

Written on the Heart

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by [who_la_hoop](#)

Summary

Harry doesn't *mind* that so many Slytherins from his year have returned to finish their NEWTs, really he doesn't. It's just – do they have to be so friendly? He's not prejudiced, really he's not. It's just – they've got to be up to something, right? Unnerved by the attention he's attracting from everyone – the Slytherins are the least of it, to be fair – and struggling with a raft of changes to Hogwarts itself, Harry wishes he could be happy that one constant remains: Draco Malfoy really fucking hates him.

When he's hit by an illegal love-spell though, Harry finds he has more to worry about than whether or not Blaise Zabini actually wants to be his friend. For if everyone affected has been blessed – or cursed, by the look on Malfoy's face – with a magical tattoo revealing the name of their soulmate, what does it mean that Harry's skin remains completely bare?

Notes

Dear Noeon, I have been brewing an eighth year epic for a long time, and I fear your wonderfully inspiring sign-up was just the excuse I needed to let it out. I am not sure if it's an imposition to get a fic this long in an exchange, so I feel I need to say: I absolutely won't be offended if you give it a try but it's not quite for you. That said, it was written with love, and I do very much hope you like it! ♥ ♥ ♥

I want to express my gratitude to the mods, too, who are all kinds of wonderful, and who at one point must have feared I was going to ask for an extension that lasted till Erised 2017.

cough

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

- Translation into Français available: [Tatoué sur mon cœur](#) by [Wynhilde](#)
- Translation into Русский available: [Написано на сердце](#) by [Lian21](#), [ледиСоль \(ladySol\)](#)
- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: [铭刻在心](#) by [Bluebubbling](#)

Introducing Blaise Zabini, King of Wankers

Sunday 1st September, 10.55 a.m. (One year, four months, five hours and twelve minutes and seven seconds since the Battle of Hogwarts)

Blaise Zabini enters the Hogwarts Express train compartment so quickly that Harry barely has a chance to register who it is before the wanker is practically sitting in his lap.

“Shove up, will you?” Zabini says, with the air of someone who’s aggrieved to find he’s practically sitting in someone’s lap.

This strikes Harry as unfair. At least – it would, if he wasn’t so busy trying to process the fact that *Blaise Zabini is sitting on him*. The fucker appears to be made entirely of sharp edges and lead.

“Greg stopped off to have a shit, and Merlin knows what Millicent’s pissing about doing – beating seven shades of crap out of Pansy, possibly – but they and all the others will be here soon to join us,” Zabini continues, sliding off Harry’s leg but still sitting far too close for comfort. “Why the hell are you sitting in the dark, Potter?” he adds, leaning over Harry and yanking at the cord of the closed blind.

“I really wouldn’t, Zabini,” Hermione says, in tones of ice.

The first inch of window reveals mostly noses, which rise in concert with the blind to reveal mouths – open, and already squealing with excitement. It’s ear-splitting, even through the glass, and is soon joined by waves of painfully loud applause. The people on the platform outside are so close to the carriage that it’s a wonder they haven’t fallen down the gap. Harry, uncharitably, rather wishes that they *would*, except then the train wouldn’t leave on time, and at least when the Hogwarts Express is moving it’ll just be him, Ron and Hermione until they get to Scotland.

Him, Ron, Hermione and *Blaise fucking Zabini*, he mentally amends.

Zabini, who has his elbow practically up Harry’s nose, makes a small noise of disgust and smoothly rolls the blind down again before leaning back.

Harry doesn’t have time to feel pleased there’s no longer an elbow in his face, though, because Zabini – who seems to have more cheek than an Erumpent’s arse – leans back in his seat and *spreads his legs*, as if he’s settling in for the long haul.

Well, Harry’s not putting up with *that*. He’s going to . . . He’s going to . . . cringe away from Blaise Zabini’s warm, muscled thigh, as if being Slytherin is contagious, and clonk his elbow against the window in the process, like a massive twat.

“Ow,” Harry says, making the whole situation infinitely more dignified, and looks over to Hermione in mute appeal. Ron seems to have been struck equally dumb, so it’s clearly down to her to tell Zabini to fuck off.

Hermione gives him a look that makes him feel about an inch tall, but squares her shoulders and sits up ramrod straight. “I’m *sorry*, but what exactly are you here for?” she says, in her arsiest – and loudest – of tones. The screaming outside the window has died down, but the applause is still going, and snatches of the Weird Sisters’ latest smash hit – ‘He saved us all’ – filter through the window, sung with more enthusiasm than musical talent.

Ron, who up till now has been gaping at Zabini with his mouth open, almost jumps out of his skin when Hermione speaks, nearly falling off his seat. He makes a heroic but useless attempt to style it out, doing some large stretching movements and rolling his neck, as if he’s just too restless to sit still. Harry supposes that Hermione *did* sound a bit like Mrs Weasley does when they’re late for dinner, and it must give a chap pause for thought to hear his mum’s ‘telling off’ voice coming out of his girlfriend’s mouth.

“I love you, Harry!” a girl screams outside, throat raw with passion.

Harry manages not to wince; he’s had a lot of practice. Hermione slides her wand out of her sleeve and slashes it at the window in an equally practiced move, wrapping their carriage in a thick, almost tangible silence, before turning to give Ron an incredulous look.

“What?” Ron says, rather high-pitched, and folds his arms.

Zabini clears his throat, and Hermione and Ron both turn to glare at him. Harry wants to join in, but it’s hard to glare at someone sitting right next to you, invading your personal space – he thinks if he turns and gives it a proper try, he’ll probably end up with his face pressed into Zabini’s perfectly groomed Afro.

“Did you say you’re sorry, Hermione? Please, don’t be,” Zabini says airily, and when Harry sneaks a sidelong glance at him he’s smiling at her. Except, it appears to be less of a smile and more of a wordless love spell – Hermione’s actually going red, a kind of mottled, splotchy colour that blotches up her neck and turns the tips of her ears into witchlights.

Of course, it could be that she’s just been rendered speechless by Zabini’s sheer cheek, Harry thinks doubtfully, and wonders if Zabini has noticed that Ron is starting to twitch. He can’t decide if it would be a good thing if Ron decked him or not – while Zabini undoubtedly deserves it, getting involved in a fistfight with a Slytherin before the Hogwarts Express has even left the station would be a new low for them all.

To Harry’s semi-disappointment, Zabini drops the smile faster than an oncoming Bludger. “Oi! In here, Pans!” he calls through the open compartment door, his attention suddenly entirely on the corridor outside and revealing, under his relaxed façade, an underlying tension.

Hermione stiffens, and Harry feels a matching rigidity come over his own limbs. When he thinks about Pansy Parkinson – which isn’t often, if he can help it – he feels nothing but contempt, which in turn makes him feel uncomfortable right down to his toes. He doesn’t *want* to be the sort of bloke who holds others in contempt. She should stop being so contemptible, then, a tiny spiteful voice in his brain adds, and he can’t think how to logically counter that.

