jane and Cynthia’s house months ago.” Hermione looked past the glass of the telephone box to where the others were sprawled in various levels of disarray over the mossy bench and the ground. Neville looked dead to the world, and Ginny was half-asleep with her head in Luna’s lap. “Would you two be all right there for a bit? We need to clean up and possibly nap, and then we can come pick you up.”

“Okay. You’re all fine? Nobody hurt?”

“Nothing irreparable. Not to worry.” Hermione smirked, leaning against the cold glass. “Cynthia told me you and Draco are a lovely couple.”

“Shut up,” Harry groaned. “It’s — they assumed, and I didn’t correct them, and —”

“Whatever you say, Harry.”

“Really! It’s not...” Harry’s voice went strangled. “It’s not... Never mind. When will you get us?”

Hermione checked her wristwatch. “Let’s say three. Try to keep Draco from breaking the Statute of Secrecy *too* much, will you?”

“I want to introduce him to the telly. Can you imagine him watching EastEnders? Ab Fab?”

“Oh, don’t,” Hermione laughed. “He’ll get addicted and we’ll never get back to saving the nation.”

“I’m going to try and get him to watch Friends.”

“He is such a Rachel.”

“Says a very obvious Monica.”

“You know who —”

“Luna’s the most Phoebe, possibly ever, yeah.”

“As interested as I am to hear who you think Ross would be —”

“Eugh.”

“We really do need to get some rest. None of us slept at all.”

“Okay,” Harry said. “I’ll see you later, then?”

“Have a nice day with your boyfriend,” Hermione said quickly, and then hung up the phone before Harry could respond. She leaned against the wall of the phone box and giggled helplessly, high on relief and ridiculousness.

*

Cynthia and Jane didn’t own a television, so Harry gave up his plans of introducing Malfoy to Muggle culture. Shortly after breakfast, Jane disappeared into the study to work and Cynthia left to go to the supermarket. They offered Harry and Draco a wide range of books and magazines and educational leaflets for entertainment, but Harry had a particular goal in mind. He sat on their unmade bed in the small spare room and watched Malfoy fussing with the curtains.

“Could we work on the Patronus Charm?”

Malfoy shook his head. “What if you have an elephant Patronus? Care to explain what a massive glowing African mammal is doing in Jane and Cynthia’s spare room? Honestly, I’m not sure we should be doing magic here at all, but I wasn’t thinking about it this morning and the damage has been done.”

“You fixed my shoes again,” Harry recalled. They sat by the door, cleaner than Harry’d ever seen them. Even the shoelaces were repaired. “Thanks. They look better.”

Malfoy ducked his head. “It was more for myself than for you, Potter. I can’t be seen next to those things.”

“Fine, so no Patronus,” Harry said, collapsing back onto the bed. “What *can* you teach me, then?”

"I could do a pretty good lecture on poisons and their antidotes. You're massively behind on potions, you know, and Hermione wants you to have a well-rounded education."

Harry blew air from his lips noisily. "Nah. What about — well, what was the curse that You-Know-Who used? To kill me, I mean. Suppose he does it again, I'd like to at least know how to duck. What was it you called it, the Killing Curse?" The green light, the cold laugh. *Not Harry, please not Harry.*

"It's an Unforgivable." Malfoy looked over his shoulder at Harry's uncomprehending face. "A curse that lands you in Azkaban for life, no trial needed."

Harry sat up properly, putting his elbows on his knees. His wand lay on the duvet in front of him. "Okay. Tell me about the Unforgivables."

"Don't... tell the others I'm teaching you this." Malfoy's pointy face was pinched, pale. He chewed his lower lip and let it go. His mouth was pink and wet. "I don't think they'd like it."

"Who gives a fuck what they'd like, it's my choice, isn't it?" Harry set his chin mulishly. "If I'm meant to be the chosen one, or whatever, I need all the tools I can get. If Volde —"

"*Don't*," Malfoy hissed, his eyes wide.

"Sorry," Harry said, chastened. "If You-Know-Who and the Death Eaters use those spells, I need to at least *know* them, wouldn't you think?"

"Everyone at Hogwarts knows them now. There's a course."

Harry watched Malfoy at the window, the fine hairs at the nape of his neck, the way his narrow shoulders crowded up towards his ears. Malfoy drew an M in the window condensation, then sighed. He turned and sat across from Harry on the bed.

"There are three Unforgivables." Malfoy held up three fingers. "The Imperius controls you. It's — like being submerged in sort of warm water. You can hear what's happening, but you aren't fully aware. The spell-caster can make you do anything. Hurt someone, hurt yourself. Some people can resist it; some can't. You become a puppet. Trapped in your own body."

"The Minister of Magic is under Imperius," Harry remembered. "Hermione said."

"Right. So that's the first." Malfoy brought one finger down. "Number two is the Cruciatus. Causes unbearable pain."

"That's it?"

Malfoy looked him dead in the eye. "I am not embellishing in the slightest when I say unbearable," he said, then brought another finger down. "Number three is the Killing Curse. Avada Kedavra. It has no counter-curse and cannot be blocked by magic. No one has ever survived a good old AK, except you." With his remaining finger, Malfoy brushed a bit of Harry's fringe aside and tapped his scar. "And I doubt you'll do it again."

"Could do," Harry said. His skin felt tight. "You never know."

Malfoy smirked. “Don’t let’s test that theory.”

“Will you show me the others? I want to know what they’re like.”

Malfoy snatched his hand away and turned towards the window. “Looks like it’ll storm,” he said. “It could be magical; the Death Eaters will be out in force by now. Their sort of dark magic really fucks with weather patterns. Do you suppose that’ll slow down the others?”

“I have to know,” Harry insisted. “Draco, I have to *know*.”

“No, I don’t want to.” Malfoy watched the trees sway. Wind battered the roof of the house.

“Fine,” Harry said. He scowled down at the duvet. “Why *not*, though? What about the mind controlling one, Imperius? You said some people can resist it.”

Malfoy sighed, wrinkling up his mouth. “Harry.”

“Draco.”

Malfoy looked back at him, face drawn. Harry felt deeply sorry for pestering him all of a sudden.

“We don’t have to,” Harry said hastily. “We don’t — it’s all right.”

Malfoy shook his head. “No, you’re right. I won’t do the Cruciatus, but. Imperius. Fine.”

“Don’t do it if you don’t want to,” Harry said. He felt a bit sick. Malfoy held his wand with a shaking hand.

“Stop talking. I have to concentrate.” Malfoy picked up his wand and took a deep breath. He shut his eyes. “Unforgivables don’t work unless there’s intention behind the curse. I could try to AK you right here and it wouldn’t so much as scratch your arm.”

“So you *don’t* want to murder me? I’m touched.” Harry regretted his half-arsed joke. Malfoy really did look bad.

“*Imperio*.”

Bliss. Worries, cares, muscle aches and niggling preoccupations — everything drained gently away. Harry felt as though he were floating. He felt warm, and safe, and calm. Somewhere in the recesses of Harry’s echoing empty house of a brain, Malfoy’s voice whispered: *Jump on the bed... Jump on the bed...*

This seemed reasonable. Harry could feel the duvet under his knees as he began to move.

Jump on the bed... But why should he jump on the bed? He didn’t want to jump on the bed at all.

Jump on the bed, said Malfoy’s voice, eminently reasonable. The duvet shifted again under Harry’s knees, and he felt like he was about to jump — and then he crashed onto the floor

with a shattering *bang*.

“Ow,” Harry said pathetically. He’d flung himself off the bed entirely in his attempt to resist the voice, and his entire body hurt.

“Harry? Draco?” Jane was at the door, knocking *one, two* in a businesslike sort of way. “That was a rather alarming sound.”

“We’re, er, fine!” Harry rubbed his bruised knees. “We’re fine, don’t come in!”

Jane’s laughter echoed down the stairs as she retreated. “Use protection! Don’t break the damn bed!”

“That was all right, wasn’t it? I didn’t fully do it, did I? I resisted a little?” Harry looked up at Malfoy to check. “Draco?”

“Yeah, good,” Draco said. His grey eyes were glassy. “That was — that was very good, Potter. Awfully good, as a matter of fact.”

Harry scrambled onto the bed. Draco wasn’t looking at him, just at his wand in his shaking hand. “Draco, are you okay?”

Draco didn’t look okay. His eyes were shut, and he was shaking. A thin sheen of sweat shone over his pale face. He gripped his wand with a white hand. Harry bit his lip and wondered what someone was meant to do in this situation. Slowly, and feeling tremendously idiotic, he leaned forward and wrapped his arms around Draco’s torso. His head hooked clumsily over Draco’s shoulder. For a few horrible moments, Harry thought he had made an incredibly stupid misstep, and then Draco’s arms came up over Harry’s back, gripping him tightly. God, *god*. Tears stung Harry’s eyes and his chest ached. He’d never — he had never been close to someone like this, not since he was small. It felt — it hurt his heart. He was so embarrassed.

“Just bad memories, Potter,” Draco said, into Harry’s shoulder. “It’s nothing.”

Draco didn’t pull away, so Harry didn’t either. He pressed his nose into the fabric of Draco’s jumper, feeling like he was getting away with something. The wool smelled of dust and lavender and a little bit like smoke, and skin.

“Boys?” A crisp knock on the door, and they sprung apart. Harry hit the headboard in his haste to get away. “I hope you’re decent. I’ve just brought the shopping in, come help put it away.”

“Just a minute,” Draco called. His ears were rosy pink.

Harry surreptitiously wiped his eyes. “Yeah, be down in a minute!”

Cynthia’s footsteps receded down the stairs.

Harry wasn’t looking at him, but he could feel Draco studying him curiously. Draco cleared his throat. “I suppose we should...”

“Yeah,” Harry said, hastily adjusting his jumper. “Yeah, we’ll go — go help out.”

“Potter — Harry.” Draco cleared his throat again. “You’re probably covered in bruises at the rate you’re going. I could heal them, if you’d like.”

“It’s fine,” Harry said. “I’m used to it.”

“Hm,” said Draco. He touched Harry’s hand then, very gently. Harry couldn’t figure out what to do, and before he could manage anything more than a weird choking sound Draco was getting to his feet and headed towards the door. “Come along, Harry. You have to help me suss out the freezey box. I have absolutely no idea what one puts in that contraption.”

*

Draco wasn’t entirely sure what had transpired between him and Harry in the spare room that afternoon, aside from the small incident of illegal Dark magic and his subsequent inability to control his emotions, only that it required a lot of work to tamp down any potential awkwardness. Jane had shooed them out of the kitchen shortly after they made good work of the fridgedator and the various cupboards, saying she was in charge of the cooking in the household and that she didn’t permit intruders.

“I’m only allowed to make toast,” Cynthia had said, with a fond look at Jane.

“The occasional boiled egg, dear, I’m not a monster.” Jane’s little smile transformed her face.

Harry and Draco had made a hasty exit to the sitting room, where they stood at the centre of the red carpet and realised they had absolutely nothing to distract themselves with. Muggles didn’t have gobstones, or wizard chess, or spare copies of *Which Broomstick?* to page through in order to ignore one another. Draco yanked a book out of the capacious bookshelves at random.

“*The Well of Loneliness?* Are we brushing up on our historical queer literature? If you enjoy buckets of shame and historically accurate yet thoroughly depressing racism, you’ll love that one.”

Draco put the book back hastily. “I have enough buckets of shame in my regular life,” he said. Harry snorted.

“It’s time for us to have a chat, boys.” Cynthia sat in the armchair, which left the small sofa for Harry and Draco. “Now, I don’t mind the two of you sharing a room, but since you are together, and rather young, I’d be remiss if I didn’t talk to you about safety.”

“Oh, no,” Harry said faintly.

“Oh, yes.” Cynthia reached under the side table and pulled out a stack of leaflets. “Obviously I won’t bother to go on about abstinence — Jane told me about what she heard this afternoon — but we ought to go over protection, as well as lubrication.”

“Oh, god,” Harry muttered.

Draco was beyond speech. He had edged so close to the arm of the sofa he was nearly scrambling off of it.

“Also consent!” Cynthia pumped one fist cheerily. “I have no doubt that your school has barely covered the essentials when it comes to heterosexual sex, aside to say that it’s shameful and that nice girls don’t, so don’t argue. If you’re staying with us, you’ll be safe in your personal lives. Let’s begin with condoms.”

Twenty minutes later, Draco was the colour of an overripe tomato and Harry had leaned so far away from Draco that they could have sat two additional people between them. Cynthia had given them both a small bottle of what she assured them was lubricant, and a box of condoms, possibly so that Harry and Draco could have trinkets to commemorate the occasion of their deaths.

“Kill me,” Draco said quietly. “I need to. I need to die now.”

Cynthia laughed. “Embarrassment is temporary, Draco. Knowledge lasts forever.”

Harry made a sound that was like a very small seagull choking. “Couldn’t you just have... given us the leaflets?”

“I am also going to give you the leaflets.” Cynthia slapped a handful of them on top of the box of condoms. “Now that’s out of the way, care for a game?”

Harry and Draco agreed at once. Muggles seemed to be rather obsessed with the sort of game one finds in a long rectangular box, which was certainly not the fashion in the wizarding world. None of the pieces did anything at all interesting. Still, Draco picked up the rules eventually. It also had a distinct advantage in that Draco did not have to look Harry in the eye for long periods of time.

“It was the *spanner*,” Draco howled some time later, throwing himself back on the carpet. “Who murders someone with a *spanner*?”

“Colonial Mustard, apparently,” Harry said, looking quite smug as he had won.

“Little Lord Fauntleroy here is quite the poor loser, isn’t he?” Cynthia gathered the pieces of the game and put them back in the box, laughing to herself.

“Most unsporting,” Harry said, in a really awful imitation of Draco’s voice.

Draco yelped in protest. “I don’t sound like that.”

Harry snorted. “Yeah, you fucking do, mate.”

Halfway through another rectangular game, the room went night-dark, and a crack of thunder made them all jolt. A few minutes later, the skies opened up and all hell poured down. Wind whipped the trees diagonal. Rain hit the windows horizontally, with massive pounding drops.

“It’s really chucking down, isn’t it?” Cynthia tutted, peering out the window. “I haven’t seen a storm like this in years. Lightning and all!”

Draco eyed the sky. The rain sounded like a herd of hippogriffs were tramping over the roof and the street had already begun to flood.

Harry ducked his head close to Draco's ear. "Just weather?"

"Doubt it," Draco muttered. Harry's prophetic dream may have had it right — if the weather was magical by nature, the Death Eaters were doubling down their search. Heavy seeking spells with a delightful side of Dementors, if Draco was right.

Harry shivered, and Draco pressed closer to him under the pretext of reaching for a bit of strange paper that determined his position on the rectangle.

"I think Potter's cheating," Draco said some time later, frowning down at the board. "How do you have all that?"

"You passed up literally every opportunity because you only wanted to own King's Cross Station."

"Obviously," Draco huffed. "You can't expect me to buy property with which I am *unfamiliar*. That's rotten business sense."

"Look at how much money I have, Malfoy. Just look at it."

Draco opened his mouth to retort when the doorbell chimed through the dark room, followed by yet another flash and a crack of thunder.

"I'll get the door," Cynthia said, and hoisted herself to her feet.

"Hermione," Harry whispered, and Draco nodded. They got to their feet to follow. Draco considered staying behind to steal some of Harry's strange coloured paper and thus win the rectangle property game, but he didn't think there was time. Harry kept looking back at him expectantly so he just trailed behind him to the front hall, where Hermione stood in the doorway with a drenched Ron, Ginny, Luna and Neville in tow. Hermione's hair was so wet it had almost gone flat. Well, it had gone less vertical.

"Hello," Hermione said, smiling unconvincingly. "We've come to fetch Harry and Draco."

Cynthia tutted loudly. "And were you even going to say hello to your godmother, young miss? Come in, come in. I'm Cynthia, wonderful to meet any friends of Hermione's. Make yourself at home, I'll just be a minute." She thumped upstairs and a moment later they could hear her holler, "*Jane!* Your goddaughter's come round, and she's brought a whole set!"

"Hi," said Harry, with an awkward sort of wave.

"Don't hug us," Draco warned Hermione. "You're soaking,"

Hermione froze, arms already outstretched. "Oh, I suppose I am. I'm ever so glad you're all right. This weather is *not* natural; I'm glad there are protection charms a foot deep on this place. I was worried sick!"

“Global warning,” Luna said wisely, from where she had been examining a small abstract painting of a dog.

Hermione shook her head. “Warming, actually, with an ‘m’, but I really do think this is magical, Luna.”

“We drove a car,” Neville said, beaming. “It all went tits up towards the end, though, we nearly floated off.”

“It was a laugh; Nev nearly shit himself. Glad you’re all right, mate,” Ron said, clapping Harry on the shoulder.

“I’m all right too,” Draco groused. “Thanks for asking.”

“Well I’m not,” Ginny groused, squeezing her ponytail out into a potted plant. “I’m freezing.”

“What *has* got into the weather,” Jane grumbled, clomping downstairs with Cynthia in tow. She kissed Hermione’s cheek and then eyed the others speculatively. “Lovely to see you, Hermione. Are these your schoolmates? You all look a fright.”

“The storm, dear,” Cynthia reminded her. “This is Hermione’s godmother, Jane.”

“Hello. Bathroom is upstairs,” Jane said. “Stop dripping on the hardwood and go on.”

“I’ll find clothes for you. All of you.” Cynthia smiled. “We have lots of spares lying about.”

“We wouldn’t want to put you out,” Hermione demurred.

“Don’t be silly. You’re staying for Sunday roast, all of you. The weather is too horrible to drive in and we have plenty of food.”

“Roast,” Ron said, his face going dreamy.

“Have you heard of a game called *Cluedo*,” Draco demanded importantly, and made sure to ‘accidentally’ mess up the Monopoly board on the way back into the drawing room.

Eventually Cynthia directed them to the conservatory to set the table, leaving Jane in the kitchen to swear proficiently in several languages at the roast. Draco waited for Harry to lay a place setting before trying it himself — the Muggles had very different ideas about knives than wizards and he’d only have looked like a fool if he’d laid the table properly.

It was cozy in the conservatory, despite all the glass and the storm outside and the lack of warming charms; Potter said this had to do with something called a ‘portable heater’. Once everyone was assembled, clad in an odd assortment of 1980s jumpers, Cynthia and Jane brought out all the food by hand since they didn’t have wands, poor things.

“Wine?” Jane uncorked a large bottle with a *pop*.

Muggles came of age at eighteen. Draco was seventeen. Was this a trick question? He looked at Harry, who somehow conveyed a shrug with his expression. Sod it, Draco didn't have time to parse Muggle morality. "Is that a trick question? To see if we're old enough, or what have you?"

"Oh, we couldn't give a toss about all that." Jane waved a hand impatiently. "Sixteen and older can have a drink with an adult, isn't that the provision? Mollycoddling bureaucratic nonsense. I started having wine with meals at ten. Historically speaking, you'd all be on small beer from toddlerhood."

"And we'd all be dead by thirty, yes, dear," Cynthia said, laughing. "Well, Hermione turned eighteen months ago, and all of you are older than sixteen, right?"

"Time is a construct," said Luna.

"I'm twenty," said Ginny.

"Yeah, and I'm a pensioner," Ron scoffed. There was a thud beneath the table, and Ron winced in pain.

"We're most of us of age by Wiz — er, most reckonings," Neville assured them. "Ginny's the youngest, and she turned sixteen in August."

"You're such a square, Nev." Ginny poured herself a large glass of wine and sat back in her seat triumphantly. "Mollycoddling bureaucratic nonsense."

"Quite," Jane said, raising her glass in Ginny's direction.

Dinner wound on. The food was excellent, the wine middling, and Draco partook freely of both. Jane and Cynthia were keenly interested in their plans to go to university — Draco, an expert now on the university experience, waxed for quite a while about the quality of lodgings — and life at school, which was easy enough to fake so long as they left out anything in the least bit interesting. Hermione and Harry developed a method of launching into severe coughing fits if any of the rest of them said anything too incriminating, which led to offers of herbal teas and something called Lemsip.

"So," Hermione said, a glass of wine in and giggly, "Aren't Harry and Draco a lovely *couple*?"

Draco attempted to kill her via glaring, to little success.

"Young love," sighed Ginny theatrically, one hand to her heart. "It really makes you believe in happy endings."

"Never thought those crazy kids could make it, but look at them now." Ron toasted them with a slightly wobbly hand: he was on his third wine of the evening.

Neville beamed. "Chalk and cheese, they are, but it seems to work."

“Draco’s chalk and Harry’s cheese,” Luna said. “What do you think, Draco, perhaps a nice Stilton?”

“Well, they hardly so much as touch around us,” Cynthia said, eying them with palpable amusement. “Are they the same way around you kids?”

“We enjoy our privacy,” Draco managed tightly, face burning.

“Yersh,” Harry said, or something like it. He was choking a little, leaking water from his mouth, which Draco actually didn’t find all that disgusting. He was doomed.

“No, they snog *constantly* around us.” Ginny shook her head disapprovingly. “We can barely pry them apart.”

“Was it the sexual safety talk, is that why you two are so awkward?”

“The *what*,” Hermione said, absolutely delighted.

Draco sunk so far down in his chair he was nearly on eye-level with the roast potatoes. Harry reached over and grabbed hold of his elbow out of perhaps solidarity or panic, Draco was unsure.

“Don’t we have more important things to discuss,” Draco demanded, not looking up from the potatoes. The *potatoes* weren’t horrible traitors. “We’re meant to be an underground resistance group and *this* is what you lot choose to fixate on?”

Jane quirked one eyebrow. “You’re meant to be a what, now?”

“He means we’re part of the, er, Young Socialist Society at school. We think New Labour’s too centrist.” Hermione glanced at Jane and Cynthia, who both looked deeply approving. “Also, we support reform within our school itself! For example, our history professor is shockingly prejudiced against minority groups.”

“What, house elves?” Neville’s eyes went wide and he clapped a hand over his mouth.

“Just a little school slang,” Hermione said loudly, eyes gone manic. “Means the, er, school support staff. Horrible, isn’t it? Ha ha. Just dreadful. Can’t believe that term exists! Another thing we’re fighting against, right?”

“Let’s circle back to the sexual safety talk,” Ginny suggested brightly. “That was a fun part of the conversation.”

Harry cocked his head to the side. “Was it?”

“Oh, yes,” agreed Luna. “That was a very entertaining fifteen seconds.”

“I’m glad to hear you’re politically aware,” Cynthia said, refilling her glass of wine. “Not that things were too different in my day, but a lot of young people so often seem much more interested in the telly and whoever Kate Moss is dating than doing anything so naff as to vote.”

They all eyed each other. It wasn't as if any of them had really had a choice in the matter. Draco hadn't the faintest as to who Kate Moss could be, but if anything else he envied her not having to spend the past year in a crap tent in the middle of bloody nowhere. Draco really had no idea if he'd be political if left to his own devices. He hoped someday he'd get the chance to find out.

Despite the best efforts of the Muggle portable heater, the conservatory grew cold as they finished their meal. Slowly they all trickled off, spreading throughout the ground floor of the small house. It wasn't much like dinner parties Draco had attended as a child — there didn't seem to be much order or reason about it, and at no point did anyone say anything slightly creepy and possibly in Latin. Draco moved through the house in the pursuit of entertainment, and possibly more Cluedo. He had nearly cracked the last round.

"I understand that your parents have moved to Australia," Cynthia was telling Hermione in the kitchen, "The weather must be lovely, and we're very happy for them. But would it be so much to give us a bell now and again? We haven't heard from them in months!"

Draco weaved around them through to the drawing room, where Ginny was having a rollicking conversation with Jane about witch burning whilst a slightly harassed Harry looked on.

"Not saying there *were* witches, obviously, but the fire wouldn't do a damn thing. You'd just do a little Flame Freezing Charm, *simple* magic, and pretend like you're going up in the blazing inferno! Twelve-year-olds could've done it, so long as they had decent dramatic timing and a good scream."

Harry shot Draco a slightly panicked look.

"Have you ever considered going into fiction writing?" Jane leaned forward on her elbows. "What are you doing for your A Levels?"

Rain poured down the windowpane. It was so wet outside it reminded Draco of the Slytherin common room. He wondered how the mermaids were doing. He pointedly did not think of any of his friends. That way lay madness.

"This is nice."

Draco nearly bolted out of his skin, but it was only Luna. Sometime in the last ten minutes she had acquired six different kinds of shiny ribbon and plaited them into her long hair.

"Sure," Draco said, trying to get his heart in working order again. "Nice."

"It's like being children again." Luna smiled placidly. "Obviously, they'd be of no use at all if we were to be attacked here, but they provide a lovely illusion of safety."

"Stop puncturing my bubble," Draco whinged. "I have wine."

"You had wine," Luna pointed out. Sure enough, Draco's glass was empty.

"I could have more wine," Draco said. "I'm of age, you know."

Draco had more wine. He had more wine, and then he had some biscuits, and a slice of lemon cake. He told Cynthia that the evening had been *spiffing*, which obviously meant that he needed to drink considerably *more* wine in order to forget the entire experience. Eventually, Cynthia and Jane had them pulling spare blankets and pillows from the airing cupboard so that several of them could sleep on the floor of the drawing room. As they discussed who could sleep in the office, and who could go in with Draco and Harry, and who could go downstairs, Draco thought it would be a bit rude to mention they actually had rather a large tent with actual mattresses in. Besides, *he* would get to sleep in a bed, so it wasn't exactly his problem.

The spare room looked familiar now, cozy and snug. Harry was laughing hysterically about something or other, giggling so hard he was having difficulty with his trousers. He fell back on the bed in his attempt, feet flying up. There were holes in his socks.

"I could help you with your trousers, you know," Draco pointed out. "Since we're dating, apparently."

"We even have condoms," Harry said, and then covered his face, shoulders shaking. "Oh fuck, we got the sex talk today. And you know what's even worse? Just the absolute fuckery of the *worst*?"

"What?"

"I *liked* it," Harry dropped his hands to wipe tears of mirth from his eyes. "The whole thing was dead embarrassing, but... God, it was like she was my mum."

Draco's heart did a painful little dip. "Oh?"

"Yeah," Harry said. He wasn't laughing now, just looking up at the ceiling. "I'd never... Well, it was like she cared."

"She does care." Draco put his hands in his pockets. "I really think she does."

"Yeah." Harry rubbed his face. "Yeah, I reckon she does."

Draco looked at Harry on the bed. The holes in his socks, his glasses askew, his hair a tangled mess. His sweet, sad expression. Draco sat down next to him and put a very careful hand on his knee.

"You've got really knobbly knees," Draco said quietly.

"I know," Harry said. His breathing was very loud. He sat up, and they were shoulder to shoulder in the dark room. If one of them were to tilt their head very slightly to the side, their faces would touch. His body thrummed with nerves. The room was so quiet that Draco fancied he could hear both of their hearts.

Then the door burst open and let in a stream of Draco's least favourite people on the whole entire planet.

"I hope you're decent," trilled Ginny. "We've come to discuss government overthrow!"

Harry and Draco jolted apart as if they'd been scorched. Draco was fervently glad that Harry had not managed to get his jeans undone; this was humiliating enough.

"Er, hello," Ron said, looking between the two of them.

"What's this about government overthrow," Draco said desperately. "Let's hear more about that. A completely reasonable time for this conversation, by the way, after we've all had several bottles of wine."

Draco's brain refused to focus on literally anything anyone said. There was something about the Minister of Magic, and the Imperius, and possibly just increased amounts of political graffiti. Hermione came upstairs fifteen minutes late having just put the rubbish out, and went on for ages about having seen some massive dog just wandering around on its own, and should she call the RSPCA? Really, none of them wanted to talk about their plans. They all wanted to make lewd jokes and tease each other and shout about who was the best at Cluedo.

In the morning, they would have to leave Cynthia and Jane's warm house and go back out into the rain, and the wind, and the mud. Back to the run-down tent and the reckless Gryffindorian plans and the exhausting onslaught of continual mild terror. It was no wonder they were more interested in chatting about rectangular Muggle games.

Ron was the last to leave the spare room, whinging about having to sleep on the floor in what he called the front room. His back, he said. He'd never get it right again. Neville, half-asleep already, was to stay in with them. The bed was not big enough for three people, so Neville slept on the floor by the window. It took him about thirty seconds to fall asleep.

"Ah, the classic Longbottom Snore," Draco whispered, listening to the familiar wheezes. "Takes one back."

"I can't sleep without it, now," Harry whispered back, and they both snickered a little even though nothing was all that funny.

They lay in the dark and listened to Neville's snores, and the pounding rain, and the sounds of cars skidding through the wet street. A siren rang in the distance. Somewhere down the road, two people were having a screaming row about cat litter. It was all rather alarming to Draco, whose nighttime ambiance had traditionally erred on the side of skylarks and owls, but Harry had a little smile on his face like he was listening to his bedtime lullaby.

Slowly, so slowly, Draco reached out over the duvet to find Harry's hand. He brushed up against skin and froze, face burning. Harry turned his palm up and twined their fingers together. They both had long fingers and jutting knuckles, and Harry had those bitten nails and rough skin on his fingertips. Draco's fingers were cold and clammy, but Harry didn't seem to mind. Draco could hardly breathe. A flock of birds took residence in his body, beating feathery wings against his ribs. Neither of them let go.

Chapter 7

As December droned on, Hermione became increasingly fixated on Harry's magical education. She set out lesson objectives. She pestered him about Herbology diagrams. One afternoon she tried to set him coursework, at which point Harry got up and left the tent before he set one of his recently-learned jinxes on her face. Ron came after him a few minutes later and rambled on about how Hermione needed a specific goal, so if they wanted her to stop going full professor they ought to come up with something tangible to do. They had a fruitless conversation about possible goals, gave up and then got the Quaffle out and kicked it around until it got dark.

The dark didn't help. The last of the violet twilight seeped away by four, leaving them with vast swaths of time indoors to fill. They tried to keep cheerful: lighting masses of candles, filling the room with bright *lumos* bulbs, playing music loudly, listening to byzantine wizarding radio soaps. Other nights everyone slunk away to their beds to nap or read or mope. They were too close together. No one was alone for more than a minute, unless they went for a muddy ramble around the campsite or had a freezing bath in the tent's shabby bathroom.

With all the aimless planning, and the lonely landscapes, and how strange things had been between him and Draco since they left Jane and Cynthia's, Harry was well up for a good old-fashioned round of explosive hexes. Unfortunately, Hermione had different ideas.

"You have to choose at least two, Harry," Hermione informed him one dull afternoon, pointing down at a list of elective subjects. "I did quite a few more —"

"All of them," said Ron. "She did all of them. She had to get special dispensation from the Ministry of Magic and it nearly killed her."

"I did quite a few more," Hermione repeated, pointedly ignoring Ron, "But most people average on two."

Harry reread the list. "I really don't see how any of this is going to help me defeat Voldem — er, You-Know-Who."

"Maybe Voldemor can only be vanquished with the assistance of a sphinx," Luna suggested brightly. She was lying on the circular rug in front of the inglenook fireplace, floating iridescent bubbles towards the peaked ceiling with flicks of her wand. "Or by translating obscure runes. I wouldn't discount it."

Harry made a face. "Can't we go back to useful shit? I still haven't got my fucking Patronus, and you want me learning..." He looked down at the parchment. "Arithmancy? Whatever the fuck that is."

"Oh, I *love* Arithmancy," Hermione said, clasping her hands together. "The use of complex number charts revolutionised the phrasing of contemporary spellwork. It's absolutely fascinating to see how the wording of certain common spells had to be adjusted relating to

the progression of the English language. Or didn't, as the case may be! Certain Anglo-Saxon spells still remain unchanged up to today, you know."

Ron shook his head, his smile exasperated and fond. "*Anyway*, I did Divinations and Care of Magical Creatures — Divinations is dead easy to fake, and Care of Magical Creatures is a bit cool at Hogwarts. Dunno what creatures Hermione'd get for you out here, though. Flobberworms? Drawings of dragons? Imaginary hippogriffs?"

"Do Muggle Studies," Draco suggested, his drawl carrying from where he was sat at the kitchen table, stirring a foul-smelling potion with lazy swishes of his wand. "It's an instant O, and Hermione will stop pestering you."

"I did Muggle Studies, actually," Hermione said brightly. "In third year. I ended up dropping it, but honestly I found the wizarding perspective absolutely fascinating."

Draco stared at her. "*You* did Muggle Studies. Granger, are you having us on?"

Hermione flushed. "I wanted to explore every option, all right? What if I wanted to pursue a career that required a Muggle Studies O.W.L.?"

"Then you could have sat the exam cold," Draco said slowly. "Because you're Muggleborn. You know things about Muggles, on account of being Muggleborn."

"*Anyway*," Hermione said, turning away from Draco and tapping her wand on the parchment. "Go on, Harry. What'll it be?"

"I'll think about it," Harry lied, folding the parchment up and putting it in his jeans pocket. "I, er. Want to learn about Draco's potion first."

Draco was brewing blood-replenishing potion, 'just in case'. Harry chopped valerian root and shredded dittany and squashed Murtlap tentacles. He watched Draco stir and enchant and raise and lower the flame according to his list of instructions. He read out the tiny notes in the margins and listed the next steps to take. He did not, at any point, make direct eye contact with Draco. The air between them was thick and confusing. Looking at Draco's hands made Harry's heart do weird somersaults.

On a frigid Tuesday morning, Harry woke to a rumbling stomach and bare cupboards. Bare cupboards meant that, Hermione willing, they'd have a chance to see something other than the tent walls, or wherever forest or field they had Apparated to this week.

"We'll have to risk it," Hermione informed everyone at breakfast, multiplying the last of the rice so everyone could at least eat something. "We have to get to a supermarket."

The rice tasted of dust and salt, and multiplying food by magic never resulted in a particularly filling byproduct. Harry'd had worse, but Draco and Ron in particular seemed to have a lot of trouble getting it down.

Ginny sat bolt upright, her rice forgotten. "Let's test the Polyjuice Potion!"

Ron shook his head. “We can just do our usual disguises. It’s just some Muggle village. No need to go drastic, Gin.”

“But we haven’t even tested out the Polyjuice, Ron, what’s going to happen when we *need* it?” Ginny’s grin swallowed her face, slightly manic at the edges. “We’ll just have to try it out. *And* we’ve got no idea of who those university hairs came from or what they look like, so it’ll be fucking hilarious to transform. You’ll have *no* idea what you’ll look like.”

Hermione hummed skeptically, a frown ghosting over her forehead. “We haven’t tested it at all, have we? Not that I don’t have faith in your brewing, Draco. Just — if we *do* need it, at some point, it would be advantageous to have done a test run, wouldn’t it?”

Draco’s expression warred dramatically between offended and thoughtful. “My brewing is impeccable,” he announced. “I won’t hear one word against it. But... I suppose a test wouldn’t go amiss.”

“I want to try,” Luna said, her enormous eyes blinking rapidly. “I want to feel my internal organs rearrange. I wonder if we’ll even be able to do magic in our new bodies? We’ll be Muggles, after all. We’ll have Muggle internal organs.”

Neville put down his rice. “I hadn’t even thought of that. D’you reckon that’s true, Hermione?”

“No,” Hermione said. “There are extensive studies... Actually, I don’t have time to get into this; remind you me to lend you a book later. We can’t *all* go, you realise.”

Everyone had circled her like a pack of hungry beagles waiting to be fed. Harry wanted to try the potion too, but mostly he wanted to get out of the tent. He *felt* like a dog. He felt like he needed a walk, or he was going to start chewing the upholstery.

Hermione folded her arms. “We’ll draw lots. Three to go, four to stay.”

“Four to go,” Ginny said. “Four to go, Hermione, what’s the harm?”

Hermione sighed. “Fine,” she said, and started ripping up parchment for lots. She, Draco, Neville and Harry came out winners, leaving Ginny and Luna to pout, and Ron to shrug.

“Can’t be arsed, if I’m honest,” Ron admitted, spelling the ripped parchment back together. “Have you read what Polyjuice feels like? *Sickening*. I’d rather have a nap and listen to Charms Over Notting Hill.”

Ginny raised her eyebrows. “*You*’ve read what it feels like? Like, in a book?”

“Well, no, but Hermione has.”

Ginny snorted. “There we go.”

“Plus there was that bit in Martin Miggs the Mad Muggle — do you remember that issue? Horrible. I’ll take the potion if I’ve got to, obviously, but it’s not exactly my idea of a good voluntary time.”

Luna got within a half-inch from Harry's face and tilted her head, examining his skin. "Can we choose the hairs for you?"

"No," Hermione said firmly, just as Harry shrugged and went, "Fine."

Hermione frowned. "This isn't a *game*, you realise, Luna."

"That's a matter of semantics," Luna said placidly. "Draco, Neville, will you let us choose for you? It'll be rather humorous for everyone I think, after the agonising pain for you."

Neville laughed. "Why not? Choose a good one."

"Under absolutely no circumstances," Draco said tightly. "I'm doing this under duress."

"Trade you," Ginny said immediately. "I'll do the washing up when it's your turn. I'll do your laundry. C'mon, Malfoy."

"No," Draco said. He crossed his arms tightly over his chest, a bit like a child guarding a previously discarded toy from an interloper. "No, I'm doing it."

"You don't even *want* to," whinged Ginny. "Have a heart."

"I haven't got one, and you can't make me." Draco's mouth formed a comical arch. "I made it. It's my potion."

"The potion belongs to the collective," said Luna.

Draco huffed. "I will sell all of you out to the enemy in under twenty seconds. Don't test me."

"Sure," Ginny drawled, as Harry and Ron snickered into their hands.

Whilst Draco and Ginny argued, Harry helped Hermione lay out the samples over the kitchen table. It might have been more disgusting if the hairs weren't stowed away neatly in glass vials. Most of the vials had multiple hairs inside of them, although a few held only a solitary strand. Draco and Hermione agonised over which of the samples to choose, piecing through the little vials like they were going to sit an exam about follicles any minute. Luna spent nearly as long deliberating, but Ginny just closed her eyes and grabbed the first vial her fingers touched.

Neville removed four mugs from the cupboard and set them on the table. "Now what?"

Draco heaved the massive cauldron of Polyjuice Potion onto the table. "Now this," he said, with a grimace.

Harry peered into the cauldron. The bubbling, seething mass looked like hot volcanic mud. "Delicious," he said.

Draco made a face at him and portioned a ladleful of goopy potion into each mug.

“Now the hairs,” Hermione said. She picked up her mug and shook it a little, watching the movement of the potion.

Draco unstopped his vial and dropped his chosen hair into the mug. The potion fizzed like a dying sparkler and Draco took a hasty step back. Harry went to get a better look: the muddy liquid had gone the violently synthetic colour of a blue ice lolly.

“Is that normal?” Harry wrinkled his nose. It even smelled of WKD.

Draco nodded, picking up his mug with hesitant fingers. “They’ll all change. Smell different, taste different, all that — it’s meant to depend on the individual. Bloody hell, this *reeks*.”

Ginny clapped Harry on the shoulder. “Got you a good one, mate,” she announced, and drew out a strand of dark hair from her vial with a careful twist of her wand. The potion went mushy pea green in both colour and consistency. Harry smelled his mug tentatively — not bad.

Luna transferred Neville’s hair from the vial with a pair of tweezers, and within fifteen seconds his mug looked like it held weak-brewed tea. Hermione was next, and her potion hissed and sputtered before turning a delicate shade of lilac.

“This is so impractical,” Hermione grumbled, looking down at her mug. “The potion only lasts an hour on average so we’re just going to have to top up, or put our usual disguises on.”

“Don’t drink all of it,” Ron suggested. “You can have the rest to top up.”

Ginny stepped forward eagerly. “If you don’t want to do it, Hermione —”

“I didn’t say that,” Hermione said, and then took a gulp.

Harry, not wanting to be outdone, took half of his like a shot. The taste was bizarre — sort of salty and thin. He wanted to watch Draco and Neville and ask if theirs tasted the same, but his stomach went liquid and twisty. He covered his mouth, thinking he might be sick, and bent double. From the corner of his eye he could see Hermione fall to her hands and knees, her hair shooting into her head and back out again, glossy and straight. Harry squeezed his eyes shut. His body burned and bubbled, skin stretching and retracting, his spine popping horribly — and then it was over.

Harry opened his eyes to a view of the canvas roof. The tent swum dizzily around him. Harry groaned. The pain had gone, but he still couldn’t fully get his bearings. Someone plucked his glasses from his face — Luna, Harry realised, as her curious face slotted into focus.

“Fucking hell,” Ginny said, laughing hysterically. “The potion works. It works *so well*. This is bizarre.”

“I’m a girl,” Neville said, in a high voice.

Harry looked over. Sure enough, Neville’s broad frame had shrunken into a small body, East Asian with long black hair and freckles. His jumper fell nearly to his knees.

“You shouldn’t make assumptions,” Luna told him.

“Oh,” Neville said, looking down at himself. “Sorry.”

“That’s all right. Do you want to borrow some trousers?”

“Yes please,” said Neville. He had to hold his jeans up with both hands in order to shuffle over to Ginny and Luna’s room, the fabric puddling around his feet and tripping him up.

“Am I hideous,” Draco demanded. He had his eyes shut tight, but was prodding his face with unfamiliar fingers. “Tell me right away.”

Harry rolled over and considered him. The strange body didn’t have Draco’s peculiar bony angles. His chin was stronger than Draco’s, his nose less prominent, and his complexion wasn’t pallid or sallow at all. He looked healthy and athletic, flushed with youth and success. “Yes,” Harry said, frowning. “I hate it.”

“Oh, *no*,” Draco said, and rushed for the bathroom mirror. “You fucking liar. Look at me, I’m handsome! I clearly chose the correct Muggle.”

Harry ducked his head and looked at his new hands. He was white, which was weird. Freckly. He wondered if he looked like Ron.

Hermione had grown about six inches and had a great deal of shiny dark hair that she was busily trying to braid out of her face. “I’d always wondered what it’d be like to have straight hair,” she said musingly. “It’s so slippery. I don’t think I like it much.”

“We should get going,” Harry said, getting to his feet. His clothes fit all right — a little weird in the arms and hips, but for the most part he seemed to be about the same height. He ducked past Draco to get a look at himself in the bathroom mirror. A sandy-haired boy with a snub nose stared back at him.

“This is weird,” Harry said, looking at not-Draco. Not-Draco was still looking at himself in the mirror, twisting his head to examine himself from all angles.

“I’m going to buy a jaw like this someday,” Draco said, running loving hands over it. “If I survive, obviously. Imagine, my excellent features with the thrilling addition of this fine jaw. No one would be able to resist me.”

“You shouldn’t.” Harry looked away. “Your regular face is — good. As is.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, and went over towards the door before he could get any more embarrassing. This body blushed easily.

“Ron, I’ll need your gloves as well,” Hermione was saying in her new voice.

Ron looked up from the mess of boots and coats and scarves. “They’re on the chair. Gin, put some of the Polyjuice Potion in vials, will you? We don’t know how long it’ll take them to

get anywhere.”

Harry’s old coat fit okay, and his trainers were fine so long as he wore thick socks. He aimed another waterproofing charm over them to be safe. Draco’d put one on weeks ago, at Jane and Cynthia’s, but it’d been really wet out lately.

“Ginny’s coat is too big, Neville. Try mine.”

Neville shrugged out of Ginny’s red coat and into Luna’s sky blue cloak, fastening the enormous fuchsia buttons at his throat. He kept looking at his hands with a sort of dumbfounded fascination.

Harry ducked out of the tent, blinking at the sudden blaze of reflected light. It had snowed in the night. Patchy white blanketed the muddy countryside, and he couldn’t quite suppress the instinctive feeling of glee. Sure, it was cold, but he’d rather snow than the relentless sleet of the past fortnight. His trainers sunk into a half inch of snow but the wet didn’t penetrate: that waterproofing charm held up.

Draco scowled, tucking his hands deep into his pockets as he muscled his way past the others out of the tent. “For fuck’s sake,” he grouched, looking out at the snowy fields.

Harry scooped up a bit of snow and packed it into a loose approximation of a snowball.

“Do *not*,” Draco said, lip curling.

Harry grinned and launched it straight at Draco’s weird Polyjuice face, which let loose a scuffle of yelping and frozen snow going in places it should not go. Neville joined in with a gleeful shriek, and then Hermione very rudely employed the use of a shield charm that made any snowballs rebound upon impact.

Draco wiped his gloves off on his fine wool jacket. “Couldn’t you have picked someplace warmer, Hermione?”

“Like where, the south of France?” Hermione slid a woollen hat over her hair. “It’s December. There’s nowhere warm in the whole country, I’m afraid.”

“There must be some godforsaken patch of barren land on this island where it is, you know, *not snowing*.”

“I like it,” Neville announced. “It reminds me of Hogwarts.”

“Where is Hogwarts, anyway?” Harry had absolutely no idea. He’d imagined it somehow placeless, sort of floating in space.

“In the Highlands, but it’s Unplottable — no one quite knows the precise location.” Hermione breathed a cheery sort of fog. She buttoned up Ron’s coat, surveying the hills. “It’s really beautiful. There are mountains all around, and a lake, and a little village nearby.”

“You’re for Aberdeen,” Harry remembered, glancing at Draco. “Because you spent a lot of time in Scotland?”

“I am somewhat familiar with the region,” Draco said tightly. “Can we walk, please? I’m a sentient icicle.”

Harry snorted. “Barely sentient.”

Draco sniffed. “Where *did* you get that coat, by the way, it’s horrific.”