Pansy shoots through the door as if the Dementors of Azkaban are after her, yanking it shut with a bang that makes Harry jump and clonk his elbow on the wall again. He's going to have a whopper of a bruise. She's got her wand clenched in her fist, and Harry has to knot his fingers into the fabric of his trouser leg to stop himself from casting *Expelliarmus* on her, just to be on the safe side.

Zabini notices, shooting a swift, sidelong glance at Harry's hand, and then for some baffling reason pretends he hasn't, quickly suppressing the anger that flashes across his face as he looks away rather than saying something snide about Gryffindors and trust issues. Harry doesn't know Zabini very well, but he doesn't *not* know him, after six years at school together. He's classic Slytherin – all snotty pride and pathetic sarcasm, like the rest of them.

"*Colloportus!*" Pansy manages to get out, rather breathlessly, and swishes her wand at the door – clearly just in time, as Millicent Bulstrode, her hair cut short and spiky and spelled a dirty blonde, her nostrils flaring, peers through the door's glass panel and rattles the handle with some force.

Pansy, still facing the door, takes a few careful steps back, her chin raised and her expression catty – Merlin, Harry dislikes her – but she clearly hasn't counted on Hermione's handbag being on the floor. She trips and all but falls backwards, coming down hard on Harry's foot and crashing into the window with a squeal.

By some miracle, she doesn't bring down the blind – until Millicent, with an impatient shake of her wand, casts her voice with Howler-like volume into the carriage: "Let me in, you cowbag, before I pull your head off and feed it to Lady Voldemort!"

Pansy starts, and for a moment she and the blind become one.

"What the ever-loving fuck . . .?" she says when she sees what's now out there, disentangling herself enough to sit down heavily – on Ron.

The massed, swaying crowd outside the carriage window peers in, standing on tiptoe and craning their necks to get the best view. Their mouths are moving, and their hands are flailing, but Hermione's Silencing Charm holds. It's clear they don't mean any harm, but still – it's strangely threatening. Harry plasters a fixed grin on his face and gives a quick, awkward wave, before looking away; it's him they're all gesturing to, of course it is. On the plus side, they're so tightly packed together that it's unlikely anyone will have room to take a photo, but he gloomily expects there'll be half a dozen stories in the press tomorrow speculating over the exact distance between him and Pansy, and whether the fact she's sitting on Ron's lap means a love triangle, or that Harry's secretly engaged to her and this is classic misdirection.

The fact that she's wearing a very short skirt, and so appears to be mostly leg, is going to make things *so* much fucking worse.

"Is that your mum out there at the back, Pansy?" Zabini murmurs spitefully.

"Fuck *you*," Pansy says.

Harry stares fixedly at the floor of the train carriage – the threadbare carpet really could do with replacing. It's not that he thinks her mum really is out there, but lots of his classmates' mums *will be*, and for his own sanity he's already adopted the policy of not fucking looking. A crowd made of up strangers is fine – a crowd made up of people he knows, and who he might actually like and respect if they weren't sodding wailing and trying to touch his arm, as if he's Felix Felicis in human form, is a different proposition.

By the time he looks up, Pansy – still sitting on Ron, who's holding himself as rigid as if he's been Petrified, but whose blood appears to have all rushed to his ears – is slipping her wand back up her sleeve, and the blind is firmly back in place, the compartment shrouded in gloom once more.

"I hope you haven't fucking *forgotten* I'm out here, ready to destroy you, Pansy?" booms out Millicent Bulstrode, happily from the other side of the door, making them all jump.

Zabini snorts. "Your misdeeds finally catch up with you, eh, Pans?" He sounds like he's enjoying himself.

Pansy's face mottles red, and she shoots a hunted glance at Harry.

Well. Harry *hadn't* been thinking about her trying to sell him out to Voldemort – he really wants to be past that, and he knows, objectively, how scared she must have been, and heard, during the seemingly endless trials, all the sodding, entirely reasonable, excuses for why she had no courage, no morals and no humanity – but he fucking is *now*. And so, by the expression on her face – shame, mingled with terror and a strong vein of spiteful defiance – is she. He wishes, just a tiny bit, that he was dead. It would be less awkward all round.

Although, as they stare at each other and he can feel his lips start to pull into an expression of disdain he doesn't want to own (she's got a look about her that experience has taught him means she's about to start to cry, and he still can't summon any sympathy for her, what sort of *arsehole* does that make him?), he thinks, with rising hysteria, that the afterlife had featured more train stations than expected, so maybe not even death would be a fucking release from this shit.

He has to say something, though, to break what's become a horrible silence. What should he say? Something dignified. Maybe he should lie and tell her he forgives her; it would be a good lie, and he really *wants* it to be true. Looking at her now – damp eyed and trembling with emotion – he thinks he's got the closest to actually meaning it he's managed yet.

Vulnerability suits her, Harry thinks, suddenly feeling very tired and very unkind – if he squints he can almost pretend she's human, rather than someone who tried to barter the safety of the wizarding world for her own life.

Maybe he should say—

"*Lady Voldemort?*" Ron bursts out from beneath Pansy, clearly unable to hold it in any longer, just as Hermione's self-control cracks enough to allow her to clear her throat in an extremely meaningful way. At the same time, another thing cracks: the door. It splinters into two pieces, which fall down with an accompanying crash of breaking glass, the noise only

partially covered by a shrill blast of the train's whistle as the Express pulls away from the station.

"Bollocks," Millicent says, appearing in a cloud of sawdust. "And what *about* Lady V?" she adds suspiciously.

Ron opens his mouth to reply, but is overtaken by a coughing fit.

Millicent narrows her eyes, as if Ron's coughing is some kind of obscure insult, and then turns a mean smile on Pansy, taking in the legs, the vulnerability and the damp eyes in one sweeping, disdainful glance. "I know you said you wanted to net a pure-blood this year to keep your mama happy, Pansy, but I didn't think you'd stoop as low as *Ronald Weasley*."

Curiously, Millicent's spite seems to give Pansy courage, and she seems to remember she has a spine. "*Net?*" Pansy says scornfully. "You've been reading too many of those awful Regency romance novels, Bullers. They've turned your brain to mush. I am merely using Weasley as a chair – it's about all he's good for." She stands up, and yanks at her skirt. "Oh, and fuck you!" she adds loudly, over Ron's splutter of rage, picking her way between knees to squeeze in next to Zabini.

Zabini shifts closer to Harry to give her room. Harry begins to fear for his internal organs.

Zabini leans in towards Harry's ear confidentially, and Harry has to steel himself not to flinch away. If he does, he'll knock himself out on the train window. "Lady Voldemort is Bullers' new cat," Zabini says, with every appearance of enjoyment.

"Voldie for short." Millicent crunches over the broken glass and makes space for herself next to Hermione by the simple expedient of sitting down, slowly but inexorably. Harry can see the prospect of Millicent Bulstrode sitting on her knee flash through Hermione's face, and she squashes up to Ron as fast as if she'd Apparated there. "And I've changed my mind," Millicent adds, settling in with a smug expression. "I wouldn't feed you to her, Pans. She'd probably be sick, poor thing."

"All I *said* was that – that . . ." Pansy starts strong – her voice rich with indignation – but she fades fast.

"That Bullers' new hairstyle makes her look like Voldemort's uglier sister?" Zabini says sweetly, and sticks his tongue out at Millicent when she glowers at him.

"Voldemort the cat, or Voldemort the Dark Lord?" Hermione asks in tones of sick horror, as if she can't stop herself.

"The cat, obviously!" Pansy says. And then, when Millicent turns a vengeful eye on her and fingers her wand speculatively, squeaks: "She's a very pretty cat! Goodness, Bullers, I didn't know you'd take it so *personally*. If *Draco* had said it, you'd have—"

"Hexed him into next Tuesday," Millicent says gravely, but tucks her wand away again. "You can judge how pretty Voldie is yourself, Granger," she adds, extremely awkwardly, "when

she makes an appearance – she’s having a constitutional through the train at the moment. Too much time in the cat basket makes for a restless puss, you know.”

Zabini snorts, then leans forward and cranes his neck through the remnants of the door. “Where’s Greg? Don’t tell me he’s still on the loo. The man can shit for England, that’s for sure.”

“So vile,” Pansy murmurs, shuddering.

“Now, now, Pans. Having a good digestive system is nothing to be sniffed at,” Zabini says, and then pauses expectantly.

A tortured expression flits across Ron’s face: pleasure at a poo joke, combined with annoyance that it’s been made by Blaise Zabini, of all people, and so can’t be laughed at under any circumstances.

Harry finds himself unable to find the joy in either the joke – which is worth a mediocre snigger at best, in his opinion – or Ron’s obvious torment. He’s feeling deeply unsettled, and the worst of it all is that he knows exactly why.

It isn’t that Blaise Zabini is sitting so close that Harry can feel his breath on his cheek.

It isn’t that Millicent Bulstrode’s named her latest cat after *Voldemort*, and he’s practically having to sit on his hands to stop himself from telling her about the time Hermione accidentally Polyjuiced herself into one of her pets, what feels like a lifetime ago.

It isn’t that he’s learned more than he cares to – more than anyone cares to, surely – about Gregory Goyle’s toilet habits, and that soon Goyle will emerge to try to either stand on his foot or sit on his lap, he expects, judging by the pattern so far.

It isn’t even that he’s becoming increasingly suspicious about why no one’s come to find out what that crashing noise was.

It’s Pansy’s casual mention of Draco sodding Malfoy.

Harry knows Malfoy’s coming back to Hogwarts too this year – McGonagall made an appointment with him in his temporary office in the Ministry to tell him specifically, with a funny look in her eye, as if she thought he couldn’t cope, or something, who the fuck knows – but there’s knowing it and there’s . . . *knowing* it. Harry wipes his palms on his trouser legs, suddenly sweating slightly, and tries not to think about the last time he saw Malfoy, and the look of dreadful, helpless rage on his face.

He’s aware he’s not making a very good fist of it when Hermione suddenly says, in a determined tone, “Not that I’m not enjoying this little chat . . .” and leaves a pause full of unmistakeable meaning. She’s always been able to read him like a book – and given how thoroughly Hermione reads books, he sometimes can’t decide if it’s a blessing or a curse.

“I’m so glad,” Zabini says, with every appearance of honesty, and does the whole ‘you’re the only girl in the whole world, Hermione Granger’ smile thing again.

Harry is almost impressed, despite himself. It must take real dedication and practice to be such a slippery, manipulative scumbag.

“Listen, you wanker—” Ron starts, and then stops, uncertainly. The Slytherins all seem to have developed selective hearing loss, and are peering out into the corridor expectantly.

Harry catches himself digging his fingernails into the palm of his hand, and makes himself stop. There are half-moon indents in his skin.

“What’s that stench?” Zabini says airily, fanning the air in front of him and wrinkling his nose.

“It’s you, ass-wipe,” Gregory Goyle says with razor-sharp wit, lumbering into the doorway and staring around balefully at the absence of seats. “Who fucked with the door?”

“Bullers,” Pansy says, a bit too quickly.

Millicent snorts. “Grass.”

Harry begins to wonder if Zabini has set a timer, and the whole of Slytherin house is going to attempt to squeeze into the carriage, in five-minute intervals.

“Huh,” Goyle says, and does some more of the baleful staring.

“For Merlin’s sake,” Hermione suddenly snaps. “*Capacious Extremis*,” she incants, flicking her wand at first one seat and then the other in a workmanlike manner. The train compartment seats expand with an ominous creak, extending into a space that isn’t there but not seeming to find that an issue.

Goyle grunts something that could have been *thank you* – or, then again, could not have – and stomps inside the compartment, narrowly missing becoming one with the wood of the door as Hermione casts a *Reparo* with more force than strictly necessary.

“How many of you lot are sodding left?” Harry asks, overcome with exasperation that Hermione seems to have given up, and any minute now Malfoy is going to show up and send everything in Harry’s life to shit. How had he ever thought he could do this? Why on *earth* had he allowed Kingsley to persuade him that, after a year as an unofficial Auror, going back to Hogwarts to finish up his NEWTs was a good idea?

The short silence that follows his question seems to last a very long time. Really, almost as long as the train journey up to Scotland itself – and it occurs to Harry to wonder, for the first time, why it *has* to take so long, given that it runs on magic. He wouldn’t mind if it got them all there, say, right now, so he could flee to Gryffindor Tower. If he takes his meals in the common room, he decides, then with any luck he can swing it so that he doesn’t have to see a single Slytherin for the rest of the year.

“You lot?” Millicent repeats, after about a million years, give or take. Her voice is flat. “Well, Vince is still dead, you know, so he probably won’t turn up. Otherwise, I’m afraid it’s mostly our parents who are in Azkaban, Potter. You should know – it was you who put them there.”

“*Millie*,” Zabini snaps. It’s a strange contrast – his fucked-off tone, mixed with the unexpected pet name.

“Yes, all right, Blaise, I know,” Millicent says calmly.

Well, this is fun, Harry thinks, his eyes feeling hot and stingy. Fuck this. No, really – fuck this and the Thestral it rode in on. Why is *he* being made to feel bad here? All the Death Eaters had needed to do to not get sent to jail was *not be fucking Death Eaters*. It’s hardly like they tripped and fell on the Dark Mark, now, is it?

A memory of Malfoy’s expression during his and his parents’ trial comes back to him again, as it does most whenever he doesn’t want it to.

“It wasn’t *just* Harry,” Hermione says indignantly. “He was one of the fifty Wizengamot members! It wasn’t all down to him. And besides,” she adds in a very prefect-like voice, “he just saw that justice was done. You can’t blame him for that!”

While it’s all true, Harry thinks gloomily as the atmosphere thickens into something poisonous to life, it’s less than helpful of Hermione to point it out. She hasn’t really considered her audience.