Harry looked down. He was wearing an ancient duffle coat that had once belonged to Dudley. Dudley had been about thirteen at the time, but as he had been a rather generously proportioned thirteen-year-old and Harry was still a scrawny sort of teenager, it fit all right. It even fit his better-fed Polyjuice body. The sleeves were too short and the chest too wide but it beat just wearing his hoodie. “It’s fine. It’s a coat.”

“It’s an idea of a coat,” Draco said. “The idea of a coat as dreamt by a child who has only ever lived in a tropical climate.”

“It’s fine. I’m fine.” Harry leaned over Hermione’s shoulder in the guise of having a look at her map.

Draco made a disbelieving sort of noise but fell silent.

Hermione balanced her wand on her open palm. “*Point me*,” she said, and the wand spun around once and pointed back towards the tent. She peered at the map again. “Do you mind a bit of a walk? Shouldn’t be too long, but I’m afraid we’re farther from the village than I thought. I suppose we could Apparate somewhere we know, but...”

“But what *else* are we going to do with our time,” Draco said sourly. “Honestly, Granger, if we spend another hour in that tent today I will lose my gobstones.”

Harry agreed with Draco but didn’t want to say so in the face of Hermione’s pained smile, so he just nodded. “We’ve got extra potion. It’ll be fine.”

“Walking sounds good to me,” Neville said cheerfully. He rubbed his hands together and blew into them, fog dissipating around his fingers like a handheld cloud. “Lead the way, Hermione.”

Neville pointed out lapwings and grouse, heather struggling under the snow and skeletal oak trees. He never seemed to get over his surprise that Harry’s knowledge of trees boiled down to ‘Christmas tree’ and ‘not a Christmas tree’, let alone his shocking ignorance when it came to varieties of grasses (‘with bits on’ and ‘without bits on’ being his general categories). Draco grumbled about the cold and Hermione walked significantly faster than anyone else, her unfamiliarly long legs carrying her much farther than they normally would. They walked for long enough that Harry started to feel almost warm. Eventually they came upon a road, which they followed through the countryside until suburban houses began to pop up all around them and soon they were walking along a grey, sparsely populated high street.

“Oh, look,” Draco said, halting in front of a charity shop. “Clothing for purchase.”

Neville stopped to peer into the window. “Do they sell food there?”

“No,” Harry said. “Unless you eat secondhand books and old china.”

“Potter and I will be making a slight detour,” Draco announced, ignoring him. “We’ll see you at the Tesco when we’re finished.”

“Tesco,” Hermione corrected. She shot Draco a look. Hermione’s eyes may have been all wrong in her Polyjuiced body, but the sharp cut of them hadn’t changed a jot. “Fine. If we’re not there, head back to camp on your own. You remember the way?”

“I have an impeccable sense of direction. I’m like a crup.”

“If you two get cut off from us again —”

Draco scoffed. “I’d be more worried about the others. What if *you* get cut off? We’d all be dead in a week.”

“Hm,” said Hermione, pleased but trying not to show it.

Neville and Harry traded exasperated glances.

“See you in a bit,” Neville said, and Harry nodded.

Hermione and Neville continued down the road towards the Tesco sign, and Draco pulled Harry into the shop. Christmas had exploded noisily all over the front section. The shop assistant eyed them for an uninterested second before going back to his magazine.

Draco located a dingy row of men’s coats in the back left of the shop, underneath a display of disintegrating hats. “Is this what passes for Muggle fashion?” He wrinkled his unfamiliar nose, mouth pinched tight. “It... Potter, it *smells*.”

“It’s a charity shop in the middle of fucking nowhere,” Harry said. “It’s not a regular — whatever, Malfoy, we don’t have to be here.”

“Yes we do.” Draco began gingerly piecing through the coats. “Your outerwear is frankly shocking. You won’t survive the winter.”

“I’ll just do some magic on it.” Harry could feel his shoulders crowd up towards his ears. He didn’t know any spells for that, but he was sure Hermione would teach him. “Charms, or whatever.”

Draco raised an eyebrow. “You could *try*. I’d hazard a guess that your monstrosity is so old the spells would just fall out of the fabric. There’s only so much one can do.”

“My coat is fine,” Harry muttered, ears burning. “And I don’t... It’s not like I’ve got much, you know. I haven’t got any money.”

“Well I do. If you take my money it’ll be like you’re stealing from the rich. Your sort likes that, don’t they?”

“My *sort*,” Harry repeated, revolted.

“Freedom fighters? Young and idealistic revolutionaries?”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Freedom fighters?”

“I *suppose* I count amongst your number but I doubt anyone would believe my credentials. It’s not like *I* earned any of the money. Although I did get it changed over to Muggle currency myself, you know. I learned all the names of the various forms, and I had to make up this whole story about how my father needed me to exchange the galleons in order to mock Muggles in some obscure yet diabolical way. The goblins really were a nightmare to deal with. *And* I had to queue for ages. So you might as well let me get you a bloody coat, for all my trouble.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “Well, I’m not even in my own body. How will I know if it fits?”

Draco shrugged. “That body’s clearly been eating better than the odd bowl of multiplied rice, but you can layer. Height’s the same, proportions are close enough. More importantly, your shoulders match. Tailoring around the shoulders is a nightmare.”

Harry looked down at himself. “How do you know?”

Draco shot him an irritated look. “Whatever you’re trying to get me to say, you should give up immediately. Come along, Potter. Coat off.”

Harry shrugged Dudley’s coat from his shoulders. Crumpled up on the floor, he did sort of see Draco’s point. The fabric was so threadbare the elbows were nearly worn through.

Draco helped him into one of the shop coats. He adjusted the lapels, and Harry realised that this was the first time they’d been alone together since Jane and Cynthia’s. Well — there was the shop assistant, but he was hidden behind a rack of dresses, so it didn’t really help Harry’s nerves. It helped that Draco didn’t look like Draco. He didn’t *look* like himself, but he smelled the same, and he sounded nearly the same — his voice was different, but his ridiculous garbled marbles accent rang out just as it always had.

“Better,” Draco decided. “Let’s try this next one.”

Harry tried the next one, and several more after that. Eventually, Draco pursed his unfamiliar mouth into a familiar expression and informed him that the green one would do.

“It goes with your eyes,” Draco said. “Well — not your eyes now.” He gave them a critical glance. “Sub-par.”

“Thanks?” Harry felt all weird now that he’d realised he and Draco were alone. Alone in the wrong bodies, alone with the shop assistant, alone in public, but certainly more alone than they had been for ages in the crowded tent. His chest was doing a fluttery thing, and his face was doing a burning thing, and his stomach had started to twist. He didn’t appreciate it. He was glad Draco wasn’t wearing his usual face; it might have been more than he could handle.

“Just the coat and these boots,” Draco informed the shop assistant imperiously, once they’d made their selection.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Don’t mind him,” he said, “He’s always like this.”

“Couldn’t give a fuck, really,” said the shop assistant, ringing up the coat. “We get a couple of you lot every month.”

“Er. Us lot?” Harry’s face felt hot. He hadn’t overheard them, had he? They’d kept their voices down — there wasn’t a chance he was a wizard, or...

“Public school boys,” said the shop assistant. “You are, aren’t you? From the school?”

“Of course,” Draco said quickly. “Of course we are from the school, yes. That’s us, from the school. We’ll just need to purchase these items. Er, Archibald has need of a new coat, you see. And boots. There was a terrible accident in his wardrobe. A fire. He had a terrible wardrobe fire. It was the talk of the school. Archibald’s terrible wardrobe fire!”

Harry kicked Draco’s shin. “Do you need to step outside, *Dave*?”

“No, no. I have these, er, banknotes, and I’m using them to acquire goods. I’m doing brilliantly.”

“You want to hand over the notes, then, mate?” The shop assistant eyed Draco with cool disdain.

“Yes. Yes I do.” Draco looked down at the paper in his hand, and then up again at the shop assistant. “The notes. Definitely.”

Harry pulled the correct notes from his clutched fingers and handed them to the shop assistant, apologising and pulling Draco forcibly from the shop once he’d collected the change.

“That’s yours,” Harry said, handing a handful of coins to Draco. “*Dave*.”

Draco stared down at the coins. “I forgot how to tell the difference,” he said, wrinkling his nose. “I’d have had to *read the numbers*, and I thought that would be suspicious —”

“More suspicious than obviously bricking it and staring at the shop assistant like a knob?”

“This Muggle body is clearly fogging my brain,” Draco said stiffly. “Come, let us go meet the others at the *Tesco*.” Draco peered down the road at the sign, and gave a little nod like he was checking his answer on an exam.

They walked along the wet pavement, sinking into piles of brown sludge that had once been snow. Draco carried the bag with Harry’s new boots. They were walking close together, and it kept banging up against Harry’s leg, but he didn’t really mind.

“Thanks for this,” Harry said, tugging at the sleeves of his new coat. He did feel warmer, and it was nice to have something that had not been Dudley’s.

Draco ducked his head. “Don’t be crass, Potter.”

Harry couldn't stop the laugh that burst from his mouth. "You're such a wanker."

"Fuck off," Draco said, but he was grinning. If Harry didn't look at his Polyjuiced profile, he could picture Draco's real grin — unpractised and silly and lopsided, the one that sloughed off every pinched and angular line of his face and made him look five years younger. Harry could feel himself smiling too.

*

Hermione added antidotes to her list of prospective lessons. Not only would they help Harry's nascent potions study, they could potentially be useful down the line. At least the basics — bezoars and dittany, Murtlap essence, that sort of thing. She scribbled a note to herself — *combine with healing spells?* Possibly she could do a unit on Healing in general. They could all do with a bit of a remedial course.

Someone sat next to her on the sagging sofa and cleared their throat pointedly.

Hermione looked up at Harry, pausing her notes on the healing spell-type. "Yes?"

"We need to talk about our plans," Harry said. "As soon as possible."

"I was thinking we'd do a special lesson on Healing tomorrow." Hermione ticked something off on her parchment. "Unless you'd rather we do an overview of defensive magic. I do think we've been rather heavy on that lately, though."

Harry raised an unimpressed eyebrow. "That's not what I meant, and you know it."

"I know." Hermione leaned back and rubbed her forehead. At this rate she'd have frown lines by the time she was nineteen. "I've been really botching this, haven't I?"

"You haven't," Harry said staunchly, shaking his head. "I do need to learn magic, and it's good you're teaching the others too, but Hermione. We aren't on the run from the government for *lessons*."

"No, I suppose not." Hermione looked around the tent. Luna was on watch, which left the six of them to stew in various positions. Neville sat by the minuscule inglenook fireplace, staring down at the chessboard like he could learn to beat Ron through osmosis. Ron, on the other side of the board, seemed a bit more engaged in tending the fire. Through the cracked-open door to Ginny and Luna's room, Hermione could just glimpse Ginny doing press-ups. Draco was in the boys' bedroom with the door shut tight. "All right. I'll go see Luna about watch, and then we'll have a meeting."

An hour later, Hermione pulled a piece of blank parchment from her handbag and spread it out over the kitchen table. She stared down at the blank expanse, her biro poised over the surface. It was a nice metaphor, she supposed. The Muggle combined with the magical. She wasn't about to bother with a quill at this stage. It was too fiddly, and with all of them crowded around the small table the ink bottle would likely not be long for this world.

"Hermione?"

“Right,” Hermione said, shaking herself out of it. “Like I said, we have to discuss our next move. I’m afraid we’re reaching a moment of truth. How far do we want to go? What are we really capable of? We shouldn’t fool ourselves. Escalating will launch us straight into the wolves’ den. We could just keep on as we have been. Learning magic, teaching magic, keeping out of sight — don’t look at me like that, Ginny, it’s not nothing. I’m not saying we *will*. I’m saying that there are options beyond the... Rather hands-on methods several of us are bound to propose.”

“More like wands-on,” Ron suggested, with a weak laugh. Hermione shot him a grateful smile.

“Well. The table’s open.” Hermione rapped on the wood with her knuckles, *one-two*.

“What about those people in Diagon Alley? What was it — the Wandless?” Harry worried his lower lip. “Couldn’t we do something for them? Like, get them out, or...”

“Many of them wouldn’t leave if we offered,” Hermione said. “They’re trapped. Looking for their families, or trying to keep hold of the wizarding world... They’re already the ones who wouldn’t leave. Or the ones that can’t, for whatever reason.”

“Well, we could get them money, couldn’t we? Food, shelter?”

Hermione did not point out that they had neither food nor shelter nor money to spare, and they were all of them wanted individuals who should not be setting foot in Diagon Alley unless forced. “All right, Harry. I’ll put it down.”

“We could do something for Muggleborns in general,” Ron suggested. “There’s got to be a network — like, people working to get them out. Fred and George have been hinting at something in their owls for ages. I reckon that might be it.”

Hermione reminded herself that this was a brainstorming meeting, and not a meeting to point out the flaws in every suggestion. Pointing out that they had no contacts, and they would again need money, would be demoralising and unproductive.

“I rather liked drawing the political cartoon,” said Luna, looking dreamily at the kitchen cupboards. “We could do more of those. Perhaps a mural.”

Hermione choked down her criticism yet again, curling her toes up in her socks at the sheer restraint needed, and wrote that down.

“We could make contact with someone we trust,” Neville suggested, after a long pause. “An adult, you know. Someone who can tell us what to do next.”

“Er, *who*,” demanded Ginny. “How can we be sure anyone’s not going to fuck off right to You-Know-Who?”

“Someone we *trust*,” Neville repeated. “It’s not an impossible concept, Gin.”

“An adult,” Harry repeated tightly. He was hunched inwards, shoulders curved and his arms folded across his chest. “Someone you trust.”

“Yeah,” Neville said. “Maybe a professor. Professor McGonagall’s on the run, but Professor Sprout’s a good sort.”

“And we just take your word for it? Sure, we can trust some *adult*. They’re definitely not secretly a piece of shit, because you’re a great judge of character!”

“*Harry*,” Hermione said, but Harry wasn’t finished.

“Hate to break this to you, but nearly everyone’s a piece of shit. Why should your *professor* be any different? And what you lot’ve told me about the informants, they’re everywhere, they can be anyone...” Harry shook his head. “Nah. Listen, you go to this adult of yours, count me right out.”

“Just put it on the list and move on, Granger,” Draco said, with a glance at Potter’s ducked head. “What about sabotaging supply lines? Or closing their channels of communication?”

“The Floo Network?” Hermione pondered it for a moment. “That would close communication — and mobility — for a large percentage of the population. I’m not even sure how closing it would be possible.” Oh, damn. Criticism. This was a lot harder than she thought it would be. “But you never know, do you? All right, I’ll add that on.”

“We could take out high-ranking Ministry members,” Ginny suggested darkly. “Death Eaters, sure, it’d be a little bit of a suicide mission, right? But what if we take out the collaborators, or the ones under Imperius...”

“That’s murder, Gin,” Ron said, blinking rapidly. “Fucking hell. You’re doing my head in.”

Ginny shrugged. “Fine, *incapacitate* them. *Relocate* them. Whatever. The Ministry’s using those bastards to pretend like everything’s normal. Take them out, and more people have to face up to the fact that things *aren’t* normal.”

Neville cleared his throat. “Couldn’t we just get proof they were under Imperius?”

“That’s impossible to prove,” Draco said. “No evidence, short of the wand that cast the spell.”

Luna hummed to herself. “How do you take someone out from under Imperius?”

Everyone looked at Draco, who scowled. “Don’t look at *me*, I’m not a Dark Magic expert.”

“Er,” said Ron.

“Well, yeah, I *am*, but if you could all not be complete bellends about it,” Draco huffed.

“Fine. There’s only... I’d say about three ways. Break the spell-caster’s wand, kill the spell-caster, or put Imperius on the person yourself and then take it off.”

Hermione’s mind whirled. There was something there — risky, *so* risky, bordering on unhinged, but possibly... If they used Draco’s knowledge of the social movements of pureblood society and their own magical skills... Her biro raced across the parchment as fast

as her hand could move but it wasn't nearly quick enough to keep up with her thoughts. A plan. Oh, Hermione *loved* a plan.

*

Draco showed up to his sixteenth Midwinter Hunt with two blood traitors, a Muggleborn, Luna Lovegood and the saviour of the wizarding world. Also Neville Longbottom, but Neville could have wrangled an invitation if his grandmother hadn't been so very obviously on the run.

Draco had gone to the hunt every year except one, when he was six. The hunt had been held at the Selwyn estate and since Narcissa had been feuding with Winifred Selwyn for three viciously polite years, she'd kept Draco at home in a form of passive aggressive protest. She and Lucius still attended the event, of course, but Draco's absence signified his mother's lack of trust in Winifred's event planning and thus struck an appropriately devastating blow.

Uriel Parkinson hosted the 1997 Midwinter Hunt. Draco was attending as a gatecrasher.

"Parkinson Park's a stupid name," Ginny said, peering through the trees at the manor house beyond.

Draco scowled in her direction, although he agreed completely. Parkinson Park was amongst the stupidest names of British wizarding estates, quite the feat considering the existence of Cockermouth Hoo. "Well what's *your* house called, then? Don't tell me, it's something twee and also a weasel reference. The Den. It's the Den, isn't it?"

"The Burrow," Ginny said, glaring at him. "If you say one word, Malfoy, I'll bat bogey your entire corporeal form."

Draco did not say one word, because he was not an idiot, but Weasley couldn't expect him not to *think* anything.

"Stop it," Ginny said, brandishing her wand.

"Merlin, Weasley, that's just what my face looks like. Don't get your wand in a knot."

Leaves crunched and crackled underfoot as Ginny and Draco were surrounded on all sides by the rest of their renegade band of interlopers.

"We didn't find anyone," Hermione whispered. "I think they're all with the hunting party."

"Why are we whispering?" Neville frowned at Hermione. "Should we be whispering? They're pretty far away."

"I don't know," Hermione said. "It seemed like the thing to do when breaking into someone's house."

"We're not breaking into someone's house *yet*," Ron pointed out. "We're still in the prep stage."

Occamy Wood bordered Parkinson Park on all sides except one, where the hunt had gathered. Through the underbrush Draco could spy the gleaming haunches of black horses and white flashes of albino bloodhounds. He could hear the sounds of clinking flasks and stomping hooves, smell the horse shit and leather dressing — it was all so dear and familiar that Draco had to shut his eyes. Part of him wanted to run out weeping like a child, say that he had made a mistake and would they please take him back?

Then Draco remembered that they were all horrifying racist murderers, and he was a cowardly fucking worm. Shame swamped any residual nostalgic joy left in his body.

“They’re doing the toast now,” he told the others in an undertone. “I’d say we have about fifteen minutes before they ride out.”

They waited in tense silence until the distant figures raised their wands and chanted in Latin, which was just as creepy as Draco remembered. Their wands flared, and then went out. The horn sounded, and the earth began to rumble as the hounds and horses rode south.

“How long will they be gone?”

“Hours,” Draco said. “More than enough time to get into the house. Only the house elves stay behind, to prepare for the party. Sometimes guests who don’t want to ride or travel alongside the hunt stay in the gardens, but the house is always empty of humans. It’s tradition. Prevents bad spirits from returning or some rot like that.”

“Gran said it was a holdover from the Muggles. All the human servants couldn’t stay at the big house so they’d get to go watch the hunt or go home for a visit.”

Hermione scoffed. “But not the house elves? They don’t get to visit *their* families?”

“Oh.” Neville cocked his head to one side, frowning. “I hadn’t thought about that before.”

“Of course not,” Hermione said derisively. “Because we don’t see them as fully realised beings, do we?”

Harry moved a branch aside so he could get a better look. “What is it they’re hunting, anyway? Foxes?”

“Nogtails, obviously,” Draco said, giving him a funny look. “What, do the Muggles hunt foxes? Odd.”

“The fuck is a nogtail?”

Hermione cleared her throat importantly. “A nogtail is Dark creature with a porcine appearance found in rural Europe, Russia and America. Their presence places a curse upon the farm or estate into which they integrate themselves, causing blight and disease. They can be distinguished from ordinary examples of *Sus domesticus* by their oddly long legs, stunted tails and large black eyes.”

Harry blinked at her, face blank. “What.”

“Evil demon pig,” Ginny explained. “Does the bad magic on a farm. Hunt it with white dogs.”

“Oh,” said Harry. “Could have just said that.”

“The demonic classification of nogtails is a human invention,” Luna said, examining the bark of a beech tree. “We consider them evil because they’re inconvenient to our interests.”

“Yeah,” Draco said slowly. “So?”

Luna shrugged. “I thought it was relevant information.”

“Your definition was much more accurate,” Draco told Hermione.

“I was going to get to the hunting methods,” Hermione said, disappointed, “I just wanted to introduce the concept of the nogtail first.”

“That’s good. He’d have a frame of reference to understand how the hunt works.”

“That’s what I thought, too!”

“Er,” said Harry. “If you’re all finished wanking over your respective teaching abilities, shouldn’t we be doing something right about now?”

They cast fresh Disillusionment Charms and made their way slowly through the wood. Draco felt as if they were a sort of strange herd of antiestablishment chameleon deer. The whole scene was inappropriately comical and Draco had to stifle a laugh. He felt a little hysterical. The whole occasion was bizarre. He was possibly about to give up his life for a cause he had taken up almost by default. The actual Harry Potter was at his elbow, the same colour as the underbrush and looking determined, which was unfortunately a very good look for him. How had Draco’s life come to this? He honestly had no idea.

“Wait,” Ron said, holding up an arm. “If I were hosting half the Ministry of Magic and almost the entire upper crust at my gigantic house, I’d ward it within an inch of its fucking life.”

Draco winced. Wards. He was such a dunce, of *course* there’d be wards. He’d never been on the other side of the wards before. He hadn’t even thought about it.

Ginny picked up a stick and hurled it towards the house. It hit an invisible barrier about fifteen feet ahead of them and shattered, spraying bits of wood like a tiny ecologically dubious firework.

“Well,” said Hermione. “I suppose it couldn’t be that easy, could it? Let’s split up and check the perimeters. We can meet back here in an hour and see if any of us found a weak point.”

Ron and Hermione went north. Ginny, Luna and Neville went south. Harry looked at Draco.

“You have a plan, don’t you? That’s your plan face.”

“I have an inkling,” Draco said glumly. He didn’t like his plan. His plan involved debasing himself, and facing unpleasant truths. He wanted his plan to fail. “Follow me.”

Draco hadn’t spent much of his childhood at Parkinson Park. The current lord of the manor was Pansy’s grandfather, and she spent most of her school holidays in a townhouse in Bath. When their knot of friends gathered it was usually at Malfoy Manor or, in more recent years, at Greg’s baroque monstrosity. Still, Draco had spent enough time here to know his way around. He led Harry through the wood towards the gardens, throwing twigs and pebbles as they went to make sure the wards didn’t stretch this far out. Eventually they reached a stone wall into which was set a narrow archway. The pebble sailed through without impediment.