Harry almost feels happy when the door shoots open again and stops her speaking any more home truths, or waxing lyrical on what a great honour it was for him to be called to serve on the Wizengamot at his age. The almost-happiness is, of course, combined with the cold Malfoy-dread, but a bit of cold dread helps liven life up, really, he’s sure of it.

Never has Harry been so glad to see Theodore Nott before. OK, so the man resembles a mutant cross between a rabbit and a runner bean, and as he’s never actually *been* glad to see Nott before it’s a fairly low bar, but that’s beside the point. A distraction is a distraction, even if it has teeth like that.

Nott looks around the carriage, and he appears to see no one except Harry.

And Harry remembers – trying to not to wilt under Nott’s flat, dead gaze – that OK, yes, Nott’s father *is* one of the few Death Eaters not currently residing in Azkaban at the Ministry’s pleasure, but that’s mainly because he’s in a spell-induced coma in St Mungo’s and it was considered unlikely that he would survive the transfer.

“Are we really doing this?” Nott says, gaze not wavering although the words clearly aren’t aimed at Harry.

Ron gives a low hiss of breath, as if he’s just uncovered a plot.

“A bit,” Zabini says, and then adds cheerfully, “though it’s not going *quite* as well as I’d hoped, eh Harry?” He digs his elbow into Harry’s side, as if he’s in on the joke. “Come and sit down, Theo.”

Nott doesn’t sit. “I’ll go and get Draco,” he says, and Harry can feel his face *do* something – he’s not sure what, but he can feel his muscles twitching, and Nott’s expression shifts into

something knowing and supercilious, so whatever face Harry's pulling it clearly isn't doing him any favours.

"Sit *down*," Zabini says, suddenly sounding rather less friendly. "Draco knows where we are. He needs to pull the broomstick out of his arse and get with the programme."

The *programme*? Harry thinks – uncomfortably conscious that there *is* some kind of plot, of course there is, even if so far it just appears to be 'talk to Potter and not hex him'.

Nott sits, though, and Harry finds it hard to concentrate. Nott's still *looking* at him, although he's dropped the supercilious look in favour of his initial expression – it isn't a glare, and that makes it worse, somehow. There's a blankness behind it that Harry's seen on too many faces over the past year – and not just on those of the enemy.

He supposes he shouldn't think of his Slytherin classmates as the enemy. He's tried very hard not to, and mostly he manages it, except in the middle of the night – and no man can be blamed for the thoughts that run through his head at three a.m., he feels sure.

Ron clears his throat, and then goes a bit red when everyone turns to look at him. "Er, right," he says, lifting his chin in an imitation of bravery. "Are you planning to fuck off then now, or what?"

It *is* bravery, more or less, and Harry feels impressed, but Ron's phrased it all wrong. Any second now, Zabini will say . . .

"No," he says, in that sweet, honest tone that's already inspiring Harry to rise up and cast a Full Body Bind on the fucker. How has he never *noticed* before how irritating Zabini is? "I'd say we could play Exploding Snap," he continues, dripping sunshine and unicorns, "but perhaps we'd better wait for Draco. You know how testy he can get if he feels we're not letting him be leader."

Hermione snorts, and Harry makes himself a promise that he will look death full in the eye before he ever plays Exploding Snap willingly with Draco Malfoy.

"We could play Exploding Weasley," Pansy says, sotto voce, and rolls her eyes when Zabini shoots her a warning look.

Harry sneaks a glance at Ron – he does have a certain crimson-tinge to his skin which suggests that if someone *were* to open a book on the likelihood of him spontaneously combusting, bunging in a couple of galleons would be a couple of galleons well spent.

"No, but," Ron says, making another heroic but undoubtedly pointless attempt to make the Slytherins do the right thing and sodding *leave them alone*, "are you seriously saying that you lot are planning to sit with us all the way to Hogwarts?"

"With a mind that sharp, it's a wonder you haven't cut yourself," Pansy murmurs.

"What was that?" Ron says, loudly and arsily, and Pansy squares her shoulders and opens her mouth and—

The door slides open.

Harry tries to breathe, but finds it irritatingly difficult; his heart seems to be trying to break a record for speed, and his stomach is attempting to Apparate to Australia without the rest of him. He doesn't need to look to know that it's Malfoy, but he can't stop his gaze from skittering over to the doorway, taking Malfoy in in pieces – a flash of hair so blonde it's basically white, shoes polished to a shine, the sharp edges of sharp tailoring, skin as pale as death.

“Chin up, Draco,” Millicent says, inexplicably. “Come and sit next to me.”

Harry doesn't want to look, but he still can't stop himself. He's going to catch Malfoy's eye if he's not careful. Not that Malfoy is looking at *him* – he's carefully avoiding looking in Harry's direction.

This is, irritatingly, not a comfort.

“Stop *dithering*, you dickhead, and sit down,” Zabini says, after Malfoy's stood there for several uncomfortable, interminable seconds, doing a bang-up imitation of a statue.

Malfoy's rigid composure slips, and he half-turns to glare at Zabini – but misses, and ends up looking Harry full in the face.

Harry almost gives himself whiplash he looks away so quickly – but not before the way Malfoy's expression instantly slips into raw, unhappy hatred is seared into his brain.

Harry gloomily decides he must hate himself and enjoy pain, because he can't stop himself from looking back at Malfoy again, his eyes moving as if they've been spelled to. Is . . . is Malfoy *shaking*? Just as Harry decides that yes, he is, and if Malfoy is visibly trembling with rage then it would probably be wise to reach for his wand, Malfoy takes a clumsy step backwards.

“I can't do this,” he says, his tone unspeakably chill, despite the words, and takes another hasty step out of the carriage and into the corridor. His wand is suddenly in his hand, and he jabs it at the door, which crashes shut as he strides off.

It's a new wand, Harry notices, trying to suppress the sudden anger that flashes through him. He gave Draco's wand back! Why did he need a new one? Did the wanker think it was *tainted* by Harry using it, or something?

He's up and out of his seat before he's thought it through.

“Don't bother,” Pansy says with an edge to her voice. “If he wants to be pathetic, Potter, just let him.”

“You're hardly one to talk!” Harry snaps.

Pansy sits up very straight. “I'm *here*, aren't I? And I'm trying *extremely hard*.”

“Yes, but the question is *why*,” Hermione cuts in. “Come on, all of you – what's your game?”

“Game?” Zabini answers quickly, and smiles a quicksilver, insincere grin. “We just want to be friends. Isn’t it obvious?”

Harry feels a bit like he’s caught between Scylla and Charybdis – inside the compartment, a bunch of nasty fuckers pretending they want to be his friend; outside, a single nasty fucker who wouldn’t piss on him if he was on fire.

His feet make the decision for him, and he’s in the corridor – calls of ‘Just shout if you need us, Harry’ (Hermione, concerned) and ‘Not the closest loo, if you value your life!’ (Zabini, sarcastic) following after him – before he’s decided exactly why he’s chasing after Malfoy, and what the bloody hell he’s going to say to him if he’s still out there.

Malfoy is, of course, not there.