“Let’s see if I’m right,” Draco said, and they crept inside.

Damn Draco’s impeccable knowledge of human nature. Damn it to hell. Pansy sat on a stone bench in the distance, freezing winter roses with her wand. She wore a thick fur-lined cloak with the hood up, but Draco would recognise her anywhere.

“There’s Pansy,” Draco said, pointing her out. “I met her when I was born, you know. She tried to smother me.”

“The fuck?”

“According to family lore, obviously; I have no memory of the event. She was only seven months old at the time. A prodigy.”

In the distance, Pansy began dropping her frozen roses one by one on the cobblestones so that they shattered into a thousand glimmering shards.

“Stay here,” Draco told Harry. “Keep out of sight.”

“I thought she was a friend of yours,” Harry said, frowning.

“She is,” Draco said. “Stay out of sight.”

Harry ducked behind some hanging ivy, his wand tight in his hand. Draco looked at Pansy again, his stomach twisting. Right. Moment of truth.

Draco had always hated this garden. Like everything else in Parkinson Park, it reeked of bad taste. Massive iron snakes slithered through the bushes, alongside topiaries shaped like dragons and the odd decorative golden pheasant. The Parkinsons didn’t even have the excuse of new money like the Goyles — they were an old family, and yet the bad taste seemed genetic. Of course there had been the occasional Malfoy with unfortunate taste in chinoiserie or albino peacocks — one couldn’t judge the odd bad gurdyroot — but judging by the timeline of terrible choices that was Parkinson Park, nearly every Parkinson had been born without a modicum of style.

Hating the gardens helped distract Draco long enough to delay booting his lack of stomach contents all over the cobblestones before he reached Pansy, but by the time he was within speaking distance he was no longer able to focus on horrible shrubbery.

Draco removed his Disillusionment Charm, and wiped his sweaty palms on his trousers.
“Pansy?”

Pansy’s mouth dropped open. Her handful of frozen roses dropped to the ground with a *crash*. “Bloody hell,” she said.

“Some way to greet one of your oldest friends.”

“Draco,” Pansy said. Her voice shook. Her eyes had gone wide and glassy. “They told us you were *dead*.”

That wasn’t surprising. It really wasn’t. Lucius wouldn’t want people knowing his son deserted, of course he’d rather everyone think he was dead. That was logical. It really shouldn’t hurt so much. “Well, I’m not.”

Pansy stumbled to her feet and approached Draco like she would a skittish horse. “They said you died like your mother had. An accident.”

“She didn’t die in an accident,” Draco said.

“I know.” Pansy looked at him like she was not entirely sure he was not an elaborate prank of some kind. “Where did you *go*? Did they — did they make you leave?”

“No. I left of my own volition.”

“What?” Pansy stepped back. “You just left, that’s it? No word, *nothing*?”

“You know what was happening at the Manor. They’d have killed me like they — doesn’t matter.” Draco swallowed rising bile and tried to make his eyes more sympathetic-looking. He was fighting a losing battle, he knew. His face was not normally one for gaining sympathy. “Pansy, I need your help.”

“What the fuck, Draco.” Pansy stepped back, her mouth setting into a grimace. “You *left*. No owl, no note. No word when you must have been planning — I *know* you. You must have been storing things away for *months*. Making contacts, looking at *maps* — you aren’t the sort to up and leave without at least a well-stocked toiletry bag. You had time for that, but not to give us the slightest hint?”

“Honestly, my toiletry bag was not long for this world,” Draco said. “But I see your point.”

“You left us, you little shit! We thought you were full cadaver, dearly departed, *deceased*. Greg and Vince have been blubbing all over the Slytherin common room night after night, and do you know who’s had to look after them?”

“Millie?”

“Well, yes. But I’ve *helped*.” Pansy screwed up her pert nose. “Honestly, Draco. Vince doesn’t even like to trip the first years anymore. He’s lost all his joie de vivre.”

“I’ve missed you,” Draco said. “Not to get sappy. Pretend I never said that.”

“I could kill you myself, you undead fuckstick. You couldn’t have at least let Vince and Greg know you were all right? They’re your best friends! You’re such a self-involved little prick, Draco Malfoy.”

“I know. I know, and I’m... I’m sorry.” Draco was not sorry. Draco was not even slightly sorry. He had his reasons, and he was right about every single one. He would work this out with Pansy eventually, but they didn’t have time for a heart-to-heart chat. “I need to get into the house. Will you help me?”

Pansy looked back at the high stone wall of the house. For a horrible second Draco thought she was about to turn him in, and then she looked back and rolled her eyes. “Yes. But I’m still furious. Don’t mistake my helping you for my condoning your idiotic behaviour.”

“I was trying to save my own life, Pans, it’s not like I had much of a choice.” Oh, it felt good to be honest. Draco never got to be a real shithead with his do-gooder partners in revolution and tent-maintenance.

“I suppose,” Pansy said, eyeing him. “Oh, fuck, I am glad you’re not actually dead. They never had a funeral, so I did wonder, but...” She shook her head.

“Aren’t you going to ask what I need in the house?”

“Of course fucking not,” Pansy snapped. “Do I look like I want to be complicit? If you’re a good friend you’ll obliviate me after. Honestly, Malfoy.”

A warm glow filled Draco’s chest. He missed Slytherins so much. “Deal,” he said. “Although you may want to keep your eyes shut for a good part of the next half hour.”

*

Hermione really did not expect to be let into Parkinson Park by the girl who had bullied her all throughout Hogwarts, but life was full of surprises and she really ought to know better than to predict how things would turn out.

Pansy Parkinson stood beside an unobtrusive back door with her eyes squeezed tightly shut. “Get in,” she hissed. “I do not want to know who you are, do not tell me, get in the bloody house.”

Hermione ducked under Pansy’s arm and into a narrow hallway that, judging by the bare white walls and worn wooden floor, must have been a servants’ passage.

“Also we’ll need some of your hair,” Draco told Pansy, once they’d all piled inside.

Pansy furiously yanked a strand of hair from her head and fumbled it into Draco’s hand, all without opening her eyes. “If you need another get it when I’m unconscious. That *hurt*. Is there anything else, or can you obliviate me now?”

“*Oblivate* you,” Hermione repeated, dumbfounded, and then clapped her hand over her mouth. Draco had told them not to talk, and what had she done? Gone and opened her mouth, as usual.

“Was that Granger? Really?” Pansy grimaced. “Merlin’s decrepit pants, Draco, what kind of dangerous do-gooder bollocks have you got involved in?”

“You really do not want to know,” Draco said.

“No, I really don’t. Are we done?”

“Yes, I think so.” Draco bit his lip. “Pans, are you sure you want me to —”

“Yes,” Pansy demanded. “Not all of us can do fucking Occlumency! And I’m not going to wherever *you’ve* gone; you look awful. What *has* happened to your hair? It’s a tragedy in four acts.”

“Thanks,” Draco said dryly. He looked down at his wand, pained.

“Draco,” Hermione said quietly, “Do you want me to...”

Draco shook his head. “I’ll do it.”

“Don’t die again,” Pansy said, her face very pale. “I don’t think Vince and Greg could take it.”

Draco laughed weakly. “Fuck off,” he said.

“Well, are you going to destroy my memory or not? Circe’s tits, Draco. We don’t have all day.” Pansy fumbled in front of her until she found Draco’s hand, and then she lifted it so that Draco’s wand was pointed at her temple. “Do it, you enormous baby.”

“*Obliviate*,” Draco said, and a thin tendril of memory seeped away from Pansy’s skin. She wobbled on the spot. Draco guided her into a seated position just inside of the servant’s entrance. Pansy’s head lolled woozily from side to side with the now-familiar dumbfounded expression of the recently obliterated. Draco watched her for a moment, and then cast a Stunning Spell.

“We don’t want her to wake up before we’re gone,” he explained, setting her up more securely against the wall. “Especially without her knowing what had happened. She’s going to be fucking furious. She never goes into the servant’s wing.”

Hermione stared at Pansy’s slack face. “I can’t believe she wanted you to obliviate her.”

“Of course you can’t; you’d rather die than not know something. Pansy would rather not die full stop.” Draco closed the servant’s door tightly behind them. “Let’s go.”

Draco led them up a narrow staircase and through a maze of winding corridors until they came upon a low wooden door. It was unlocked, and he ushered them inside before sealing it with a Sticking Charm. Hermione looked around, getting her bearings. There was a large window with a window-seat, half a dozen moth-eaten chairs, a table missing a leg and a grandfather clock that appeared to have teeth. Spiderwebs hung heavy from every available surface. Ron blanched, and stood very carefully at the centre of the room.

“It’s a sort of servant’s hall,” Draco explained. “The house-elves aren’t exactly keen on rest, so they never use it.”

Hermione made a mental note to address that concept later, when death was slightly less imminent. She dug the vials of Polyjuice Potion from her handbag and laid them out on the broken table. “We didn’t know we’d have Pansy’s help in the original plan so this gives us an advantage: we don’t need to seek out random hairs and hope for the best. The essential plan remains the same. Two of us will Polyjuice and infiltrate the party, and then we —”

“We know,” Ginny said, shaking an errant spider from her hair.

“You made us memorise the steps,” Neville added. “There were flashcards.”

“Do you think they don’t allow house elves to decorate, or is that a personal choice?” asked Luna, looking up at the bare ceiling.

“Right.” Hermione frowned down at the vials. “Well, since the plan has changed a little, we have to decide which of us is going to be Pansy.”

“Potter’s the friend, I’ll be Pansy,” Draco said. “I know the house best, and Harry needs to be under the highest level of disguise. We’ve gone over this, Hermione.”

“Right.” Hermione shook her head, trying to clear it. She had to focus.

Harry was not paying attention. He had wandered over to the grandfather clock and was examining it with a faintly disgusted expression. “Do all clocks have teeth here?”

“Get away from that,” Draco said, yanking him back by the coat. “Those teeth aren’t decorative.”

Hermione went to the window. The hunt moved across the landscape like a bounding river, hounds and horses and witches and wizards ploughing through hedges and jumping streams. She’d read about this wizarding tradition, of course, but she’d never seen one in action. According to *Rituals and Social Customs of British Wizarding Society*, the hunt had to have its sacrifice by nightfall. Even on the shortest day of the year, they had hours to go. Hermione sat on the window-seat and dug out their ration of sandwiches. Time to settle in.

The sun moved across the sky. Shadows grew and recessed. Hermione catalogued the contents of the room twice, and narrowly avoided an infestation of pixies nesting in a blue velvet armchair. Eventually she dug her copy of *Rituals and Social Customs of British Wizarding Society* from her handbag and tried to reread the chapter on midwinter.

“Governmental overthrow is really boring,” said Ginny. She was sat on the floor playing Muggle cards with Neville and Luna — the lack of snapping seemed ideal in their current state.

Hermione nodded. “Most of the time it’s rather dull. Books never tell you that.”

“Dull with a side of terror,” said Ron. “I’m so nauseous I can’t even finish my fucking sandwich. What a nightmare.”

Hermione patted his hand soothingly.

“Explain to me again how this hunt thing works,” Harry said. He lay on the dusty floor, practising his charms-work on a dozen floating marbles.

Draco sighed noisily. “Like I’ve told you seven or eight times, it’s held on the winter solstice. First, there’s a hunt during the day. You have to kill something or it’s bad luck for the next year. You bring that back to the house, have a feast — traditionally you’d eat the nogtail you hunted, but that’s not done so much anymore as nogtails taste like decrepit leather — and then go out when you’re good and bladdered to have another hunt, this one to frighten the Muggles. Historically speaking. We’re not meant to do that anymore, but...” Draco shrugged. “I’d bet you seventeen galleons and my favourite dragon-leather oxfords that scaring the Muggles will be on offer tonight.”

“The second hunt is colloquially known as the Wild Hunt,” Hermione explained. She pieced through the book until she found the illustration, and showed it to Harry. “They use black dogs instead of white, since they’re no longer hunting nogtails, and everyone dresses in black.”

“That makes it looks like a real corker of a demonic evening,” Draco said, craning his neck to get a better look. “Really everyone’s just blind drunk and a fall away from terrible injury. St. Mungo’s *loves* the hunt, I can’t tell you.”

The sun had begun to set by the time thundering hooves began to approach the house. Hermione checked the window: the hunt galloped towards them, holding blazing wands aloft in the dimming air. Hermione shuddered, her heart pounding. They were doing this. They were really doing this.

“I’ll go down to the hunt,” Draco said, dropping Pansy’s hair into a vial of Polyjuice. “Show Pansy’s face. Add a little something to the beverages.” He glanced at Hermione, eyes questioning. “Right?”

Hermione gave him a quick nod of assent. It was strange — she had been feeling the balance of power shift all day. Really she didn’t care who was in charge of any given operation so long as the operation was done well, and it made sense for Draco to take a more lead role in an environment he knew well. It was sweet of him to try and restore things, all the same.

Everyone politely averted their eyes as Draco transformed. When they looked back, Draco-as-Pansy was staring down at himself with a mulish expression.

“Damn,” he said, his trousers puddling at the ankles. “I forgot about clothes.”

“You could go and steal Pansy’s,” Ginny pointed out. “She doesn’t need them.”

“I think she will when she wakes up,” Luna said.

“She has a bedroom here. I’ll change first.” Draco rolled his trousers up and slipped out of the useless shoes. “Save those for me, will you? They’re bespoke.”

“You’re such a pretentious prat,” Harry scoffed, fondness written all over his face.

“A pretentious prat who’s about to do a very dashing deed, you fucker.” Pansy was ordinarily not quite as pale as Draco, but in Draco’s current state her skin could match him hue for hue. “Wish me luck.”

Hermione cleared her throat and motioned for Ron to join her at the window. Luna began examining a broken lamp with undue fascination, and Ginny started stretching her hamstrings, tilting her head away. Neville looked around with a bewildered expression, but found a broken mirror to poke at after Hermione made demanding eyebrow expressions at him for a few pointed seconds.

“What?” Ron asked, eying a nearby spider with palpable trepidation.

“We’re giving them a brief moment of privacy,” Hermione whispered.

Ron looked back at Harry and Draco. “They’re just insulting each other.”

“I know,” Hermione sighed. “They really need to work on their communication skills.”

“Goodbye, possibly forever,” Draco called, hand on the doorknob. “No need to make a scene.” He waited, expectantly.

Hermione shooed him. “Go, Draco. We don’t have time! We’re very grateful and impressed that you’re doing this, and you’re awfully clever, blah blah blah. Go!”

“Fine,” Draco huffed, and left. They heard him spell the door, and then footsteps faded away down the corridor.

“Now what,” Harry said, staring at the door. His jaw twitched.

“Now we wait.” Hermione sat on the window seat and pulled her knees up under her chin. “Again.”

It felt like hours. Hermione knew, intellectually, that it could not have been hours, but time crawled forward at an excruciating pace. She had almost managed to interest herself in *Rituals and Social Customs of British Wizarding Society* when Pansy came rocketing into the room — not Pansy. Draco, wearing Pansy’s clothes and Pansy’s face.

“It’s all set,” he panted. He tossed Harry a bundle of embroidered cloth. “Brought you robes. All set. Harry, take the potion. Hermione, come here.”

Draco led her behind a discarded painting and pointed out the dusty fireplace. “There’s a secret passageway,” he said. “I’d almost forgot. Tap your wand over the mantel and say ‘*Dissendium*’.”

Hermione did. The fireplace gave way like a disintegrating sandcastle. In its place stood a recessed stairwell, the stairs disappearing into the dark. “Does it lead out?”

“To the gardens, I think,” Draco said. “Leave it open. I don’t know if it’ll shut on its own, but we might as well be prepared. Harry?”

They fought their way back through the discarded furniture to find Harry in the guise of a short boy with curly brown hair.

“Archibald,” Draco said. “So glad you could make it.”

*

Harry forcibly lowered his shoulders and tried to pretend that he saw wizarding stately homes every day. No, he wasn’t at all taken aback by all the sentient upholstery. Tapestries with moving dragons that breathed fire were utterly humdrum. Who *didn’t* have talking portraits? Harry kept his eyes straight ahead. The corridor was empty, but he didn’t know how the talking portrait business went. Maybe they all reported to the family.

“I wish you looked like you,” Harry said quietly. “This is crap.”

“Do you miss my face?” Draco-as-Pansy preened. “It’s rather good, isn’t it? Tell me again how much you like my face.”

“Sod off,” Harry muttered, fiddling with his robes for something to do.

“You don’t think Pansy’s fit? That’s a bit rude of you. She and I went to the Yule Ball together, you know.”

Harry scowled. “You what?”

“This was before I knew I wasn’t interested in women,” Draco continued blithely. “We were young. Pansy’s dress robes were horrible as well; she burned all the pictures.”

Before Harry could respond, the corridor gave way to a wide marble staircase that descended into an immense marble hall. Floating candles illuminated intricate carvings, an architecturally unnecessary number of columns and a heaving crowd of guests. Nearly everyone was splashed in mud and smelled of horse shit and gin. Small figures wove through the throng carrying silver trays of food and drinks — on closer examination, they were not human but odd creatures with bat-like ears and bulging eyes. House-elves, Harry guessed.

“Don’t say much,” Draco told him in an undertone. “You’re painfully shy, on account of your bad upbringing and body odour problems.”

“It’s been a real trial,” Harry said dryly.

Draco stopped on the landing, surveying the ballroom below. “Hm. Judging by the milieu, I doubt they’ll have any memory of either of us.”

Against the far wall, an elderly man vomited into an intricate porcelain vase. Several middle-aged women sobbed by a long table of dried fruit. A handful of riotous twenty-somethings appeared to be transfiguring their unconscious friend’s nose into a beak.

“Jesus. How drunk are they?”

“Well, I’ve put Ukrainian Daisyroot Draught in everything. So, trolleyed.” Draco ducked under a woman’s flailing arm. “Merlin, that’s Maeve Macmillan. Let’s go in the other direction. She’s terrifying.”

Draco was a foot shorter as Pansy, but he still managed to haul Harry as capably as ever. They swung away from the dreaded Maeve Macmillan and towards the table of dried fruit where a cluster of women continued to sob.

“The gardener said he simply couldn’t get them out of season,” a thin, ginger woman wailed. “My landscaping will be a disgrace. A *disgrace*.”

“I understand,” cooed a beaky blonde, patting her friend’s arm, “I understand, Violet. I’m so terribly sorry.”

Harry raised an eyebrow at Draco. “Your cult?”

“Does it help that they’re all almost entirely miserable?”

“A bit,” Harry admitted.

“Well if it isn’t little Pansy Parkinson!” A swarthy man with a mass of shiny dark hair and an ingratiating smile swooped in to kiss Draco on both cheeks. He was not tall, but held himself as though he were. “Darling, where were you today? Your father said you were ill — now, sweetheart, that’s no excuse to miss the hunt!”

Draco grimaced, then tried to play it off like a laugh. “Dreadfully sorry, Mr. Selwyn. I’m afraid I was indisposed.”

“And is this the reason you were indisposed?” Selwyn turned to Harry, who took an instinctive step back to avoid the full force of his drunken leer. “I’ve never met you before. I’m Gaius Selwyn. Charmed, I’m sure.”

“Charmed,” Harry echoed faintly.

“This is Archibald,” Draco said. “He’s... Visiting. He goes to Durmstrang.”

“Ah, *velkommen*, Archibald. Durmstrang! What a divine school. So unique. My wife and I considered sending our son to Durmstrang, but in the end my wife wouldn’t hear of it. Too far away, you know.”

“My mother thought so too,” Draco said absently, looking around Selwyn’s head at the crowd beyond.

“Your mother did? How funny, I had no idea your father considered Durmstrang.” Selwyn made a face at Harry, like he was trying to include him in his puzzlement.

Draco jolted. “Er. Yes, I think it was a... passing thought. The Malfoys were considering it.”

“Ah, yes, you were so close with their son. Poor boy.” Selwyn shook his head, his face a sad clown mask. “What a tragedy. Poor Lucius hasn’t been the same since. And he once had so much influence! He still does, of course, but it’s... well, it’s more a matter of location, isn’t it? One shudders to think what he would come to if Malfoy Manor ceased to be viable.”

Draco’s eyes went wide. He started to speak but stuttered into a cough, face going red.

Harry discreetly elbowed his side. “Is your son, er, enjoying Hogwarts?”

“He’s long since left,” Selwyn said, waving one hand airily. “Too bad. Under the current leadership, he might have got a first rate education.” He glanced at Draco. “Are you quite all right, Pansy? Don’t tell me it’s the wine. It’s awfully *strong* this evening.”

“Er, yeah. Probably the wine. I’ll take her to get some water,” Harry said, leading Draco away from Selwyn as quick as he could manage without slipping on someone’s spilled wine or errant vomit.

“What the fuck, mate,” Harry whispered in Draco’s ear.

“He’s a Death Eater. He was talking about the Dark Lord. He could be the one controlling the Minister; I don’t know.” Draco rubbed his forehead. “Merlin, why did I agree to this fucking plan. This is a bloody basilisk’s nest and we are both going to be imminently murdered by about forty drunk people and ruin Pansy’s grandfather’s ballroom with bloodstains from our internal organs. Why couldn’t we have just, you know, done some graffiti?”

Harry grasped Draco’s elbow hard enough to bruise. “*Get it together*,” he hissed. “Find the fucking Minister and I will get us out of this, okay?”

“*You* will.” Draco scoffed. “Really, Archibald. Wizard-you is barely out of nappies.”

“I will get us out of this,” Harry said firmly, “And you will fucking help me, you knob.”

“Right,” Draco said, settling Pansy’s shoulders. “Right. Fuck. Okay, come on.”

“This might be a bad time to mention this, but are we sure he’s really under Imperius?” They wove through a frenzied cluster of dancers. Three of them were missing their trousers. “He could be a collaborator, couldn’t he?”

“He’s not.” Draco headed towards the far wall at a clip. “The last one was. Fudge. He tried to compromise and then got cold feet and the Dark Lord killed him. They weren’t taking any chances with the next one. Shit, there he is.”

Pius Thicknesse stood by one of the myriad marble columns, wearing pinstriped robes and a pleasantly vacant expression. An elderly woman clutching a decanter of brandy shook a gnarled finger in his face, speaking rapidly.

“Follow my lead.” Draco pasted a simpering smile onto Pansy’s face, and began to sway comically. “Minister! Oh, hello, Ms. Prewett. So *terribly* sorry, but my father wanted a word with the Minister.”

“Your father can hardly restrain himself to one word,” Ms. Prewett sniffed. “He’d bloviate at a flobberworm, given the opportunity.”

Draco giggled airily. “I do hope I’m as lively as you when I’m your age, Ms. Prewett. Excuse me. Archibald, will you help me show the Minister the way to Father’s study?”