What’s there is the answer to a small mystery: Luna, sitting cross-legged on the floor with her back against the wall. She’s holding a thick scroll covered in dense handwriting in her left hand, and her wand is raised in her right. Light, so thick it’s almost tangible, streams from the wand, rising up to the ceiling and then waterfaling down on both her left and right. She is, Harry realises, creating some sort of barrier on both sides of the corridor, preventing anyone from entering this section of it.

Anyone, that is, apart from the people she sodding *let in*.

Luna looks up and smiles seraphically. “Hello, Harry,” she says. “Did you have a good summer?”

“Um,” Harry says dubiously. He would admit, without too much pressing, that he loves Luna – but sometimes he can’t tell if she’s stupid, or if (more likely) she thinks *he’s* stupid and there’s something she wants to point out without actually coming straight out and saying it. Summer had passed in a blur of sentencing, of the wicked being sent away to suffer for their crimes – the climax of months of preparation, to ensure justice was done, and done in public. Was that good? Harry thinks so, most of the time. “I suppose so. Er, what are you doing, Luna?”

Luna looks surprised that he has to ask. “Oh, just reading a letter that Rolf wrote to me, you know.”

Harry nearly falls into the trap of asking who the hell Rolf is, and what he has to do with anything, but dodges it with consummate skill. “No – the spell thing.”

“Oh! This?” Luna says. “I’m just doing a favour for a friend.”

Harry waits.

“Did you need something?” Luna asks, and then cocks her head as if she’s listening to something Harry’s not saying. “He’ll forgive you, you know, Harry. You just need to give him time.”

Harry wonders who she's talking about – it would be most irritating if it was Malfoy, he thinks, so sod's law that's exactly who she means. "I was looking for Malfoy," he says, trying not to be irritated, either way.

"Yes, I know," Luna says and looks around as if Malfoy might be lurking in a corner somewhere. "He's not here though," she says – redundantly.

"He'll *forgive* me?" Harry repeats, face suddenly blazing hot and nerves on fire with the outrage of it.

"Don't you want him to?" Luna asks gravely.

Harry swallows hard, trying to choke down the knot of emotion that seems permanently stuck in his throat. "Malfoy can fuck right off."

"Yes, I'm sure he can," Luna says with utmost seriousness. "But Harry – do you want him to?"

And then – and again, because it's Luna, Harry can't tell if she's genuinely forgotten why she's casting the spell in the first place, or if she's trying to teach him some kind of obscure lesson – she stops casting the barrier spell.

Harry takes in the fact that what seems like the whole wizarding world is also on the train – all sitting in the corridor, waiting for their chance to paw at him – and leaps for the door to the compartment, dragging Luna in behind him and sliding the door shut with a bang.

Zabini reacts with surprising speed and insight, and is on his feet and strengthening Harry's locking spell – misting the glass opaque at the same time – practically before Harry's cast it. He gives Luna a chiding look.

"Don't look at me that way, Blaise," Luna says serenely, then turns to Harry. "They just want to say hello, you know," she says, and sits down next to Pansy. "They're only people."

"I don't know most of them though," Harry says – and it's true. He barely recognised anyone out there. It gives him pause for thought that the people he knows best at school are those there in the carriage with him.

"You don't know them *yet*," Luna says cheerfully. "Isn't it nice that so many people have transferred to Hogwarts because they want to meet you, Harry?" And before Harry can protest that no, it *isn't* nice in the slightest, she's raised her wand. "It's not good to sit in the dark, Harry – it encourages sentient shadows," she says, and Vanishes the blind.

Outside, hills dotted with sheep roll by. Dark-grey clouds scud across an even darker-grey sky. And a witch on a broomstick in a flapping waterproof robe, red with the exertion of trying to keep up with a speeding train, attempts to take photos of them with one hand and clutches desperately at her bucking broom with the other.

And because this day can't get any worse – despite the fact it's barely even begun; it's not even midday yet – Blaise Zabini, who is rapidly rising to the position of 'the man who Harry

dislikes most ever', says airily, "Well, we might as well give her something to write about, eh, Harry?" and twists in his seat to kiss Harry, right on the mouth.

The Unwelcoming Feast

“Well, that was fun,” Hermione says as they squelch into one of the waiting stagecoaches at top speed. The rain is coming down in sheets, and Harry is wet through, right down to his underpants. If there was an award for Understatement of the Year, he thinks wearily as he takes off his glasses and tries to find a bit of his robes dry enough to wipe them on, she’d win it hands down.

“Yes, yes, a laugh a minute,” Ron says, giving his arms an experimental shake. Raindrops fly off him; one of them hits Harry in the eye. “I particularly liked that bit where we sat in awkward silence for two hours.”

Hermione’s brow creases in thought. “I think it might have been three.”

“You could be right,” Ron says, and his stomach makes a loud, extended gurgling noise. “What a shame that lot had to go back to get their trunks and we managed to lose them in the crush, eh? We might be sitting in silence right now, if they’d caught us up.”

Luna turns from looking out of the window at the torrential rain to say, with every appearance of honesty, “Yes, it’s nice to have a rest from talking sometimes, isn’t it?”

“And it wasn’t silent the *whole* time,” Hermione adds thoughtfully. “It sounded like you enjoyed your sandwiches.”

Ron goes pink. “At least I didn’t kiss Blaise Zabini, though, eh!” he says heartlessly.

Harry glares at him. On the plus side, as soon as the newswitch had got her photo, she’d left immediately. On the minus side, however, she’d left immediately because she had a photo of him *being kissed by Blaise Zabini*. He still can’t decide which is worse – that the photo exists, or that once Zabini had carried out the foul deed, he’d wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, made a mock retching noise, and said, grinning like a wanker, “Urgh! Might I suggest a breath mint, next time?”

“I DIDN’T KISS BLAISE ZABINI,” Harry says, perhaps a bit louder than necessary. *Next time!* The sod was lucky he hadn’t risen up and twisted his head off; no jury would have convicted him.

Ron grins. “No, mate. He kissed *you*.”

“It’s not funny, Ron,” Hermione says, wrinkling her nose. “None of this is funny! It’s pissing down with rain, I’m wet through, and the Slytherins are up to something. Voldemort is *gone*, and the bloody Slytherins are *still* bloody *up to something!*” She folds her arms across her body and puffs herself up, as if she’s ready for a fight.

“Oh! Don’t you like being wet?” Luna says. “I’m fond of the rain. It makes me feel wistful.” She slips her wand out of her robes and soon the heat of a Drying Charm toasts its way to

Harry's skin. "I'm nervous about going back to Hogwarts too, Hermione," she adds as she stows her wand away.

Hermione subsides like a pricked balloon.

"It's going to be strange," Luna says cheerfully – introducing strong competition to the Understatement of the Year award – "but I quite like strange, don't you?"

"It was definitely strange when Zabini snogged Harry," Ron says and waggles his eyebrows.

"It was just a peck!" Harry protests He's trying his best to expunge the vile moment from his mind, without much luck. Ron is not exactly helping matters. "He barely touched me!" he adds for good measure, because it's *true*, for fuck's sake.

"Ron's just trying to wind you up, Harry," Hermione says with a snort. She seems to have recovered herself a bit, but her hands are knotted together too tightly in her lap for her to be truly relaxed. "Ignore him."

"Is that any way to speak of your beloved?" Ron asks, mock-wounded, and dodges as Hermione reaches over to whack him on the arm.

"Look! We're nearly there," Luna says, opening the window and sticking her head out – and letting a vast quantity of rain in. "Beautiful, isn't it," she adds, turning back and beaming. A raindrop slides off her nose.

It's true – Hogwarts at night, with its thousands of windows lit up and twinkling, is a sight to behold. It's strange how quickly you can get used to something, though, Harry thinks as he stares through the torrents of rain. Over the past year, Hogwarts has come to mean many things to him: a place to gather evidence of evil crimes; a venue for the dozens of vigils and memorial ceremonies for the fallen; and a beacon of hope for the future, as Wizarding Britain pooled its magic to rebuild the shattered buildings. Somehow, the fact that it was where he'd gone to school had drifted into irrelevance.

But now, as the carriage smoothly pulls to a halt outside the stone steps leading to the castle, Harry feels the familiar tingle of excitement pull at his insides. He loves Hogwarts. It's the first place he ever truly felt at home; it's the first place he ever truly felt like he had a family.

Harry hates Hogwarts, he really, really fucking hates it.

As soon as he steps out of the carriage, and into a press of overexcited, damp fellow students, his good mood vanishes. Someone snatches at his scarf from behind, nearly choking him as they pull it off with a whoop of glee, and there's a sting of pain at the side of his head as a grasping hand pulls out a small clump of his hair. He can't reach his wand because people are pressing in so closely, and even if he could, what would he cast? These are *schoolkids*.

It takes him a second to remember that he's a schoolkid again too.

The unease he's felt for weeks about coming back to study hits him again with full force. It's mostly been the first day he's been dreading – with the Sorting ceremony taking the starring role in his anxiety dreams – but now that the first day is here at last, he finds that this isn't much of a comfort.

He doesn't need Trelawney's powers to be able to predict that the Sorting ceremony will be a bit on the awkward side. The school's been closed for a year – twice as many new kids to Sort means twice as many new Slytherins, after all, not to mention all the students who've transferred from other schools to finish their studies and who'll need to be Sorted too. Harry expects that even the most rabid pure-blood kid will feel a pang of discomfort at being Sorted Slytherin in the current climate. Not that there's anything *wrong* with being Slytherin, exactly – Snape was one, and he was a wanker, but he'd turned out to be practically Gryffindor in the end. Brave, and self-sacrificing, and an all-round hero, despite clearly hating every second of it. But Snape aside, Harry thinks it has to be a bit of a kick in the balls to be judged as a perfect fit for the house most famous for producing powerful wizards who *tried* to take over the world, but ultimately couldn't manage it. Evil and yet incompetent – not a good look.

“Out of the *way*,” snaps a cold, familiar voice, and the crowd parts, recoiling faintly from—

Well, of course it is. Harry can't see Malfoy's face; just his retreating back. The disdainful words ‘*famous* Harry Potter’ slip into his ear like a drop of ice-cold water, and Harry can't tell if Malfoy actually said it out loud, or if his own brain just filled it in.

“Come *on*,” Hermione says breathlessly, nearly knocking him over as she pops up at his side. Her robe is dishevelled, and her expression suggests she's not entirely enjoying herself. She grabs at Harry, pulling him painfully by the wrist, and Ron, who appears to have lost his outer robe entirely in the struggle, lunges up from behind and gives him a massive shove forwards that nearly has him falling to his knees.

With this dubious help, Harry makes it through the press of the crowd and up the stone steps. The massive oak doors leading to the Entrance Hall are open, and although the vastness and brightness of the hall is a welcome relief, the fact that what looks to be every single painting occupant has come out to welcome him – some jostling each other in overcrowded canvases, paint flaking as they stab each other with their elbows – overwhelms him with embarrassment.

It's not just the Sorting ceremony Harry's been semi-dreading, after all.

Harry's noticed – bit hard not to, really – that almost immediately after the Battle of Hogwarts he graduated from infamous to properly, actually, *horrendously* famous. Over the past year he's taken to practically living in his office at the Ministry, sleeping on a camp bed and getting his meals Owled in, to avoid going outside except on official business. He keeps inadvertently causing riots; there are still three teenage girls in St Mungo's suffering from slow-healing crush injuries, after the last time he decided it was safe enough to pop down to Diagon Alley and pick up something to read that wasn't Ministry paperwork.

He's even had to hire a secretary of sorts to help him manage his fan mail, and although Alastair is pushing eighty, is almost as tall as Hagrid, and gives the impression of eating rocks for breakfast and knives for lunch, there's sometimes a funny twinkle in his eye that

makes Harry want to hide under a table, in case Alastair secretly wants to hero-worship him too. Thinking about Hagrid makes him feel homesick, for a home he never had; Hagrid's taken up a new position as visiting lecturer on Magical Creatures at Beauxbatons. Harry's pleased for him, really he is, he just . . . wishes Hagrid was here. Things would be easier, somehow, if he was here.

Harry could put up with the unwanted attention a bit more easily, he thinks, if people actually wanted to talk to *him*; he's perfectly aware, though, that they want the *Daily Prophet's* selfless hero. Still, he's learned how to smile and be gracious and try not to go mad. He expects the novelty will soon wear off, because he's still *Harry* underneath it all, isn't he? The wizarding world is small, and people will realise that, soon enough.

Harry's swept into the Great Hall and over to the Gryffindor table, and half-squashed by people who want to sit next to him and think if they move in closer they can grind Ron and Hermione into dust and achieve their aims. When more people are – reluctantly – seated, at a distance from him, he spots Neville at the other end of the table, who's also surrounded. It makes more sense with Neville, Harry thinks as they exchange embarrassed nods – quiet, gawky Neville turned into a resistance fighter and killed a fucking enormous snake with a *sword*. If there was ever a good reason for hero-worship, it's that.

When everyone is sitting down, staring at Harry – he hopes they all get neck-ache – Headmistress McGonagall rises from the sparsely-occupied teachers' table and clears her throat. A few people glance over at her . . . and then look back at Harry. He tries not to sink into his seat, and has to fold his hands together under the table to stop himself from trying to push his hair over his scar. Somehow, he doesn't think that trying to cover it up will do the trick these days.

Harry hopes she's going to call in the new kids straight away, so they can be Sorted. The sooner that happens, the sooner the evening will be over. He's looking forward to reminding everyone that he's *Harry*, for fuck's sake – they need to get over the whole slaying the Dark Lord thing, or they'll put him off his exams. Another worry pops up: what if he fails the fucking things?

But he doesn't have time to dwell on that before it's put out of his mind entirely. Because Headmistress McGonagall *doesn't* begin the Sorting ceremony. Or, rather, she does, but it's something rather different. She announces, as if it's no big deal at all, that things will be different this year, and *it's not just the new kids who'll be Sorted*.