Harry and Draco led Pius Thicknesse past Ms. Prewett to the shadowy recesses beyond the column infestation. Most people seemed to be using this area for what Draco might call ‘trysts’ and what Harry would call ‘fucking in public’. They walked quickly, Pansy’s shoes clacking on the marble floor.

“That was Ginny and Ron’s great aunt,” Draco informed him. “Can you see the family resemblance?”

“No,” said Harry.

“Really? I thought she had Ginevra’s spirit.”

They passed from the marble hall into an equally grand corridor, and from the grand corridor to a small drawing room. Pius Thicknesse went along easily, like an amenable child, his benign smile never faltering until Draco took out his wand and stunned him. Pius Thicknesse fell to the thick Persian carpet. They surveyed the unconscious Minister for a brief, dumbstruck moment. Harry hoped Draco wasn’t processing what they were doing. It seemed like whenever Draco processed what they were doing, he started bricking it.

“Why were you good at undercover just then? Normally you’re crap.”

“I did a slightly unsporting impression of Daphne Greengrass,” Draco said. “I think I’ve discovered the secret to acting undercover. I am bloody *brilliant* at impressions, you know. I can just do those.”

“Sure,” Harry said faintly, and hoped that Draco was not needed for any undercover missions in the future. “Should we... What should we do with him?”

Draco pinched his face in a familiar expression — *too* familiar, Harry noticed with a jolt. Pansy’s nose was lengthening, chin pointing, hair getting lighter.

“When did you last top up your Polyjuice?”

“Bollocks,” Draco said, and pointed his wand at the slumped figure of Pius Thicknesse. “*Mobilicorpus*.” Thicknesse levitated into the air like a puppet controlled by an inept puppeteer, arms flopping and head tilted back. Draco looked at Thicknesse, and then at Harry. Grey seeped over Pansy’s brown iris. Harry knew he ought to be worried, but it was an utter relief to see Draco’s eyes again.

Draco grinned his own grin, lopsided and more than slightly terrified. “What do you say we commit some treason, Potter?”

*

Draco had not committed treason quite to this level before, but he was really considering it as a vocation. Everything was going so well. They'd timed their exit *avec* Minister with the start of the second hunt, so that the drunken hoards were caught up in trying to figure out how to ride a horse when they can't stand up and thus were far too preoccupied to notice. There had been that odd moment with Gaius Selwyn, but Draco had managed to avoid any familial encounters, and Harry's Polyjuice was holding on admirably. The secret passageway from the servant's hall had let Hermione and the others out in the gardens, just like Draco thought, and they were waiting by the statue of Perseus Parkinson just as they planned.

Really, Draco should have known better.

"Minister? This is most irregular, all the guests are in the —" Lucius Malfoy stopped cold, staring at the scene. He was holding a wine glass and smoking a cigar. He had an abandoned plate of vol-au-vents next to him, and the skin was stretched so tightly over his bones that Draco doubted he ate any of them.

"*Expelliarmus*," said Harry, and Lucius's wand flew across the cobblestone path before he could reach for it. Harry plucked it easily from the air.

Lucius's mouth dropped open. He looked at his empty hand, and then at Harry. "What *is* this —"

"Father," said Draco, stepping out from behind Neville. His voice was his own. The last of the Polyjuice Potion had worn off. Pansy's robes were comically short, fluttering around his calves.

"Draco?" Lucius's drawn face went white. "Draco, what are you doing here?"

"Take the Minister and go," Draco told the others, not taking his eyes off of Lucius. "All of you. I'll take care of this."

"Draco," Hermione pleaded.

"Go." Draco tried to make his face as commanding as possible. It was possible he'd just landed on constipated, but he'd take it.

Hermione's enormous brown eyes watered with the intensity of her imploring, but she did the curt jerk of her head that meant that the others had to do what she told them to: in this case, get the fuck out of the gardens. Ron went first, levitating the slack body of the Minister. Ginny, Luna and Neville followed, hurrying through the stone archway and out into Occamy Wood beyond.

Lucius Malfoy made a sound of shocked disbelief. He was clearly drunk — his face had gone crimson and he was swaying slightly on the spot. "What is this? Who *are* these people? What are you doing here?"

"We'll wait to Disapparate," Hermione said, and then did the head jerk at Harry.

"I'll be behind you," Harry said. "Give me a minute."

Draco looked back at him furiously. “For Merlin’s sake, go with the others!”

Harry shook his head. “Nah.”

“Do *not* die,” Hermione demanded, shaking her finger in Harry’s face. With those parting words, she ducked through the archway and disappeared.

Lucius was not looking at Hermione. “Was that the Longbottom boy — are you involved with filth like that? Blood traitors and mudbloods? Is this how your mother raised you?” His father rounded on Harry. “Who are *you*? I’ve never seen you before — have you blackmailed my son? Brainwashed him? Put him under the Imperius?”

“Er, no,” Harry said. “We’re friends.”

“*Friends?*” Lucius turned back to Draco, gaunt face wild. He dropped his wine glass; it crashed on the cobblestones in a small firework of glass and red wine. Lucius didn’t seem to notice. “You left your family, you left your home for these... Wastrels?”

“It’s complicated,” Draco said. He held his wand in a shaking hand. He had to stun him. He had to stun his father and run. Harry’s Polyjuice Potion wouldn’t last forever.

“It was a mistake,” Draco’s father said, his face softening. He stumbled forward and clutched Draco’s shoulders. Up close, Draco could see how dark Lucius’s under-eye circles were. He looked like someone had punched him. Twice. “You can redeem yourself. Turn over the traitors to the Dark Lord and he’ll forgive you. He’ll welcome you back. You can come back to the Manor, Draco. Everything will be as it was.”

“No,” Draco said, his voice choked. “No, it won’t.”

“What are they to you? We are your *family*, Draco.”

Draco laughed wetly and broke away from Lucius’s hold. “And what a genetic gift it has been. My sincere thanks for the poor immune system and weak nail-beds. Personally, I blame the inbreeding.”

“Draco, my son... Please. You’re all we have left. You’re the last of the Malfoys.”

Harry’s skin had started to darken. He was growing, just a little — he was too tall for the modified robes now and his hair had started to go wild. Harry pulled his glasses from his pocket and put them on; his eyesight must have gone first. They didn’t have time.

“*Stupify*,” Draco said, his voice choked. He aimed it at his father but it missed, it missed — he didn’t know if he’d intended to do that. He didn’t have time. He pushed Harry towards the archway, his throat making horrible sounds still. “Go, *go*, now!”

Harry broke out into a sprint. Draco kept at his heels, the cold air ripping at his lungs. Cold, *so* cold — too cold. The air was growing darker. Hermione and the others waited at a copse of beech trees — Hermione’s face was ashen. Harry stumbled and stopped running; Draco nearly plowed him over. *What was the point*, Draco thought dully, as the chill set into his bones. *What was the point of running... They were just going to be caught anyway.*

Harry collapsed, his eyes rolling up into his head, and Draco caught him under the arms. “Shit,” Draco told him, and looked back. Dementors loomed from the forest: ten or more of them, dense black cloaks rippling. He could hear their rattling breaths.

“*Expecto Patronum*,” shouted Ginny from the distance. An immense white horse bounded from her wand, its muscular flanks moving smoothly as ran the Dementors head-on — but there were more of them now, emerging from the trees on either side of Draco. Five, no — ten. They were surrounded.

“*Expecto Patronum*,” Draco said, and his wand gave a faint flicker of light and went out. Harry was heavy, his clammy weight dragging Draco towards the ground. Someone screamed — Luna, maybe, or Hermione. Draco couldn’t see anymore. It was too dark now to see anything. Darkness swamped him like a frigid blanket. He could hear the dementors breathe in sickening scraping gasps.

Two enormous dogs galloped towards them, so white they seemed to glow. At first Draco thought they were hunt hounds, escaped from the kennels, but as they grew closer Draco could see that they were not dogs at all but Patronuses, and one was a wolf. They snarled at the Dementors, snapping at their raggedy cloaks with gleaming teeth until the Dementors melted back into the trees. Two men emerged from the wood, wands lit and drawn.

“Professor Lupin?” Draco’s eyes went wide. “What the fuck?”

“Hello, Draco,” Lupin said, his wand trained on the retreating dementors.

“Merlin fuck,” said only Sirius Black, of all bloody people. He didn’t look nearly so gaunt as he had in all the wanted posters. “He looks exactly like James.”

“Yes,” Lupin said, with a shadowed glance at Harry. “Yes, he does. Now get them the hell away from here, Sirius.”

“What the *fuck*,” Draco said again, but before he could do anything Sirius Black had grasped Harry by the wrist and Apparated with a clap of displaced air.

Draco’s heart stuttered wildly and his body went cold. “*Where did he take him*,” Draco hissed, groping for his wand. “Where did Black take him, tell me *right* now.”

“Trust me, Draco,” Lupin said, looking back through the trees. The others were running towards them now, wands blazing.

“Piss off,” Draco said, struggling to his feet. Where was his fucking wand? Why did Pansy’s robes have so many bloody pockets? He wanted to shout to the others to go back, save themselves, but he also wanted them to save *him*, so he settled for waving frantically. Merlin, he took Harry — shit, *shit*.

There was another *pop* and Sirius Black had returned, just in time to grab him and the unfortunate Ginny, who was the fastest, and take them whirling off into darkness.

*

In one blazing moment of nausea and confusion, Harry hurtled towards consciousness and also the ground.

“What the *fuck*,” Harry said, landing on the moss-blanketed dirt with a *thump*. He retched pathetically over a gnarled root but nothing came up. One minute Dementors, the next surprise Apparition. And, by the look of it — new people. Harry went for his wand. It felt as if he was swimming through cold soup, but he managed to hold it in what he hoped was a convincing manner. Harry checked his surroundings: Hermione next to him, Luna and Draco by a small shrub and Neville rubbing his face near them. The two strangers. Ron and Ginny were ginger blotches in the distance — Harry’s glasses were smudged. And there, by a mossy boulder, lay the unconscious figure of the Minister of Magic.

“You all do swear quite a bit,” said the shabby man, wiping dirt from his jeans. “No more than we did, I suppose. It is jarring, seeing as I last saw you all when you were third-years.”

“Professor Lupin,” Hermione gasped, getting to her feet. “What are you doing here?”

“Hello, Miss Granger. If you’ll just give us a minute to explain —”

“*That’s Sirius Black*,” Neville shouted, pointing. He scrambled for his wand, pointing right at the man’s heart. “He killed all those Muggles, remember? He’s a murderer! He escaped from Azkaban!”

“It’s true,” Sirius Black said darkly. “The boy isn’t lying. I am a murderer.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Sirius,” Lupin sighed. “He is a murderer, yes, but he didn’t kill those Muggles. It was a setup. Just let us explain — tie us up if you like.” Lupin tossed Ron his wand, raising his hands up like a surrender.

Ron caught the wand and then nodded at Black. “And him,” he said.

Black looked like he was about to say more menacing things about being a dark and terrible murderer, but Lupin cleared his throat pointedly and he kept his mouth shut. He did have fairly menacing eyebrows, and just about the poshest accent Harry’d ever heard, aside from Draco. Harry could see why Neville would jump straight to ‘murderer’.

“Go on, Sirius,” Lupin said. “They deserve answers.”

With an impatient sound Black handed his wand over to Neville, who startled and nearly dropped it. “*I want to know what they’re doing with Pius Thicknesse*,” Black grumbled. His head tilted, and from a different angle his eyebrows just looked petulant. “Looks like they knocked him out with a rock. Hilarious.”

Ron looked at Hermione, who nodded briefly. “*Incarcerous*,” Ron and Neville said together, and ropes sprung from the air to twine around Lupin and Black.

“We need to secure the perimeter before we do anything else,” Hermione said. “Quickly. They may have led us into a trap.”

“They did save our souls just now,” Luna reasoned. “Killing us just after would be a bit silly.”

“They did just lead us *away* from a pretty decently-sized nest of Death Eaters,” Ginny agreed, but got up anyway. She paced in a large circle around them, creating the shimmering protective bubble that hid them from sight.

“Our old Defence Against the Dark Arts professor and my disgraced cousin,” Draco said. He was shaking, but doing his best to look composed. Harry wasn’t sure if it was the Dementors, or seeing his father, or their current situation. “One really does make odd bedfellows in a revolution.”

Black stared at Draco. “Bloody hell. You’re not Narcissa’s son?”

“Yes. I suppose I’m your first cousin once removed, technically.” To Harry, Draco elaborated, “He was blasted off of the family tree years ago, but one can’t expect one to simply *ignore* a felon in the family without at least researching how close the blood ties go.”

Black laughed like a dog, in rough barks. “Fucking hell. Cissy must not approve of your current whereabouts.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Draco said. “Can’t ask the dead.” He got up crisply and went to help Ginny with the protective spells.

Harry was finding it difficult to concentrate. His head ached and his stomach still churned. Not to mention that Black and Lupin were both staring at him like — like something, he didn’t know, and it made his skin prickle.

“*What*,” he snapped. “Am I your next murder victim, or something?”

“I’m sorry for staring,” Lupin said quietly. “You see, you look remarkably like your father. It’s uncanny.”

Black’s face was quite pale. “Except the eyes. Your mother’s.”

Harry swallowed and looked at Hermione. “Are we interrogating them, or what?”

“You ought to have a bit of chocolate first,” Lupin said. “Those Dementors were with you for a long time. If you haven’t got any yourselves, I’ve got about three chocolate frogs in my pocket. I can’t reach it right now but I assume an *accio* would do the trick.”

“Fuck off,” Harry said, nearly losing his balance as he tried to stand and needing to brace himself on a tree. “I don’t need anything of yours.”

“He takes after you,” Lupin told Black in an undertone, which was confusing on several levels and Harry decided to ignore it.

Hermione dug a massive Dairy Milk bar from her handbag and began breaking it into sections. She passed Harry a larger portion than anyone else and raised her eyebrows

imperiously at him until he began to eat it. Warmth seeped back into Harry's extremities — he refused to be grateful to Lupin for that.

"Remus and I have been searching for you for years, Harry," Black said, his sunken eyes like desperate grasping hands. "Years — I was in Azkaban, like they said. I escaped to find someone else, someone who was hiding at Hogwarts. I escaped and made my way to the castle. I thought you'd be a student there, but no one knew where you were. I didn't know they'd never found you. I didn't know."

"Why the hell should you have known? Who the fuck even are you? Mate of their old professor? You knew my parents? So *what?*"

"Harry," Black said. His mouth twisted. "I don't suppose anyone would have told you — I'm your godfather. Your dad was my best friend. I... I was meant to look after you."

"And you've clearly done a bang-up job," Harry said cruelly.

"I know, and I'm so terribly sorry." Black did look sorry. His face was a mask of pain. "But we've found you now."

"Congratulations. Would you like a prize?" Harry folded his arms tightly over his chest. He was shaking. This was stupid. He wished that Lupin and Black hadn't apparently saved their lives, otherwise he'd have felt completely fine with abandoning them in the woods. Well, he'd have left them near a water source. Probably.

"We want to help you," said Lupin. "All of you. We're members of resistance group called the Order of the Phoenix. Dumbledore formed the group during He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Name's first rise to power. Both of your parents were members of the Order of the Phoenix, Harry, as were we. When the Dark Lord rose again, Dumbledore reformed the group. Unfortunately, he is no longer with us, but Minerva is a highly capable —"

"Professor *McGonagall*?" Neville squawked. "We knew she was on the run, but — really?"

"Not surprised," Ginny said. "She always had an anarchic streak."

"It was hidden in all the tartan," Luna said. "Well, not exactly hidden. The tartan was a clue."

Draco was staring at everyone as if they'd suddenly started bumping and grinding whilst Hermione played the marimba, which Harry felt was a far more appropriate reaction to the current situation. Ron still looked skeptical, but Hermione — Hermione had that look where all the cogs of her brain were buzzing at once.

"Minerva has been a member of the Order since the very beginning. Long before either of us," Lupin went on. "She was against our recruitment, as a matter of fact. She approved of your mum, Harry. She thought Lily was sensible. The rest of us, well, she didn't have the highest hopes. Said we'd bring about our own destruction. I suppose she was right, in a way."

"So you're with Professor McGonagall?" Hermione tilted her head to one side. "And she's having you look for us?"

“Not exactly,” said Lupin. He and Black exchanged glances. “Minerva’s on a mission for Dumbledore. The Order has other concerns, but you’ve been our priority, Harry. We’ve been looking for you all this time.” He looked at Harry again, his eyes kind.

Harry had to blink back hot tears, for some bizarre and idiotic reason. “No,” he said. “No, fuck this.”

Harry had no idea where they were. It was dark, and the trees obscured much of the moonlight, and he hadn’t the faintest idea where Lupin and Black would think was a good place to drop seven teenagers, a felon, an ex-professor and the unconscious Minister of Magic. It didn’t matter. He had to get out, or he’d... He could feel all that magic bubbling up in him again. Tree branches quivered, roots shook. Harry tried to take a deep breath. He chose a direction and walked.

“Should we go after him?” Ron asked.

“Let him take a minute,” Hermione said, her voice fading. “Let’s get back to your story. How *exactly* was the murder of twelve Muggles and one wizard a setup?”

Harry walked until he could no longer hear voices. He stopped in front of a skeletal oak tree surrounded by a sparse clearing of mouldering leaves. The forest was cold and wet and Harry could see his breath. He shoved his hands deep into his pockets and closed his eyes. He was still shaking. He didn’t know why.

Everything was so *confusing* all the time. Black, and Lupin, and Parkinson Park. He had a godfather he’d never asked for, a godfather who probably thought Harry was some kid who needed looking after. Harry could look after himself. He’d always looked after himself. And Malfoy, what was his game? Fixing Harry’s shoes and buying him a coat, touching his *face*. Harry hugged himself around the middle. He was going to be sick all over a tree. He felt a brief, strange pang of longing for his crap flat in Peckham, before any of this had happened. Back then his life had been shit, and hard, and terrible, but it hadn’t made him feel like this. It was weird. He felt like when you come back in from the cold, and your fingers and toes ache and burn as the blood goes back in.

Twigs snapped underfoot as someone ducked through the brush. Harry could see pale hair bobbing underneath a low-hanging branch. Of *course* it was Malfoy. He came closer, thin face shadowed in the dim forest, grey eyes wary. He was still wearing Pansy’s robes, but he’d put his own posh wool coat on as well. He looked awful. His calves were probably freezing.

Malfoy leaned against the tree, feigning nonchalance horribly. “Brought you your coat,” he said, and tossed it to him.

Harry wanted to toss it right back, or possibly throw it into a nearby lake, but he was cold. He put it on.

“You all right?”

“Brilliant,” Harry spat. His eyes burned and he turned away. He didn’t want Malfoy to see him crying.

“We can get rid of them,” Malfoy said quietly. “We can — not to sound murderous about it. I mean to say, we can just... Apparate away. Leave them here. We don’t have to get caught up in what they’re caught up in.”

“You think Hermione would go for that?”

“Probably not,” Draco admitted. “She likes the idea of a more organised resistance. Better resources. More money for those little pieces of Muggle parchment she likes with the sticky backs. But we can — we can strike out on our own, if we have to.”

“We wouldn’t last a week without her, remember?” Harry’s voice sounded hoarse. He wished his eyes would stop fucking leaking for five minutes. “We barely lasted a day at Jane and Cynthia’s.”

“I don’t know, Potter. We could figure something out. Sod this whole revolution business; it’s rubbish anyway. Crap food and no wages. Let’s leave this shit island to its self-destruction. We could go to Australia and live with Hermione’s parents and pretend to be Muggles. At this point I’d probably get an O on the Muggle Studies N.E.W.T, honestly, it’d be easy.”

Harry shut his eyes and had a brief, delirious fantasy of him and Malfoy on some Australian beach. Draco would be grouching about the heat, a thick line of sunblock on his nose. His bare shoulders would be red and peeling a little. Maybe he’d put on a really naff t-shirt with a stretched out collar to keep from getting more burnt. Harry would have a surfboard, and he’d somehow have got really good at surfing. They’d have boring jobs at a shop and no one would be trying to kill them.

“Funny,” Harry said, and his wet laugh was not very convincing.

“No?” Draco shuffled a bit closer. “Worth a shot, I suppose.”

“Sorry about your dad.” Harry scuffed his shoe on the ground, digging a little trench in the dirt. “Seemed like... I mean, I know he’s a right bastard, but I think he does love you.”

“He does. Fat lot of good that does me, obviously.” Draco edged yet closer. “It’s all right. I mean, it’s not all right, but it’s...” He shrugged expressively. “I think we’re handling your situation first.”

“I don’t have a fucking situation.” Harry looked at his feet. “Piss off.”

“In the immortal words of Harry Potter, ‘nah’.” Draco was very close to him now. He reached out and touched Harry’s hand — Harry flinched and stepped back.

“What are we even *doing*?” Harry demanded, wiping his eyes.

“Saving the country, and possibly the world?” Draco shrugged. “We may be doing a middling job of it at the minute, but it’s the thought that counts.”

“No, I meant...” Harry turned away. He didn’t want to look at Draco. “I meant, what are *we* doing.”

“Oh,” Draco said. Harry could practically hear him go rigid and pointy. “Oh, that.”

“Yes, *that*.” Harry turned back around so he could glower at him. “What — what are you playing at? You buy me a coat, you fix my shitty trainers, you hold my *hand*...” Harry’s eyes stung. His heart hurt so badly. “What are you fucking me about for?”

“I’m not fucking you about.” Draco looked pained. He brushed his hair out of his eyes. “I’m not playing at anything. Or I don’t mean to be. I... Don’t make me say it.”

“Make you say what?”

“I... *you know*. You.” Draco looked down at his hands, which he had twisted together so tightly his fingers were white. “I feel... I have felt... For fuck’s sake, Harry! It’s so cringe. Don’t make me say it.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “You mean... You fancy me?”

“*Fancy*,” Draco echoed, looking up at the patches of sky through the trees. “Yes. *Obviously*, are you completely dim?” He rubbed a hand over his face. “*Fancy*. Merlin and Morgana both, Potter.”

“Oh,” Harry ground the toe of his repaired trainer into the dirt. “I’ve never had someone fancy me before.”

“That is patently impossible, Potter,” Draco informed him. “You’re unbelievably unobservant, that must be the problem. Really, it’s like you’ve got tunnel-vision. You can only pay attention to a vary small radius of information at a time.”

“No one who knew me,” Harry amended. “No one who really knew me.”

“Oh,” Draco said. He took a deep breath like he was bracing himself for something. “Merlin’s sake, Potter. Can you stop *doing* things to me, for once?”

Harry frowned. “I’m just stood here.”

Draco covered his face with both hands. “This is so horrible. I hate this so much. Could you come here, please?”

Harry took a few steps forward. This was so confusing. Everything was weird, and confusing, and he was a *wizard*, and those men knew his *parents*, and they wanted him to be part of some weird underground resistance group that was somehow different to *Harry’s* weird underground resistance group, and here he was about to, he was pretty sure, have his first boyfriend. He was about seventy-five percent certain. He didn’t want to be cocky. He wasn’t all that certain how these things worked for normal people, let alone for teenaged renegade wizards.