The moment McGonagall says it, Harry knows what the end result will be. He'd almost admire McGonagall for her sheer nerve, if he wasn't so fucking *angry*.

McGonagall doesn't even pretend it's fair – that the Sorting Hat will be involved. She just looks down at a piece of paper in front of her and says, "Our returning seventh years are small in number, so I have decided to re-Sort them into just two houses: Gryffindor and Slytherin. Terry, Justin, Pansy and Millicent – please rise and join your new housemates at the Gryffindor table."

There's a slight intake of breath from the whole school, which makes the candle flames bob and flicker. Harry has his back to the Slytherin table, and it takes everything he has not to

swivel round and look over. But, he doesn't have to turn around all the way, does he? He shoots a sidelong glance down the Gryffindor table, to see Terry Boot and Justin Finch Fletchley squeezing in at the other end. Where are Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode though? Harry takes another unwise glance, to see the pair weaving through the tables with all the speed of a snail with a hangover. Behind them, in the distance, he spots a flash of white-blond hair, and he turns back so fast it hurts. *Merlin*.

Bizarrely, Malfoy's words on the train come back to him, ringing with cold intensity. *I can't do this*. Can't do what? Be civil to Harry? Be in the same fucking room as him? Well, *this* is going to go well.

"Pansy and Millicent in Gryffindor!" Hermione hisses in Harry's ear. "Oh my god. They're going to eat me in my sleep."

Harry reaches over and squeezes her hand; she grips back very hard.

There's a smattering of polite applause when everyone's finally sat down. Harry glances down the table to see that Millicent Bulstrode looks a bit like she's been dinged between the eyes with a frying pan, and Pansy Parkinson has her chin held so high she's practically eyeballing the ceiling.

Harry's doing rapid sums in his head, and he's gripped by a wild hope that perhaps his worst fears won't be realised. There are nine boys returning from his year – five Gryffindor, including Terry and Justin, and four Slytherin. Five in one house, four in the other – that works, doesn't it? There's no reason for either him or Ron to be moved to a different house. No reason at all.

"This leaves us with just one new Slytherin," McGonagall says – and Harry's heart drops, like an out of control Gringotts' cart hurtling down to the depths of the vaults. "Harry Potter, please join your new housemates at the Slytherin table."

What should he do? Harry wonders. He could just sit there, he supposes. He's too old to be dragged anywhere, and he thinks that if he objects hard enough then she'll be forced to back down. Emotion rises in his chest and threatens to choke him. Is it not enough that he suffered through all that shit, that now he has to be separated from his friends and forced to . . . to . . .

It's the fact he can't pin down the end of that thought that makes up his mind. Forced to sit with some people he doesn't really like? It's all a bit pathetic, really. He faced death and didn't waver – he can cope with . . . with . . .

With sleeping in the same room as Draco Malfoy.

"At least Parkinson and Bulstrode will only eat you," he hisses at Hermione as he tries to rise on legs that threaten to buckle. Hermione seems reluctant to let go of his hand. "Malfoy's going to eviscerate *me*, and then laugh as my guts fall out."

"No, he won't," Hermione says, without much conviction.

“Mate, you don’t have to,” Ron says, craning his head around Hermione’s – her hair’s turned wild and bushy from the rain. “McGonagall’s gone nuts. Let’s stall her, until we can get her moved to the Janus Thickey ward. It’s for her own good,” he adds, nodding so vigorously that it’s a wonder his nose doesn’t fall off.

McGonagall clears her throat, and says, her voice ringing with conviction, “Today, right here, right now, we have a golden chance: to make a new start for ourselves. Today, we can build a better, brighter future for Hogwarts, wiping away old prejudices and forging new, stronger bonds between the houses. We have been guilty of letting traditional, sporting rivalries degenerate into something darker.” Her voice sharpens. “Well, no more! We are *one community*, and if the house system is to continue, with all its benefits, we must all take a hard look at our own feelings and decide which is more important: our individual desires, or the greater good. Starting *right now*.”

“Oh, bloody hell,” Ron says, a bit too loudly, because right down at the other end of the table, Millicent lets out a very unladylike snort.

“I suppose sharing with those two won’t be *that* bad,” Hermione says dubiously and makes an obvious attempt not to twitch; her grip on Harry’s hand has tightened to an excruciating level.

Well. Never let it be said that Harry Potter can’t take a hint. He rises to his feet with all the speed and enthusiasm of a very slow and unenthusiastic thing, extracting himself with effort from Hermione’s death grip, and forces himself to walk towards the Slytherin table, trying not to look at anything other than his feet. It is entirely silent in the hall, apart from the sound of his shoes on the flagstone floor. It makes a novel change; it’s a shame he can’t enjoy it.

Silent, that is, until Blaise Zabini, king of wankers, calls out, “Oi, Potter, over here!”

Harry looks up, to see Zabini grinning and waving. Harry has never seen anyone wave in a passive-aggressive manner before, but he supposes there’s a first time for everything. “Welcome to our big happy family, Potter,” Zabini says, and the fucker *winks*.

In a world that’s all change, it should be comforting that one thing remains a constant: Draco Malfoy really, really hates him.

The Sorting ceremony is excruciating. The Slytherin table is three-quarters empty, but Harry’s classmates are sitting together in a tight knot, and despite his instincts screaming at him to not be a *complete* dickhead, he can’t help it: Zabini shoves at Goyle to get him to move up, and Harry – the complete dickhead – slides in between them. Malfoy is opposite him, of *course* he is, next to Nott, who’s doing that blank, disturbing stare thing at him again.

The candlelight casts odd, dark shadows on Malfoy’s pale, pointed face, and Harry can barely stand to look at him – or make himself look away.

It’s been a long time since Harry’s been able to quantify exactly how he feels about Malfoy. It winds him up that he doesn’t know, but the more he thinks about it, the more of a tangled

mess it becomes in his mind. He doesn't much like him, he's fairly sure of that, but sometimes he wonders if wanting to talk to Malfoy, to extract answers from him to questions he knows he'll never actually ask, is driving him round the twist.

Malfoy *took the Dark Mark*. Thinking about it makes Harry feel a bit sick.

Right now, though, Harry would be perfectly happy to be ignored by Malfoy, he thinks – well, ish. But what Malfoy does is worse: he mixes up ignoring him with giving a running commentary on the Sorting ceremony to the empty air.

“Esmerelda Snart – Slytherin!” the Hat booms.

“Mr Snart – found guilty of being a collaborator. Five years in Azkaban,” Draco murmurs. “Mrs Snart – home alone for the next five years, one presumes.”

“Algernon Phipps – Slytherin!” the Hat booms.

“Mourning the loss of his older brother. Hit by an Auror's curse,” Draco adds, again in an undertone, and again aimed at no one. “Some might call it justice, I suppose.”