“Come here properly, asshole.”

“I don’t know what I’m meant to...”

“For fuck’s sake, Potter. Have you never learnt elementary social cues? *Here.*” Draco dropped his hands from his face and put his arms around Harry. He clutched Harry’s new coat with both hands. Draco’s face pressed against Harry’s neck, long eyelashes brushing his skin.

Harry couldn’t move. Draco’s coat smelled of smoke. His breath was warm and his nose was cold. Harry’s chest went tight and painfully full, like a wardrobe packed so tight that it would shortly avalanche all over the unfortunate person who would next open the door.

“Hug me back, you dickhead,” Draco mumbled into Harry’s neck.

Harry did. He put his arms around Draco’s waist and leaned into the curve of his chest. His eyes went hot and wet again, which was embarrassing. He ducked his head to hide them on the shoulder of Draco’s fancy coat. His nose leaked too, so he wiped it on the wool. It even felt expensive on his nose, which was impressive really.

“I’m getting bogeys on your coat,” Harry told him.

“You’re such an absolute knob,” Draco said, but he didn’t let go. He touched Harry’s head with one hand, spreading his fingers beneath the tangle of hair to slip over his skull. His fingers moved slowly, carefully. “I have no idea why I like you.”

“You like me. You said it out loud.”

“You must be hearing things, Potter.” Draco’s grip tightened around his waist. His other hand slid to the back of Harry’s neck and stayed there, warm at his nape. “I’m concerned about your delusions and flights of fancy.”

“*My* flights of fancy,” Harry said. “You lot met me on a train platform to tell me I was a wizard.”

“You are a wizard.”

“It’s the principle of the thing.”

“Can I...” Draco pulled back, eyes flickering to Harry’s mouth.

Harry didn’t let him finish. He leaned forward and kissed him. Draco made a soft sound, or Harry did, or both of them. Harry had kissed two people in his life and neither of them had felt like this, like if Draco took his hands from Harry’s face he would crumple to the ground. Harry wanted to get closer, closer, but it wasn’t possible. Pansy’s robes were infuriatingly unassailable — Harry groaned in frustration and Draco laughed into his mouth, warm and wet. The delirious dizzy nearness of Draco, their mouths together and the heat fogging Harry’s glasses... Harry felt lit up. He felt like a *lumos* in the dark.

“Fuck,” Draco said, his forehead pressed against Harry’s. “We really ought to get back.”

“Probably,” Harry said, and kissed him again.

“You’re right,” Draco said, his mouth moving against Harry’s. “Fuck it.”

“They can fuck right off.” Harry laughed and kissed Draco’s cold cheek, the corner of his chapped mouth. In a few minutes, they would go back and find the others. Harry would face Sirius Black and Remus Lupin, and they’d figure out what to do about Pius Thicknesse, and they could change out of their ridiculous robes. Just not yet. Not quite yet.

Chapter 8

The holiday caravans had been empty for months. Every hotel in the village had vacancies. No one expected there to be many visitors clambering for a winter ramble along the frigid pebbled beach just outside the village. Nonetheless one evening in December, two ramshackle tents were spotted clinging to the rocky cliff by the sea, blustering in the wind and spitting rain. They sat a decorous yet intrigued distance from one another, like year sevens at a school disco.

Inside the larger of the two tents, a boy with untidy black hair was giving serious thought to his romantic entanglements.

At no point during Remus Lupin Disapparating with Pius Thicknesse, the tent set-up, or casting the wards did Draco let on whether or not he and Harry were dating now, or doing anything other than taking the piss out of one another as usual. Harry found this rather confusing. Similarly confusing was Sirius Black, sat incongruously at their kitchen table with a mug of tea. Harry kept to the sofa with Ginny and Luna, trying not to be in Black's eye-line. He kept *staring*. Harry wished Ron wasn't on watch. He could do with someone to make commiserating faces at. He wished that Draco would sit next to him, but he was keeping his distance. God. Mostly, Harry wished they'd never run into these fucking *adults*. Then he thought about what else had happened in that forest, and his cheeks went hot.

"Ingenious," Sirius Black was saying, shaking his shaggy head. "Bloody brilliant. How did you even get into the fucking house? That thing's warded up to the gills."

"We had help," Hermione began brightly, but shut her mouth when Draco sent her a murderous look.

"We did almost all die, so the help wasn't... always helpful." Neville looked at Draco, seemingly trying to gauge if he helped.

"More blood traitors?" Black made an impressed sort of face. "Our numbers grow. First Malfoy, now this new one. Where are they? Leave them behind to face the dull yet murderous music, did you?"

"They aren't a blood traitor," Draco said sharply. "And as far as I know, I'm not one either. Not like *you*."

"Really," drawled Black. All the humour drained from his expression, leaving behind a very cold set of cheekbones. "What *are* you, then?"

Draco coloured and turned away.

Black leaned forward, eyes narrowing. "What, you think you'd have a dead exciting gap year? Dirty up your soft hands with the revolutionaries for a few months, then run along back to the family estate and rule in comfort?"

“Fuck you,” Harry said hotly, getting to his feet and stalking right over to Black. “Say that again.”

“Draco’s been instrumental in our operations,” Hermione said, blocking Harry with one firm arm. “He’s not a spy, or a dilettante, if that’s what you’re insinuating.”

Black held up his hands in surrender. “Sure.”

“Sit the fuck down, Potter,” Draco hissed. “You’re embarrassing yourself.”

Harry sat next to Draco, glaring across the table at Black. Hermione said they were meant to *trust* him now, for some bloody reason, but Harry had one hand on his wand at all times. He wasn’t taking any chances.

“Well, if you’re just going to glower like a constipated Hitwizard, Potter, I am going to have a frigid bath and contemplate my imminent return to the *family estate*. You’ve heard who lives there now, Black? I’m sure I’ll be welcomed back with open arms after my *gap year*.” Draco stalked off towards the bathroom, door slamming in his wake.

“We don’t have hot water, really,” Neville said, after a tense minute. They could hear Draco banging around in the bathroom, the water turning on and off. “There’s something wrong with the bath, like it’s resistant to heating charms. The tap runs lukewarm for about thirty seconds and then you’ve got to sort of... pour it in buckets, then heat the buckets with magic, and levitate the water. It’s a whole production.”

“I doubt the Malfoys have it much better,” Black admitted, looking at the closed door with a tilted eyebrow. “Purebloods think suffering is morally superior.”

“My gran’s proof of that,” Neville agreed. “I only had cold baths until I got to Hogwarts.”

“That’s the real reason we’re blood traitors,” Ginny called, from her slightly awkward game of Exploding Snap. “Weasleys just wanted a hot bath.”

Hermione shook her head. “This is why all of you have so many *neuroses*.”

Sirius Black let out a bark of a laugh, throwing his head back at the force of it.

Harry levelled him with an unimpressed look.

“Sorry about before,” Black said, quieter. “That was... unsporting of me.”

Harry snorted at *unsporting*. Purebloods were ridiculous.

Black’s gaunt face lit up. His smile took ten years off him, and Harry wondered whether this is what he had looked like when he had known his father. When they had been mates, apparently. Harry pushed back from the table and went to go look at Ginny and Luna’s card game.

They were quiet after that, the radio playing softly in the background as Ginny and Luna argued about Exploding Snap. Hermione went through the cupboards, frowning, and

eventually came back out with three packets of Hula Hoops, a Mars bar, and four apples, which she divided up in exacting portions. Eventually Draco left the bathroom, glowering, and disappeared into their room to bang around a bit more in order to punctuate his dissatisfaction.

“Incoming,” Ron called, after Harry had spent a good half hour agonising over whether he should go in after Draco or not. He’d settled on ‘not’, but only because Black was out here. Harry wouldn’t be able to do — anything, any of the soft things he wanted, horrifyingly, to try out, not with Black and now Lupin on the other side of the door.

Remus Lupin ducked into the tent and shook out his wet cloak, scowling. “The number of lies I had to tell to sort that out...”

Black perked up as soon as he saw Lupin. “Come off it, Moony, you love orchestrating the downfalls of governments. Don’t try out that old professor act.”

“I *am* an old professor. But never mind.” Lupin nodded his thanks at Neville, who had flicked on the kettle and begun making tea. “The Order has relocated Thicknesse to a safe house. We’re hoping he’ll be willing to come out publicly about what’s going on behind the scenes at the Ministry, but given his current reticence on the matter this seems... unlikely.”

“What the fuck does it matter what he wants?” Ginny looked incensed. “It’s the bloody right thing to do!”

“Be that as it may, Miss Weasley, we aren’t in the business of forcing people.”

Ginny scoffed. “He’s a rotten coward.”

Black made a face like he was sucking a lemon. “Personally I’d go with ‘spineless flayed flobberworm’, but if you don’t want to get creative, coward’s the least of what he is.”

“So what’re you lot doing with him, then?” Ron had come in from watch and was handing the watch lantern over to Ginny. “Have him clean out your larder for kicks? Mild weeding? Bit of de-gnoming?”

“Boy has a point,” grumbled Black. “Thicknesse is useless as is.”

Lupin sighed. “Thicknesse is not our primary concern. It’s a miracle you got out of Parkinson Park alive. If we hadn’t been tracking you, if we hadn’t had inside information —”

“Well we didn’t bloody die,” Harry said staunchly. “So it doesn’t fucking matter, does it?”

“It was reckless. You hardly planned, you didn’t have backup, you’re a handful of half-trained teenagers and most of you have hardly any qualifications —”

Hermione made a small, panicked noise, like a guilt-ridden vampire bat. “We’ve done our best to replicate Hogwarts training. I know it isn’t the same, but we really have been putting effort into a well-rounded education.”

“Seeing as the Ministry is currently run by a monomaniacal dark wizard,” Luna said placidly, “I don’t see how Ministry-run exams are relevant.”

“You could have been killed. You could have all been *captured*.” Lupin rubbed his forehead. He was very wan, and sort of drained like he ought to sit down somewhere and have a cup of tea before he collapsed of scurvy or something. “With Harry along with you — do you know what they would have done?”

Hermione’s jaw tightened. She looked pale. “I had thought of that, but —”

“But you thought *Pius Thicknesse* was worth your lives? Harry’s life?”

“My life is my fucking business, mate,” spat Harry, getting to his feet. He had had quite enough of this. “You’re not my teacher, Lupin. You don’t get to tell me off like I’m getting excluded. You never taught me shit.”

“*No one* has, Harry! You’ve probably developed years of coping mechanisms for your magical abilities, most of which are likely harmful not only to you but to the people around you. You need proper training, from proper instructors.”

“Moony,” Black said, low. “Might be a bit hypocritical, mate.”

“They taught me *fine*,” Harry spat. “Hermione’s got me doing fucking coursework, and you don’t know anything about me.”

Across the tent, Neville caught a mug that spilled over the side of the table. Then another.

“Harry,” Hermione said softly.

Harry forced himself to do the deep breathing thing. They *had* been doing a good job training him up, and he couldn’t give these wankers any reason to think otherwise.

“I think we’re done for the night,” Black said, jerking his head towards the door. “Moony, mind checking our tent? I’ll be along.”

Lupin, scowling, ducked out of the tent.

“It’s not often I’m the one talking *him* down,” Black said, looking bemused. “Usually it’s more ‘Padfoot, don’t eat out of bins!’ This is an unusual dynamic for us.”

Harry sat down on the sofa and crossed his arms tightly over his chest. He looked at his knees. He didn’t want to look anyone in the face. God, fuck, why did these arseholes have to come in and *ruin everything*? Sure, they saved their lives, or whatever, but then with all the *ruining everything*.

Black got up from the table, carefully passing his mug to Neville with a nod of thanks.

“I think he has it in his head you’re still those snot-nosed kids he taught, years ago. What were you all, twelve? He’s... protective.” Black stood by the door, hands in his pockets. “I wouldn’t blame you if you fucked off in the night, all right? We haven’t put wards down to

stop you, or anything like that. You could leave if you wanted.” Black scuffed his foot on the floor. He looked, in the low light, strangely young. “Just give us a chance, yeah? We can talk a bit tomorrow. You’ve done a shitload of good for the cause already, and I bet you’re raring for more. We can help you.”

“We’ll think about it,” Harry said, before Hermione could cheerily agree to stay put just because she was an utter swot and apparently couldn’t shake the need for the approval from authority figures.

“And I don’t care what Remus said, your Thicknesse caper was ballsy as hell. Top marks from me.” Black flashed a grin, then ducked out of the tent.

Harry looked at the door for a long moment. “I’m just going to, uh,” he said, and then booked it to the bedroom before he had to finish the sentence.

Draco was sulking on his bed, reading a book by wandlight. He glanced up at Harry and then straight back at his book, jaw tense.

“They’re gone.”

“Bully for them,” Draco said dryly, and turned a page.

Shit. Harry felt like an idiot. Just because they’d — well. He turned his back on Draco and started getting ready for bed, his cheeks burning. How could he have been so stupid? It was his own fault for getting, whatever, *invested*.

“Potter, what are you doing?”

“Ice fishing,” Harry snapped. He turned around, and Draco was holding up one arm, looking expectant. All the fight drained out of him. “I don’t... I don’t know what that means.”

“It means come *here*, you twerp.” Draco’s mouth rose up on one side.

“Oh,” Harry said, and shuffled closer. He felt weird, doing this with Draco looking right at him. He climbed into bed and fit himself carefully along Draco’s side. His bed was narrow, but they were both a bit skinny and it felt all right. Draco smelled of soap and skin. Harry wanted to put his face into Draco’s warm neck and close his eyes, but that felt a little impossible so he just pressed his nose to Draco’s jumper.

*

Hermione woke with the sun, which was not really saying very much considering the sun did not rise until half eight. Ron snuffled in his sleep, turned over, but didn’t wake as she scrambled down the ladder into the living room. The tent was still in the cold morning, and Hermione layered her socks and jumpers until she felt sufficiently bundled for the windy coast.

The sun spread orange fingers across the sky. Hermione’s breath came in misty white clouds. She looked over the sea, over the wide spread of rocky earth and felt her heart just *clench*. It was strange to love a place she’d never been. This seaside field was Neville’s contribution, an

area too popular for warm weather but good enough for wet December. There was no rain today: just clear, icy skies and the sparse grass whipping in the wind. Hermione had no memories here, but she felt an odd sense of familiarity all the same.

Lupin ducked out of his tent and Hermione lifted her hand in a wave. “Good morning, Professor.”

“Sirius has made it clear that if we’re going to be treating you like adults, I need to stop thinking of you as my students,” Lupin said, polishing his glasses with a worn handkerchief. “Perhaps we ought to keep it to Christian names.” Hermione blanched, and Lupin laughed. “I quite agree, to be honest. But let’s humour him, shall we? Last night did not go over very well.”

“You saved our lives.”

“Aside from that.”

“Harry will come around,” Hermione said firmly, as she had about forty times over the past few months.

“Are you quite certain about that, Miss Granger?” Lupin looked as carefully mild as he had during lessons.

“Hermione,” Hermione corrected. God, that felt strange. She covered up her wince with a laugh. “And yes. Leave them to me.”

Lupin smiled. “You always were a very clever person, Hermione, but the quality I liked most about you was that right there. So determined. You’d see something through or you would die trying.”

“You were the best Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher we ever had. I’ve been trying to imitate your lessons.”

Lupin ducked his head. “I’m glad to know I rate higher than Gilderoy Lockhart.”

Hermione moved on quickly; Lupin looked deeply uncomfortable. “We need to work on our Patronuses, as you may have noticed last night. An experienced teacher would be very helpful.”

Lupin nodded slowly, looking out over the horizon. “I see. Do you think your compatriots would agree?”

“Well,” Hermione allowed. Of course most of them wouldn’t mind at all, but Lupin was not talking about most of them. “I think he’d feel better if he wasn’t being singled out.”

Hermione hauled everyone from their beds within the hour, and they assembled in front of the tents to have a go at making their Patronuses slightly less wildly unreliable. Harry dragged his feet and clutched his wand with a belligerently clenched jaw, but he stood next to Draco and didn’t storm off, which was honestly better than Hermione had expected.

“I always liked the Patronus,” Black said. He stood next to his tent with the air of someone who ought to be leaning against a wall or sitting rakishly backwards on chair. “It’s like a cuddly personality profile.”

Harry glared in his direction. “What d’you get then, a polo pony? A gundog?”

Wind whipped Ginny’s hair back like a red flag. “I’ve always thought I was horsey. Ready to kick in any direction.”

“I wonder what I’ll get,” Neville said. “My Patronus hasn’t ever been corporeal. You don’t suppose anyone gets something really awful, do you? I’d hate to be, like, a flobberworm. Or a hamster.”

“I’m keen on white mist,” Draco drawled. “Really says everything you need to know about me. Can’t be bothered to have more of a shape than that.”

Ginny had no trouble at all — her horse sprung forth from her wand looking solid enough to touch. After that, Lupin had her walking around with him, adjusting grips and giving encouragement. Hermione was doing middling with her flimsy otter, and Ron and Luna quite well, but neither Neville nor Harry had managed anything corporeal after half an hour. Draco’s white cloud had wings, which was more than it had had an hour ago.

“That’s good,” Lupin said, as Draco’s slightly winged something flew around his head. “That shows a lot of progress.”

Draco didn’t say anything, but Hermione saw his ears go pink in a pleased sort of way.

Harry tried again, his back firmly turned on Lupin. An enormous quantity of white mist poured from his wand and swamped him like a friendly London pea souper.

“I’m not sure what the problem is,” Hermione said to Lupin in a low voice. “Sometimes there’s a shape and sometimes there isn’t, but it never fully solidifies.”

“My educated guess is that it’s his happy memory. He doesn’t trust it.” Lupin pulled his mouth to one side. “I don’t think he’ll trust me telling him that, either.”

“I don’t suppose we could just send him to therapy, could we?” Lupin fixed her with a rueful look, and Hermione sighed. “I suppose not. How do we get him to trust it?”

“He could choose a memory that’s uncomplicated, but I expect that would be difficult for him.”

Hermione watched as Ron clapped Harry on the back, made a joke that had him relaxing his glare for the first time that morning. “For now,” she said. “I think he’s getting there.”

*

Harry’s low-grade headache began when Lupin and Black came stampeding into their lives and had not retreated in the two days since. He wasn’t sleeping well; he kept having dreams about snakes and disintegrating country manors. Patronus practice was communal on the first

day, but the next morning Lupin approached him after breakfast to see about additional lessons. Harry, distracted by his head, agreed without thinking about it, like a total fucking idiot.

They stood in the middle of the field. Lupin was keeping himself in very careful check, his whole body contained to a square foot of space like he was afraid to crowd Harry.

“What now,” Harry said. He regretted agreeing to this bullshit. Magic aside, he felt like he’d been called to see the head teacher.

Lupin surveyed him calmly. “What has Hermione taught you about the Patronus Charm?”

“Ginny taught me,” Harry snapped, and then scuffed his trainer in the grass. He wasn’t sure why he’d yelled about that. There wasn’t a reason for it. It was a safe assumption to think Hermione had taught him. She had been the one to tell him about the charm in the first place. “Er, Hermione said it was like a shield, you know, for Dementors.”

Lupin nodded. “In a sense. A Patronus is not only a shield but is itself a sort of Anti-Dementor: it forms from your capacity for love, happiness, hope. Your Patronus is a guardian. It cannot feel despair, and thus a Dementor cannot feed upon it.”

“Okay.” Harry folded his arms over his chest. “Can it think for itself? Like, is it, uh. Sentient?”

“A Patronus can relay messages for you, can find people, can drive off Dark creatures, but it isn’t alive in a traditional sense. Theories differ on its sentience.” Lupin waited to see if Harry would speak again, and when he didn’t, he continued. “The Patronus Charm is very difficult magic, Harry, far beyond the Ordinary Wizarding Level. There are many accomplished witches and wizards who struggle with it.”

Oh for fuck’s sake. Harry rolled his eyes and tried to keep from exploding nearby plant matter. “So people keep bloody *telling* me. How does that help? Jesus.”

Lupin hid a smile behind a hand, poorly. “All right. I’ll stop telling you. Now your memory — I expect Miss Weasley told you it had to be happy? It has to be *powerfully* happy. Imagine a memory with weight. Heft. A memory without any holes. Without any sinking little bits of sadness, if you can. Or with the sinking bits pushed to the side, not strong enough to compete with the memory itself.”

Harry looked out towards the tents. A memory with weight. Nothing from before London, then. Last time the pub had almost done it. “What’s your Patronus?” he asked, stalling for time. “I was unconscious the other night. Never saw it.”

“Ah,” Lupin said. He went a little red. “It’s a wolf.”

“And that’s... bad?” Harry couldn’t see how. Wolves were sick.

“It reveals... more about me than I generally prefer to let on.”

“Oh, because you’re a werewolf?”

Lupin coughed, looking wrong-footed for the first time that morning. “Merlin. Uh, yes. The others informed you, I gather?”

“Hermione said she guessed when you were her teacher. She’s well pleased to be right.”

“Ah,” Lupin said, shaking his head a little. “Well. Werewolves are not overly popular in the wizarding world.”

Hermione had told him that too. “Sucks,” Harry attempted. “Like — not that your life sucks. I guess? I don’t fucking know your life.” Harry turned away, hunching in on himself. Fucking Lupin. He wanted to go back to the tent and do embarrassing soft things with Draco and never see Black or Lupin ever again.

“I try to keep perspective on the matter. Sirius helps,” Lupin said, and then laughed a little. “Your father used to call it my ‘furry little problem’ in company.”

Harry’s stomach jolted. He hadn’t been able to *stop* thinking about the fact that Lupin and Black knew his parents, but hearing about James Potter talking, being in company, being *alive* — that was something altogether different.

“Would you like to have another go at the charm, Harry?”

Harry realised he’d been being oddly surly and quiet for a lot longer than was normal in a conversation, even for him. “Whatever,” he said.

“A powerful, joyful memory,” Lupin reminded him.

Harry heroically did not punch Lupin in the face, and instead closed his eyes. A powerful, joyful memory. He thought about kicking the Quaffle around with Ron after dark, both of them swearing profusely every time they kicked it out of bounds and couldn’t find the bloody thing. He thought about Draco holding him, hands in his hair, calling him an absolute knob and not letting go. He thought about Jane and Cynthia’s conservatory, how warm it was on the rainy night and how Draco kept kicking him under the table. He thought... Fuck. Even if this whole thing went tits up, even if Voldemort offed him in two months after all the work everyone put in training Harry up, it would have been worth it.

“*Expecto Patronum*,” Harry said, and his wand nearly vibrated in his fingers as a dazzling silver animal galloped into being, jutting antlers and pounding hooves. The stag galloped through the windswept grass in a wide circle, finally coming to a stop in front of Harry and staring at him with wide shining eyes.

“Shit,” he said. “Okay. I guess they weren’t lying, then — you’re an all-around not-crap teacher, Lupin.”

“Thank you, Harry,” Lupin said, in a strange sort of voice.

The stag vanished. Harry stared at the place where it had been. “We’ll see if I can manage it with an actual Dementor, I guess.” Harry put his wand in his pocket. “Seems a bit harder.”

“The more familiar you are with accessing that joyful place inside yourself, the easier it will be under pressure.” Lupin took a breath. “I’m not sure how — Harry, what did Hermione and the others tell you about Animagi?”

Harry thought back to the debrief after they had left the Parkinsons. He’d been a bit distracted, having just snogged Draco against a tree, but there had been something about Black finding Lupin at Hogwarts and hunting down Peter Pettigrew, who was extracurricularly a rat. “A bit,” he said. “They said that Black and, uh. Pettigrew and my dad — they learned how to go all... furry... at Hogwarts, right?”

“At Hogwarts in the sense of that was our geographical location, yes.”

“Pretty fucking nerdy rebellion, mate. Hermione says it’s really bloody illegal and that you all had to have studied for, like, years.”

“Well, yes,” Lupin agreed. “I mean to say — did they tell you what their Animagi forms were?”

“Black’s a dog, yeah? And Pettigrew was a rat, which seems like a pretty big bloody warning. And my dad...” Harry trailed off. “No one said.”

“He turned into a stag,” Lupin said. He patted him on the shoulder and started off back towards the tent, which was kind and also showed he had a sense of self-preservation, because Harry’s eyes had gone hot and if Lupin had seen him cry even a little bit Harry would probably have tried out any of the *many* hexes he had learned in the past several months.

*

Draco was lying on the bed with a pulpy Muggle romance novel, blithely ignoring his responsibilities when Harry came barging in like a sulky uncoordinated hippogriff.

“Potter?”

“Can I?” Harry nodded towards him jerkily. “Er, you know.”

“I don’t know, actually.” Draco put his book down. “Can you what?”

“Can I...” Harry trailed off, his face twisting in frustration.

“What *are* you on about, you idiot? Yes, probably, unless you’re interested in maiming or doing a little pre-supper murder.” Draco would never understand Harry Potter. He was a strange, beautiful feral little monster and Draco did not know why he had all these stupid feelings about how he tangled his hands up in his jumper.

Harry’s face twisted a little bit more and then he seemed to give up. He sat down on the edge of Draco’s bed, looking at him like he was expecting to get pushed off.

Draco pulled on the back of Harry’s jumper until he collapsed backwards. He felt a hot little thrill at being allowed to do that, to *touch* him, to run a hand through his horrible hair. He was

allowed to arrange Harry's limbs until he was pressed up against him, his face jammed into Draco's neck. Draco wanted to pull Harry right into his body so he could never leave him. Merlin fuck, it was horrible. Draco felt all soft and open like Harry could dip his hand right through Draco's sappy ribs and pick out his heart.

Harry's eyes were a little bit wet. Draco wanted to hunt down everyone who had ever hurt him and make them suffer, slowly and over a long period of time.

"You want to not talk about it?"

"Tell me about your crap book," Harry said, mumbled into Draco's skin. His breath came out in warm huffs, and Draco's heart threatened to beat right out of his body.

"Fine," Draco said, and began to tell him about what Muggles apparently called *vikings* and who were clearly sex terrorists.

*

Black sat on a rock, looking over the fog and the sea. Wind whipped his long hair back like a dark candle. Harry looked down at the torn photograph in his hands, *James and Lily Potter, Godric's Hollow, January 1980*, and then strode forward before he could think better of it.

"Harry?" Black squinted up at him.

Harry shoved the ripped paper into his hands. "Hermione found it in a book."

Black looked down at the picture. "Merlin," he said, running a finger over the beaming faces of Harry's parents. "In a book, really?"

Harry didn't say anything. He looked out at the ocean, wide and pitiless. He wanted to take the picture back. He wanted to grab it and run as fast as he could out over the fields and never come back.

"I took this," Black said finally, his voice rough. "It was Remus's camera but he was always self-conscious about using it, for some reason."

Harry sat down gingerly, a careful distance from Black.

Black continued, not paying Harry any mind. "James was so excited to have a house. They'd been living in this shitty flat in London the size of a loo and when Lily found out she was pregnant she said if they stayed there your cot would have to be the kitchen sink. James would have bought the first house he saw, I think. He never cared much about that sort of thing. Lily had more sense."

The salt wind stung Harry's eyes. He felt very far away from his body.

"They were so happy. Cooped up in that cottage, covered in nappies and sick, in the middle of a war and they were so *happy*." Black wiped his face. "Fucking hell. Now you've got me wanging on."

“Do you have more pictures,” Harry said. He could barely recognise his voice. “Of my, er. Of my parents.”

“Remus does,” Black said quickly, darting a look over at Harry. “He kept all the albums for both of us. I was, you know, a bit incarcerated and didn’t... Anyway. I can — you could come and look, if you’d like.”

Harry nodded shortly. “Fine.”

Black stood up, and Harry followed him to the tent.

*

Hermione wasn’t sure what caused the détente between Sirius and Harry, but she did welcome the sudden lack of snarling and the severely diminished sullen silence. Harry still sometimes watched Remus and Sirius with sharp, suspicious eyes, but he was no longer shouting at the slightest provocation, so Hermione counted it as a win.

On their fourth day in Wales, Hermione began to feel the odd prickle on the back of her neck that meant it was time to move on. She was not always sure what set it off — a good half of the time it was probably only nerves — but it didn’t do them any good to stay put. She needed to go and see Sirius and Remus.

She had not actually set foot inside their tent before. It felt odd, like visiting a professor’s room inside of Hogwarts. She knew professors had to live *somewhere* but it felt somewhat disrespectful to even imagine where. She had a brief, terrifying image of Professor McGonagall in a dressing gown and ducked into Sirius and Remus’s tent.

“Er, hello? I would have knocked, but it’s rather difficult with canvas.”

The tent interior was small and severely dated — with the shag carpet and mustard yellow sofa, it looked straight out of 1976. It was also, notably, empty. Hermione knocked on some wood panelling.

“Professor Lupin?”

There was a clattering from the back of the tent, and then what was presumably the bedroom door opened. “Hermione?” Remus’s glasses were askew, and his hair mussed.

Merlin and *Morgana*. Hermione devoutly wished for the ground to swallow her whole. Maybe she could run out over the cliff and jump into the sea. “Hello,” she said. “I’ll, er, come back a bit later, shall I?”

“That’s quite all right,” Remus said, adjusting his glasses. “Just — just a moment.”

Hermione stood in the doorway and looked intently at the kitchen. Surely nothing on earth was as fascinating as the way the green backsplash clashed with the wooden cupboards. Absolutely no thoughts at all could intrude upon anyone’s mind when they were examining what appeared to be a red and orange floral rice cooker. Remus Lupin and Sirius Black owned a red and orange floral rice cooker. If she still had an in at the Daily Prophet she’d put

that on the front page. Breaking News: Noted Murderer Sirius Black Enjoys Floral Kitchen Appliances.

“So sorry,” Remus said, emerging from the bedroom with his hair in order and a very red complexion.

Sirius followed, stretching his neck languidly. “As much as I’d like to have an unbearably awkward conversation with a teenaged rebel leader, I think I’ll have a shower. Moony?”

“Yes, of course, by all means avoid this whole thing. I’ll speak to Hermione,” Remus said, waving him off. Sirius disappeared into the bathroom, snickering.

Hermione looked desperately at the kitchen. “You have a rice cooker.”

“Oh? Yes. Sirius loves Muggle cooking things, for some reason. Lily used to give them to us and he’d never know how to use anything. He used to put bananas in that to try and make banana bread.”

Hermione frowned. That really wasn’t — she hoped they knew how to clean it properly.

“Not that you aren’t, er, very welcome here, Hermione, but was there something you wanted to discuss?”

Hermione tore her eyes away from the banana-polluted rice cooker. “Oh. Yes. We need to move on. This area is too popular with walkers, and we’ve been in one place long enough.”

“I see,” Remus said. “Well, if you would consider it, we have a safe house. Several, actually — scattered all over the country. Sirius’s house in London is under Fidelius. Unplottable, anti-Apparition jinxes. The works. It’s our main headquarters and there’s a tremendous amount of room, albeit slightly infested with... Pureblood nonsense.”

Hermione shook her head. “Not yet. Harry’s not... Give me until the new year.”

Remus took a deep breath. He seemed to be fighting his professor face and was only mostly successful. “The longer you stay undefended —”

“We’ve been at this for months,” Hermione reminded him firmly. Remus Lupin had a floral rice cooker; he was not about to intimidate her at this juncture. “Although we appreciate the help, of course, we are very capable of handling ourselves. We do intend on joining up with you but we need another week, that’s all. One week and I’ll bring Harry to London if I have to drag him myself.”

Remus looked at her for a long moment and then nodded. “All right. Would you like a cup of tea?”

Hermione mostly wanted to run back to her own tent, bury her face in Ron’s shoulder and confess everything she had seen and inferred from the last fifteen minutes, but that would be unbearably impolite. “Yes, thanks,” she said, and sat down gingerly at the small olive green laminate table.

They stared down at their tea and made awkward small talk about lessons, Ordinary Wizarding Levels and the weather. Eventually, Sirius emerged from the bathroom with damp hair and wandered over to check in.

Sirius nodded as Remus explained Hermione's plan, and then reached over the table to take a sip from Remus's mug. "Might make it easier if we buggered off for a bit, Moony. Gave him a chance to unclench a bit."

Hermione looked up at him, a little surprised. She hadn't thought Sirius was a very insightful person, originally. "That's actually not a terrible idea."

Sirius barked a laugh. "Thank you for your resounding tone of confidence, fearless infant leader. I do have *some* decent ideas. Not many, mind, but they do come to me, and my geriatric brain."

"I can think of a few winners," Remus said dryly, taking his mug back from Sirius with a wry shake of his head. "Attempting human transfiguration with Benjy Fenwick being one real precious gem."

Sirius waved a hand. "Benjy's nose was fine eventually, don't be dramatic."

"Benjy had a beak for three and a half months, Sirius."

"Which was, number one, hilarious, and number two, *very* hilarious."

Hermione propped her chin up on one hand and thought about how Sirius Black had been in Azkaban since he was in his early twenties and probably had not had a lot of emotional room for maturation in the traditional sense.

"We'll go back to our headquarters for a few days," Remus said, pointedly talking over Sirius continuing his story about Benjy Fenwick's temporary beak. "You can come to us after, or we can meet you — you know how to contact us."

"Our owl is out on delivery at the minute but yes, that shouldn't be a problem." Hermione traced the laminate. "Harry's been... Better. I wanted to thank you."

"The first time I held Harry he pissed on me." Sirius grinned crookedly. "I deserve a lot of thanks."

Before Hermione left the tent, Remus handed her note. "Just in case," he said. "I don't suppose I have to tell you not to lose that."

Hermione unfolded the scrap of parchment. *The headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London.*

Remus and Sirius Disapparated that evening, just before Hermione and the others packed up the tent and Apparated to the Forest of Dean. Everything was just the same as she remembered: stately oak trees and the crisp scent of pine needles, the soft drift of moonlight through dense branches, the sense of ancient memory. Of course, the last time she had been here it had not been winter. Hermione touched the bark of the old trees, remembering

camping with her mum and dad. They fussed so much over sterilising the water. They'd never trust Hermione's sterilising charms now; they'd be boiling water in pots and lecturing her about cholera.

As mortifying as the last few hours with them had been, Hermione missed Sirius and Remus. She felt a bit unmoored. It was all on their shoulders again.

*

The day dawned mild and gusty, the tent whipping in the wind. Draco woke to the sound of creaking trees, the blustery sway of the tent and low mumbles from Potter, who tossed and turned in his bunk. Draco got up, hissing at the cold floor on his bare feet, and crept towards Potter's bed.

"No," Harry muttered. "Don't — don't..."

Draco's stomach twisted. He reached out and brushed the hair from Potter's wrinkled forehead. His frown smoothed under the passage of Draco's hand. He did it again, smoothing the rumpled tangles back.

"Draco?" Harry blinked up at him, bleary and confused.

"Nightmare," Draco said softly. "You were making a racket, Potter. Disturbing my beauty sleep."

"Some beauty," Harry snorted. His eyes fluttered shut. Draco stroked the skin of his forehead again, and Harry sighed.

Neville let out a wheezy bellow of a snore and Draco startled, yanking his hand back. What the fuck was it about Potter that made him forget about his surroundings? This was — this was untoward, and unjust, and *unseemly*.

"You shouldn't sleep too long," Draco said gruffly, folding his arms over his chest. "It's Christmas."

Harry batted his hand in Draco's direction and then pulled the duvet up over his shoulders, a silly little smile on his face. Draco left their room before he did something daft like climb in bed with him, or in any other way be so obviously gagging for it that he wanted to incinerate his entire body.

Luna sat at the kitchen table wearing pyjamas printed with green and red giraffes. She held a large mug that steamed gently in the cool air. "Good morning, Draco. Would you like to help me decorate?"

"No," Draco said.

"That's unfortunate for you," Luna said sympathetically, and set him to transfiguring small, melted-down candles into larger ones.

Luna transfigured twigs and pebbles into evergreen branches and glowing baubles, set glowing lights all along the ceiling and enlarged a red hair ribbon to tie around the inglenook fireplace like a giant gift. Ron and Ginny woke up and stumbled blearily out into the cold to find something they could transfigure into a tree. This turned out to be an actual tree, ripped somehow from the ground and tracking dirt into the tent.

“I’m taking the morning off,” Hermione informed them, wrapped in an enormous dressing gown with her nose stuck into a tattered Muggle magazine. “You’re taking care of that.”

“I’ll give her ten minutes,” Harry told Draco in an undertone. He’d woken up halfway through the candles project and had been distracting Draco ever since.

“Five,” Draco said. There was dirt *everywhere*, and Ron and Ginny had yet to figure out what to do with the roots.

In the end, Hermione lasted seven minutes before throwing aside her magazine and huffily showing Ron and Ginny how to set up a Christmas tree *properly*. In the end, Ginny was sulking, Hermione had pine needles in her hair and Luna had taken over Hermione’s magazine.

“I’ve discovered my new favourite band,” Luna announced, waving the glossy pages.

Draco raised an eyebrow. “From a Muggle magazine? They don’t even include the songs.”

“I don’t need to hear the music to know,” Luna told him, and tilted the magazine to show Draco the picture, which was a convincing argument and honestly, fair play to everyone involved.

Hermione leaned over to see, and then sniffed. “That magazine’s from ages ago. Your new favourite band broke up last year.”

“Oh no,” Luna sighed, stroking the picture. “I’ll always remember you.”

“There’s a support line you can ring, I believe.”

Harry came up behind Draco to get a look, one hand on Draco’s shoulder. “Oh my god,” he said, laughing. “There are also a few music videos that can really illuminate your sexuality for you, if you’re interested.”

Hermione glanced at Harry. “Oh really?”

“Don’t tell me you missed those.”

Draco wrinkled his nose. “What is a... music video?”

“My kingdom for a telly,” Harry said. “Someday you’re in for a real awakening, mate.”

*

Aunt Petunia had never been what anyone might call a level-headed woman, and Christmas certainly never helped matters much. Every year Petunia would lose her entire shit about the schedule, and the particularities of the prawn cocktail, and whether her napkin rings were too gaudy. Harry, as resident indentured servant and convenient object of shouting, would be pressed into service for all and sundry. He would slice parsnips and mash turnips, he would lay the table no less than three separate times, and then he'd be relegated to a folding table sort of to the side of the whole affair with a selection of very dry turkey and the odd carrot during the actual meal. When Harry grew in stature and surliness, he became increasingly uncooperative and as a result would be locked in his room for the duration.

He was finding Christmas in the tent a bit overwhelming, as a result.

Halfway through the meal — turkey sandwiches, as Hermione wouldn't let Ginny steal a whole bird from the shop — Harry excused himself and ducked into the boys' bedroom.

In October Hermione had enchanted a bit of the tent wall into a facsimile of a window. She got tired of everyone sleeping until two in the afternoon, and hoped the natural light would encourage regular hours. Harry was grateful for the window now. The tent was so cramped, and everyone had been crammed around the kitchen table with no room to breathe. It felt good to look out at the woods, the cold glassy surface of the lake, the dry grass whipping in the wind.

The door creaked open, and Harry looked back to see Draco.

"Is this the sort of sulk where you'd quite like company, or the sort of sulk where you'd like me to fuck off?"

Harry shrugged.

"Illuminating," Draco said dryly. "Suppose I'll stay, then."

"Suit yourself." Harry turned back to the window. Hogwarts had a lake. It got cold there, they said. Maybe it froze in the winter.

"Did your lake look like this?"

"Our estate didn't have a lake. A few streams, and a decorative pond, but —"

"No, I meant your school. Hogwarts. It had a lake, right? The Big Lake, something like that?"

"The Great Lake," Draco said.

Harry liked how Draco corrected him. Sometimes he was snooty and sometimes he was almost absent-minded, but it always felt like it was more about Draco than Harry himself. Draco loved being right about things more than he cared about Harry being wrong. He didn't mind Harry being wrong, but he *really* loved being right.

"The Great Lake. Was it like this?"

“Not really.”

Harry nodded. He hadn't thought so. The Great Lake was probably a lot bigger, and grander, and more beautiful. Maybe more frightening. Ginny told him that merpeople lived there, and a giant squid. Probably nothing lived in this lake except fish.

Draco turned towards him and gripped his elbow, tight. He pushed their faces together. Harry's glasses slipped down his nose and sort of knocked into Draco's cheek and it all went wrong.

“Sorry,” Draco mumbled.

“S'okay,” Harry mumbled back.

“Just let me...” Draco's hand shook. He touched Harry's shoulder, his neck, his jaw.

Harry's eyes fluttered closed. It made it easier to lean in and press their mouths together.

At first, nothing. Soft skin, nervous breathing. And then Draco's mouth opened and there was unbearable heat. Harry's heart thudded painfully in his ribs like it was knocking to get out. Wet, and warm, and the scrape of teeth — they pressed together urgently, hands scrabbling under jumpers, hissing at the touch of cold fingers. Draco's back, the hot skin underneath all the wool. Jutting spine and knocking hipbones. Harry's brain vacated his entire body. He was nothing, he was touch and scent and skin.

“Harry,” Draco gasped, and Harry clutched him back, bit his lower lip hard.

The door squeaked — the fucking *door*, fucking hell. They broke apart with a wet sound and moved to opposite sides of the room.

“Hermione found Cluedo in the village,” Neville said blithely, blinking at them like a handsome cow. “Want to play?”

Harry couldn't look at Draco. If he looked at Draco, he'd see if his lips had swollen, if he looked flushed, if his eyes were dilated.

“Sure,” Draco said, his voice cracking.

“Fine,” Harry said, roughly.

They played Cluedo. They played Cluedo, and stayed a careful distance from each other, and grunted at appropriate intervals. When it was time for bed they waited until Neville's snores began wafting through the room before even looking at each other. Draco held up his arm. Harry knew what that meant now.

“Neville's right there,” Harry whispered, once he was tucked under Draco's duvet.

“We went to boarding school, Potter. Neville knows how to sleep through plenty of extracurricular dick-touching.”

Harry snorted. “Is that what’s happening?”

“Well, if you don’t *want* to,” Draco huffed, turning to his back.

“I didn’t say that.” It was easier to reach out in the dark. Draco’s body was warm under the duvet, his jumper thin and soft with holes at the elbows. He smelled good. Harry had to shut his eyes and press his face to Draco’s pillow for a moment.

“You all right?”

“Haven’t done this,” Harry mumbled.

“Really?” Draco turned towards him, and Harry pressed more of his face into the pillow.

“You mean I’m the first one who gets to touch the chosen one’s dick?”

“Oh my fucking god, Draco, shut *up*.”

“*You* shut up. This is an important historical moment. I’m like King Arthur and your dick’s Excalibur.”

“My dick’s not stuck in a stone, arsehole.”

“The stone of virginity. It’s a metaphor, you dunce. You do know what a *metaphor* is, don’t you?”

“I got an A in GCSE English, thanks. Your school doesn’t even teach spelling, Hermione told me.”

“I don’t need to spell Excalibur to know that your dick is my sword in the stone.”

“This is a real fucking turn-off, mate.”

“Is it?” Draco eased his leg under Harry and pressed up, where evidence was decidedly to the contrary. “Mm, no. You like it.”

“Yeah, I get the major horn for Welsh legend,” Harry said, as sarcastically as he could manage. Draco had angled his thigh against him again, and Harry’s slightly broken voice did not help. “I’m seventeen. A stiff breeze does the trick.”

“Something’s certainly stiff, all right.” Draco got his hand under Harry and felt for the shape of him.

Harry did not whimper. He made a sound that *could* have been a whimper, if he were a totally different person. “That’s horrible,” he managed to gasp, and turned onto his side so Draco would have better access.

*

The owl was postmarked Christmas Eve, but Hedwig didn’t wing her way to their camp until Boxing Day. Hermione saw her swoop through the trees, a battered envelope tied to her

talons, and ran for Ron. His letter went out last.

Hermione reminded herself that her parents were safe as houses in Australia, and that honestly she had a lot less to worry about in that respect than Ron and Ginny, whose families actually had to live in their current political climate. Thus fortified, she joined the others in the living room. Everyone gathered around Ron as he read aloud.

Dearest Ronniekins, and also our late sister Ginevra,

We hope you're having a nice time saving the world. Mum's still got hold of your ghouls but she's furious about it. Christmas is a rotten state of affairs, what with Percy and you two so our most ardent thanks for the most uplifting Chrimbo of our lifetimes. We've been keeping busy, and if you get the chance to pop by Gambol and Japes you might find a certain innovative selection of sweets by yours truly.

Ron snorted. "It's a joke shop," he explained to Harry. "Fred and George have been inventing since they could wave a wand. Even before."

"Keep reading," Ginny said impatiently, making a grab for the parchment.

Ron dodged his sister, keeping her to the side with one long arm. "*That's not all. Have you got a wireless out in the heroic wilds? If so —*" Ron squinted down at the letter, his eyes darting from side to side as he read. "It's about eight o'clock, right? Where's the bloody wireless? Somebody get the wireless, quick."

Neville unearthed the radio from underneath an avalanche of scarves and brought it over at a run.

"There are instructions," Ron muttered, tapping at the radio with his wand. "Might be too late, but let's see..."

"Instructions for *what*," demanded Ginny. She made another grab for the letter.

Hermione yanked the letter from Ron and examined the contents. "This could be old," she said. "We don't know how often they change the password. Are you doing the pattern right?"

"Yes," Ron grunted, trying again. He muttered a string of words under his breath.

Luna frowned. "Are you admonishing the wireless for something? Is that a new swear?"

Harry looked at Draco, confused. "Is this a wizard thing?"

"Not one that I know," Draco drawled. "What *are* you doing, Weasley?"

"Hush," Hermione said, reading over the letter again. "It might be nothing, just be patient."

Ron tried, and tried again. Hermione was just about to push him — gently, lovingly — out of the way so she could see if he was doing it wrong when the radio crackled to life, and a voice boomed from the speakers. "... pleased to welcome two of our regular contributors to the airwaves, Royal and Robin."

Hermione gasped. There was no mistaking Lee Jordan's familiar voice, the tone of it or the way he always sounded slightly amused. He could have been announcing the Quidditch. She hadn't thought of him since Hogwarts.

"We have sad news to report: another Muggle family has been found dead, this time in Winterslow. Their deaths have been attributed to a gas leak, as usual, but we know better, don't we, Royal?"

"I'm afraid so, River. I'd like to remind our listeners that very simple protection charms over their Muggle neighbours could prove the difference between life and death. Muggle killing for sport is on the rise."

"Holy shit," Ron said, blinking down at the wireless.

"Shut *up*, Ron," Ginny said, elbowing him to the side so she could crank up the volume.

Lee Jordan's voice fairly blared through the tent. "Following the recent pro-Potter edition of *the Quibbler*, editor Xenophilius Lovegood has now been imprisoned, along with the W.W.N's Gil Catchlove and journalist Oliver Barnes."

"Oh," Luna said, her large eyes glittering in the low light. "That explains why Daddy didn't answer my last letter."

"I'm sorry, Luna," Hermione said, reaching out to touch her hand.

"That's all right," Luna said. "He's still alive."

Hermione spared a thought for her parents in Australia. Wendell and Monica Wilkins didn't have to worry about a visit from the Death Eaters, didn't need a protection charm over their house. She was glad for that. She was also glad that Luna had a special proclivity for lying, and there was minimal chance Xenophilius Lovegood knew much more about his daughter's whereabouts than the Grangers knew about Hermione.

"Thanks for the updates, Royal. Let's move on to our perennial subject: the search for the Boy Who Lived. Robin? Any new sightings of Harry Potter?"

Harry jolted. His face went slightly pale. In a move Draco clearly thought was subtle, he edged closer and pressed their shoulders together.

"Harry Potter himself has not been spotted," Robin admitted, "But I'm sure we all remember the little addition to the Daily Prophet last month? Potter Lives! He and his band of helpers managed to get the word out, and it's our job now to carry on."

"Indeed, and those messages have been popping up all over Britain, have they not?"

"You said it. Train stations, toilets, walls all over Diagon Alley. There was mural in Godric's Hollow for about three hours." The correspondent laughed. "Word from Hogwarts is that it's recently been scrawled all over the third floor corridor."

Hermione turned away, wiping her eyes. “Sorry,” she muttered, wringing her hands. “God, I just — it makes such a difference, doesn’t it?”

The radio crackled and continued on, Lee Jordan’s familiar voice uncharacteristically serious. “What do you have to say to Harry Potter and his friends, if they’re listening?”

“Well, I’d just like them to know that we’re all with them. They’re not alone. There’s help out there if they know where to ask. And to Harry: welcome home.”

“Sorry it’s in such a state,” added Royal. “We’ll be pleased to meet you.”

“That’s all for *Potterwatch* today, listeners. We don’t know when we’ll be able to broadcast next, but keep twiddling those dials: we’ll be back. The password will be ‘Albus’. Keep each other safe: Keep faith. Good night.”

Voices faded into white noise, and Neville switched the wireless off. Hermione didn’t quite know what to say. To hear that they’d *helped*, that they’d really *done* something — her eyes flooded and spilled over. *Potter Lives*. She wanted to find the person who had left that message in a toilet cubicle near that Muggle university and send them flowers. Of course the graffiti wasn’t about them, not really, but they’d helped. They’d *helped*.

“Let’s go to London.”

Hermione wiped her eyes and looked at Harry, shocked.

“I mean it,” he said, jaw set. “Let’s go. Let’s see what the Order of the Phoenix has got going on.”

“Really?”

Harry nodded curtly. “Yeah, but with one request.”

Hermione examined Harry. He didn’t look worked up: a bit grey, and brittle around the chin. Nothing in the tent was shaking, anyway. “If it’s reasonable.”

“We don’t stay with them. We find our own place. At least at first.”

“All right,” Hermione said. Her nerves wouldn’t *love* being in such a populated place and not in a protected area, but it was always more difficult to find a wand in a woodpile. It wasn’t an impossible request, and if it got them all to meet with Professor McGonagall, possibly, it was worth it.

“London,” Ginny said, grinning. “Brilliant.”

“Hampstead Heath again?” asked Neville.

“So many nettles,” groaned Ron. “I’d rather with less nettles.”

Harry raised one hand. “I’ve got an idea,” he said.

*

Harry had explained their destination to Hermione and Ron as best he could, but he didn't fully believe it would work until they Apparated directly onto the platform. Harry didn't even fall over this time, which was an unexpected plus considering how filthy the tiling was.

"I don't like this much," Ginny said, her face tense.

"I do," Hermione said. "This was a brilliant plan, Harry. I'd never have thought of the Underground, and this is fairly close to their headquarters! No rain, as well. Obviously it's a bit depressing, but one can't have everything."

"This is really King's Cross?" Ron looked around the tunnel skeptically. "Looks not... as good."

"King's Cross York Road. It was shut down like fifty years ago." Harry looked around at the chipped walls, the graffiti, the dust. Grimy Flatmate had been obsessed with ghost stations; he was glad those droning hours over too much White Lightning hadn't been entirely wasted.

"I wonder if we'll see a dragon," Luna mused.

"Uh," Harry said, looking down the dark tunnel.

"They're more scared of you than you are of them," Neville said, with an encouraging smile.

"They breathe fire, yeah? And I've just got a magic stick made of wood so that seems... Unlikely."

"There aren't any dragons in the Underground, Luna," Hermione sighed, pulling tent poles out of her handbag.

Luna smiled. "You'll feel very silly when we're overrun by Welsh Greens in the middle of the night."

"Is this area really structurally sound?" Draco looked up at the curved ceiling, nose wrinkled. "It seems to be missing great hunks of rock all over — there."

"If everyone could stop whinging and *help* a little bit," Hermione said, looking pointedly at the tent poles.

Harry made his security charms extra strong, just in case Hermione was wrong about the Welsh Greens. Hermione had not been wrong once since Harry had met her, but he didn't want to take any chances with flying murderous Zippos.

*

Draco Malfoy was seventeen years old. He had exactly zero N.E.W.T.s, twenty-seven galleons and a wardrobe that was quickly beginning to run towards moth-eaten. He was currently living in a tent in the Muggle Underthingy, in a *tunnel* that looked like it was half a

breath from absolute *collapse*. If eleven-year-old Draco saw him now he would be *revolted* and probably would assume he had *head lice*.

Draco Malfoy also had Harry Potter in his bed, sleepy-eyed with his hair all over the place, so. That wasn't nothing.

"Neville's going to wake up," Harry murmured into Draco's mouth.

"I cannot possibly overstate how little I care," Draco touched Harry's cheek a little roughly, maybe. He looked good.

"Yeah, fuck it," Harry said. When he laughed his head tilted back, and Draco busied himself biting the skin.

"Not the fluxweed," Neville muttered, turning over in his bunk. "No, the Flutterby Bush."

Draco pulled his hand out of Harry's pyjama bottoms. "Uh."

"Yeah, bit of a mood-dampener," Harry agreed, rolling to his back. "Want to go for a walk?"

"In the creepy dark tunnel? No thanks."

Harry pulled him out of bed anyway, and because Draco was a sucker, he got dressed and followed him obligingly out of the tent. Hermione was on watch, reading a thick book next to the watch lantern.

"We're going on a walk," Harry announced.

"Are you?" Hermione looked up, eyebrows raised. "Sounds unlikely."

"We need to see the way out of the tunnel; get a sense for the surrounding area. We won't be long."

Hermione squinted up at them. "This is stupid. If you get separated again —"

"We're not going to," Harry said. "C'mon, Hermione. I'm the one who knows about this place. Better waste our time now than later, yeah?"

Hermione frowned. "Fine. But if you're not back within the hour you're doing the washing up for *months*."

Flickering Muggle lights illuminated the tunnel as they walked. Draco would never get used to the way Muggles lit things: he was used to the warm glow of gas-light, the yellow flicker of candle-flame. Muggles seemed to enjoy a sickly bluish white glare. It made Draco feel a bit ill.

"You take me to the nicest places," Draco said. He was trying not to breathe through his nose.

"Just give it a minute," Harry said, and Draco gave it a minute, because he was a soft touch and should be ashamed of himself.

A dot of light ahead grew larger as they walked until Draco could see where the tunnel opened up. Graffiti thickened along the brick until finally they were standing in open air, looking out over a rail-yard littered with abandoned metal detritus.

“Nice,” Harry said, beaming. “We’re not far at all.”

“I cannot fucking believe this is my life,” Draco said. He was standing in a murky puddle of what smelled like spilled petrol and looked like iridescent sick. The sky felt even lower than the tunnel, weirdly: grey and pressing down on his head. Draco wanted to cover his face. He wanted to go *home*. This was rubbish. His shoes were ruined and he’d never be able to afford new ones, and Harry Potter was an assault on Draco’s emotional integrity, and this was his *life*.

Harry’s smile faded. “What’s with you?”

“Nothing,” Draco spat out. He tried to move his shoes to a non-petrol area and knelt to see if he could siphon off some of the liquid. “These are bloody ruined, that’s all.”

“Okay? They’re just shoes.”

“These are *dragon-leather*. They’re meant to last for *decades*.” Decades of life not spent on the run, in disgusting Muggle cesspits.

“Purebloods are fucking weird,” Harry said. He stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Sirius Black doesn’t seem to care what his shoes are doing and he sounds even posher than you.”

“Black was in Azkaban for over a decade; I don’t think he’s an authority on footwear. Besides, Black doesn’t miss it, I don’t think.” Draco siphoned the worst of the muck off his shoe. It still looked oily. He stood up, working his jaw irritably. “I don’t know why — he’s better at this than me, I suppose.”

“I don’t think, like, being on the run from the government is a competition, mate. But if it were, I would be winning.”

Draco kicked him in the shin with his semi-ruined oxford, and Harry yelped in a way that was a little bit sexually appealing, which disturbed Draco on several levels, and then they fell back into a weird, tense silence. Harry watched him with his big, bright eyes and waited. Draco looked at the horrible ground.

“Spit it out,” Harry advised, after what could have been four to seven hours of tension.

“I miss it,” Draco said finally, wretchedly. “Sometimes I think I’d go back if I could. Not to — not what it’s like now. But before, when my mum was... I want it back. I want it back so badly.” He shut his eyes. He didn’t want to look at Harry. He was too ashamed.

“So?”

Draco opened one eye to squint at him. “What?”

“Were you expecting me to yell at you? You miss it. So what? I think it’d be pretty fucking weird if you didn’t. Sounds like you had a nice enough childhood, enough to eat, nice parents. We live in an abandoned Underground station at the minute. It’s full of rats. Who wouldn’t miss it?”

“But... They’re Death Eaters.”

“Right,” Harry said. “And you’re part of a resistance group against them. You kidnapped the Minister of fucking Magic. You’re harbouring like six fugitives. *You’re* wanted by the whole bloody lot of them, aren’t you? I don’t see the problem.”

“I didn’t join on purpose.” Draco swallowed hard, his voice cracking. “Potter, it was — I didn’t join because I *believed in the cause* or had any weird sense of heroic responsibility. I didn’t leave my family for grand moral reasons.”

“Okay. Why’d you leave, then?”

“I left because they were going to *kill* me,” Draco said, and the words ripped his throat open. He couldn’t stop. “My mum was trying to make alliances so that I didn’t have to... There were expectations. The Dark Lord lived with my family, my father helped bring him back — we were meant to be an example. I had to be a Death Eater, but I was soft. I didn’t have it in me to torture, or kill, or... It wasn’t some moral compunction. I just couldn’t do it, and my mother knew that, and she was trying to find a way to... I don’t know, get me out? I’m not exactly sure. They killed her before she could do anything. Everyone said it was an accident, but it wasn’t. So I left, because they were going to kill me next.”

Harry moved a little bit closer to him, inching his way forward like he was approaching a wild animal. “I’m sorry about your mum, but still not seeing the problem.”

“I was *scared*,” Draco said furiously. “Is that what you want to hear? I got spooked. I got skittish. I fled, and because I didn’t know where else to go I latched on to *them*. I knew Granger was planning something, and I convinced Luna and Neville I’d be an asset. I thought they’d protect me. Thought I’d live slightly longer with the bloody Gryffindors than on my own. That’s the only reason I’m here, do you understand? That’s it!”

“Okay,” Potter said.

“*Okay?* That’s all you’ve got to say about it? Harry, I’m no better than the bloody Death Eaters. I’m a *sham*. I’m a *leech*.”

“You’ve got this idea about yourself,” Harry said slowly. “You’ve got it in your head that you’re a traitor to both sides, that you’re no hero because you were scared, or something. No offence, but that’s a load of bollocks. Nobody made you do any of the stuff you did with us. Like, Diagon Alley, or Parkinson Park. You’ve risked your life loads of times for us.”

“That was just —”

“That was *just* fuck-all. Draco, it doesn’t fucking matter how you got here. You are here.”

Draco looked up at the slate grey clouds. "But I still want... I still want to go back, sometimes. Even after everything that happened."

"Yeah, that's a bit fucked up," Harry said. "But like, what isn't? You want to go back a little bit, but you don't. I still don't see the problem."

"I've done half the things I've done because I thought you were fit and I wanted to impress you."

Harry smirked. "Thanks, mate. I think you're okay-looking too."

"You really don't care?"

Harry shrugged. "I believe that you believe that."

Draco wanted to kick him in the shin again. "It's true!"

"Yeah, well, you've got a pretty casual relationship to the truth, so to be honest I'm going to go with what I think."

Draco was gaping unattractively enough at Harry that he was fairly certain any passers-by could do a complete dental history if they had the inclination. "*What?*"

"You're a bit dim, mate. Not sure if you know. Let's leave the thinking to me from now on, all right?"

Draco sputtered. "I want to go back because I don't want to be *poor*. It's humiliating. I don't know how to do anything, and you all have horrid table manners."

"Yeah, you're a right snob, you pillock." Harry was still smiling, horribly. Draco loved him. It was just the worst.

"If I had anywhere else to go, I'd hit you over the head, drag you across the world and leave everyone else to die. The only thing that's stopping me is shame, and, you know, financial constraints."

Harry laughed out loud. "Very caveman of you."

"I would," Draco yelled. Harry was not taking this at all seriously. Harry was a complete idiot and would not survive the month if he didn't get some sense of self-preservation. "I'd leave all of them and drag you to Australia. I don't give a toss about the country, really. I only care about it because I think *you* care about it, for some idiotic reason I'll never understand. You weren't even brought up in our world. And I miss having a house-elf! I loathe making my own bed. Sometimes I still think bigoted things. Sometimes I wonder if your Muggle upbringing fucked you up for our world for life. I wonder if your magical power is enough to compensate for seventeen years of..." Draco waved his hand vaguely. "You know, emotional problems."

"Maybe it's not."

“Shut up,” Draco said fiercely. “I hate how easily you took to everything, honestly. Except you’re awful at Potions. And your Herbology is shocking. I don’t think you can distinguish between dittany and asphodel.”

“Draco, we’ve got bigger problems than your weird guilt complex. For one thing, I can’t remember what either of those plants are.”

“You’re going to fail your O.W.L.,” Draco said. “Hermione will make her disappointed face.”

“Maybe.” Harry inched a little bit closer and then, very slowly, slid his arms around Draco’s back. It was like a hug from a very nervous marble statue, and Harry clearly had no idea where to put his stupid hands. It made Draco feel so much better that it should have been illegal. “Sorry about your stupid shoes.”

Draco’s awful heart beat so loud. This was horrible. Every time Draco thought, *that’s enough, that’s the most one could possibly feel about this handsome lunatic*, Harry went and said words or tried to *hug* him, and Draco went and had *more* insufferable emotions. He was the last of the Malfoys. He could never go home again, he would be off-balance and confused about social rituals for the rest of his life, and Draco thought — he’d do it all again. Fuck it. He’d burn an entire crate of dragon-leather loafers.

*

Hermione plotted their route with the trusty help of *London A-Z*. Their rather unglamorous hideout was well-located: only about a mile away from the safe house. Hermione checked the address about fifteen times as they walked into Islington, and squat brick buildings and rubbish-strewn pavement gave way to Georgian terraces with brightly coloured doors.

No one gave them much by way of a second glance. With their carefully innocuous clothes and scuffed trainers, the lot of them looked like any other group of teenagers roaming the streets after dark. Ginny bounded ahead of them along the narrow pavement, her red hair uncharmed for once. Harry hung back, hands stuffed into his coat pockets, looking at the quiet street with sullen suspicion. Hermione looked at Draco, who shook his head slightly. No reassuring chat, then. She dearly wanted to give one, but it would probably have been more for her benefit than Harry’s. Harry generally just wanted to get on with things, so she suspected Draco had the right idea.

Grimmauld Place must have been a very nice part of London a hundred years ago: the once-handsome terraces were large, with fine brickwork and ornate iron railings. Now there was a distinct smell of piss and rather a lot of rubbish left out everywhere.

“Come on,” Hermione said, and walked over to the patchy grass in the centre of the square. “Let’s pretend to be loitering teenagers for a minute.”

“We are loitering teenagers,” Ginny pointed out.

“What’s that Muggle teenagers drink? Cold John’s?” Ron looked over at Harry, who managed a slight smile.

“Yeah, mate, close enough,” he said.

Hermione produced the scrap of parchment and began to pass it round. *The headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London.*

“Memorise that,” she said, and once it had gone past everyone’s nose she burned it surreptitiously in her palm. “Now think about what you just read.”

“Holy shit,” Harry said, blinking at the terraces across the street. “Is that... normal?”

Luna smiled. “I’ve never seen a Fidelius Charm in practice before. It’s rather lovely, isn’t it?”

“Could do with a bit of a wash,” Ron said.

Ginny shook her head. “Nah, it’s goth. That’s the vibe. Goth underground resistance headquarters are really in for ninety-eight. ”

Neville looked over at Draco curiously. “This used to be the Black house, right? Have you been here before?”

“Not since I was small,” Draco said, shoulders going up towards his ears. “What, are we just going to stand out here and tempt fate?”

“I do so love tempting fate,” Hermione said, and looked around the square. A stereo blared Oasis from one broken window, but there was no one looking down at them. “Quick, let’s go.”

They all clustered together on the steps. Hermione knocked sharply on the door, and she heard a series of metallic clangs before a little window opened up above the twisted serpent knocker. She caught a glimpse of fierce eyes before the little window closed, and there was another clanking sound before the door opened up.

“Inside, inside,” someone said, and they tumbled into a dim, dank hallway lit by flickering gas lamps. Hermione sneezed. The whole thing was encrusted with dust and cobwebs.

“I don’t remember it looking like this,” Draco muttered.

“Miss Granger, what creature sat in the corner when you first visited my office at Hogwarts?”

Hermione racked her memory. “A grindylow, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.” Remus lowered his wand. “And you can vouch for the others?”

Hermione looked back at everyone: Neville, poking ill-advisedly at a serpent-shaped candelabra; Draco, very pale; Harry, shoulders squared and clutching his wand; Ginny, watching a slumbering portrait of a white-haired woman with a speculative eye; Luna, who appeared to be examining her hair for split ends, but who could just as easily be checking for a stash of Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder hidden in her braid. And Ron, who was looking back at her with one quirked eyebrow.

“Of course,” she said.

“Lovely. Quiet through here,” Remus whispered, with a suspicious look at a pair of long, moth-eaten curtains. He led them through the dank hallway, down narrow stone steps and through a creaky door into a basement kitchen. A long wooden table stretched the length of the large stone room, littered with empty wine bottles and rolls of parchment, quills and maps. Every chair was filled, and over a dozen pairs of eyes were fixed intently on the new arrivals — mostly, to be honest, on Harry.

“Er,” Harry said. “Hello.”

“Mr. Potter,” said Professor McGonagall, rising to her feet. She surveyed them calmly through her square spectacles. “I’m Minerva McGonagall. Welcome to Grimmauld Place.”

The faces of the Order of the Phoenix were shadowed in the flickering candlelight. What with the medieval decor, they could have been two neighbouring kingdoms meeting to broach the prospect of an alliance. Hermione stood in front of her all-time academic idol and she felt — undiminished. They were neighbouring kingdoms, and the war would be won when they combined forces. Hermione realised with a little thrill that they didn’t *have* to listen to McGonagall, not if they didn’t agree with her. Hermione’s band of teenaged delinquents hadn’t done that badly so far, had they?

Nothing could quash the roar of possibility that paced like a lion through Hermione’s body. It wouldn’t be easy. Hermione suspected that she would have to fight rather hard for a place at this table; and if Lucius Malfoy had given away what he had seen at Parkinson Park, Voldemort’s increased awareness of Harry’s possible contacts would not bode well for anyone. Harry had been rubbing his scar lately as if he had a constant migraine. Ginny still thought that they ought to get into the murder business, and Luna was doing nothing to stop her. Ron’s guilt about his family ate at him more and more every day. Draco kept looking at Professor McGonagall like he was expecting detention. Neville — well, Neville still didn’t know that Harry and Draco were sleeping together, and one of these days he was in for a rude and rather explicit awakening.

It didn’t matter. None of it: the Death Eaters, the cowardly ex-Minister, Voldemort himself. Hermione believed with all her heart. Hope burned inside her skin so fiercely it was a wonder she wasn’t lit up like a torch. They could do this. They could burn the rot from the country like a wildfire and start again.

“Hello, Professor McGonagall,” Hermione said, and took a seat at the table. “Did you have a nice Christmas?”

McGonagall’s mouth twitched. “It was fine, apart from the continual decline of our nation. Shall we begin?”

Hermione grinned. “Let’s,” she said, and folded her hands together. “We have a lot to cover.”

End Notes

Thanks so much for the warm reception to this bonkers tale of rogue Morris Minors and top lads, I've enjoyed (mostly) every minute. This story is complete and there will not be sequel, or at least not one from me -- if you are interested in exploring this universe yourself, you are more than welcome to have a go!

For interested parties there is a tag for this project at my tumblr [here](#), and a soundtrack [here](#) on 8tracks, or Spotify [here](#).

Works inspired by this one

[Hearsay](#) by [phornex](#)

[[podfic](#)] [Hermione Granger's Hogwarts Crammer for Delinquents on the Run](#) by [Lazulus](#)

[Pater Patronus](#) by [Zoya1416](#)

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