By the time the Hat gets to “Zander Montgomery – Slytherin!”, and Draco informs the air that Zander's parents are recently divorced – post-traumatic stress proving too much for their marriage – Harry has had enough. “Yes, *OK*, Malfoy, I get the picture,” he snaps.

Malfoy finally deigns to look at Harry – and Harry rather wishes he wouldn't. He has the shittiest expression: a mixture of disdain and anger that makes Harry shift uncomfortably on the bench seat.

“What's up with you, Potter? Crabs?” Zabini asks unsympathetically, then applies a sharp elbow to his side. Harry briefly considers poking him in the eye in return, before realising that he probably meant it as an odd kind of moral support. “Give it a rest, Draco,” Zabini continues, quietly enough that he can't be overheard by people on the other tables. “It's not Potter's fault that everything's gone to shit for us, now, is it? Stop wallowing in self-pity and pull yourself together, for Merlin's sake.”

Malfoy turns a look of pure venom on Zabini, and Harry feels briefly sympathetic for Zabini before he realises that Zabini doesn't seem to care.

“In fact,” Zabini continues, lowering his voice even further as the unfortunate Zander approaches, “I have it on good authority that young Master Montgomery's parents split up because Mr Montgomery shagged a Muggle. You really should pay better attention if you're going to spread nasty gossip, Draco – you'll find it's much more satisfying that way.” He turns towards Harry. “My mother is the queen of nasty gossip, you know, Potter.” He bows his head modestly. “I learned from the best.”

Well. Harry's not quite sure what to say to that – *it's not nice to spread nasty gossip* is the only thing that comes to mind, and he can just imagine the looks he'd get if he said *that* out loud. But at least it's shut Malfoy up for the moment. The Sorting continues, but Malfoy remains silent – silent, and mocking. Harry finds himself unable to sit still, and unable to stop

looking at Malfoy, even though each glance appears to give new heart to Malfoy – his vicious smirk almost returning, like the old days, each time he catches Harry’s eye.

None of the new Slytherin students choose to sit anywhere near them, and Harry can’t tell if it’s because they don’t want to be associated with *him* . . . or with a convicted Death Eater. There’s been almost as much gossip in the press about Malfoy as there has about Harry himself, over the last year – albeit rather less kind.

Sorting is followed by the Headmistress’s speech – and it’s the sort of thing Harry expects, about friendship and co-operation, and it’s so simultaneously jolly and mawkish that he finds himself squirming for a whole new reason. “Disgusting, isn’t it?” Zabini says under his breath.

“No, it’s great,” Harry says dishonestly, trying to channel his inner Hermione. The real one is probably drinking in every word and taking notes to refer back to later. He thinks, gloomily, though, that Zabini can see right through him, because he grins, a calculating, sly smile, and raises an eyebrow.

Harry thinks the most dreadful part is when McGonagall, her voice cracking, follows the traditional welcoming talk with a short but horrendously heartfelt speech of thanks to Harry on the whole school’s behalf – he can feel Malfoy staring at him the whole way through, but he looks determinedly past Malfoy’s ear and into the middle distance, to avoid the first recorded case of ‘death by sarcastic glare’. But, to be fair to life, the feast that follows is fairly dreadful too. If he ever had an appetite, the way Malfoy pushes his food around his plate as if it’s caused him personal offence is enough to destroy it, but Harry does his best to force down a little of the roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. The alternative to eating is just sitting there in awkward silence, and Harry’s had enough of that today to last a lifetime.

It’s at least a million years before the meal draws to a close, and Professor Slughorn waddles over to their table, beaming from ear to ear.

“I see Old Sluggy has made good use of his year off,” Zabini murmurs in Harry’s ear. “Eating – I mean, doing – the things he loves best.”

This strikes Harry as pretty poisonous – Slughorn’s bravery during the Battle of Hogwarts is well known, and if the man chose to celebrate surviving the fucking thing by consuming his own bodyweight in pies, then what the hell was wrong with that? “Good to see you, sir,” he says, and finds that it’s actually true. If he has to be stuck in Slytherin, at least the Head of House is someone he has some respect for.

Slughorn twinkles at him. “You too, my boy, you too. A pleasure to see you in Slytherin. I hope it won’t be a disappointment for you to learn that I am not currently planning another meeting of the Slug Club, but perhaps you would care to join me in my office with a few other select students for tea, from time to time?”

Harry nods, mostly because it would be rude not to, and tries not to notice that Slughorn hasn’t asked any of the others sitting around him. It’s enough that *they* will have noticed; drawing attention to it will only speed up his eventual evisceration by an enraged Malfoy.

“This week’s password is ‘victory’,” Slughorn says. “Make of that what you will, boys.” He moves on down the table, his robe straining at the seams.

To Harry’s relief, by now even Zabini seems to be sick of the continuing awkward silence. “Come on, then, Potter – time for beddy-byes,” he says.

Zabini rises and starts to make his way out of the Great Hall, so Harry follows. He knows where the Slytherin dungeons are, but it doesn’t seem wise to let on. And besides, he’s never been in the dormitories themselves – if there aren’t bear traps in the hallway, hidden there for the sheer fun of it, he’ll be surprised.

Harry standing up seems to be the cue for everyone *else* to rise, though – ‘accidentally’ jostling him as they do so, and attempting to strike up conversations. Just as Harry thinks he might actually fall over and be crushed by everyone’s overfriendliness, he’s rescued.

By *Malfoy*.

“Famous Harry Potter strikes again, I see,” he murmurs with biting disdain, wrapping thin fingers around Harry’s upper arm and yanking.

Harry manages not to fall over, and the crowd parts – they are not so keen to crush *Malfoy*, he realises with irritation. It hardly seems fair.

Malfoy hurries Harry through the Entrance Hall and all but pushes him down the staircase that leads to the dungeons, dropping his arm as soon as they’re out of sight.

“Er, thanks,” Harry says.

Malfoy just snorts.

Zabini is waiting halfway down the dank stone-walled corridor, tapping his foot impatiently. “Pay attention, Potter,” he says importantly.

Harry decides he’s had enough of being treated like an idiot. He walks to what he remembers as being the correct patch of wall and says, “Victory,” to the stone, feeling like a twat. Sure enough, a passageway creaks into life.

“How did you know where to stand, Potter?” Zabini asks. “Just out of curiosity.”

“Lucky guess,” Harry says, and shoots into the passageway to try and forestall any further questions.

Inside, it’s just as green and ridiculous as he remembers – clearly, the designer had made a heroic attempt to upholster one hundred percent of the room in dark-green leather, meeting with almost total success. Even the walls are suspiciously leathery, although one is hung with an enormous, faded tapestry flecked with dingy reds, and Harry makes a silent promise to himself to never examine it more closely. For decoration, and to cheer the place up, no doubt, the designer had chosen to go heavy on the skulls.

Harry really, really hopes they’re animal in origin.

“Nice atmosphere,” he says, driven to sarcasm. Well, it’s been a long day. “Very warm and cosy.”

Malfoy, his skin now tinged green, snorts again, and shoots Harry a look that is infinitesimally less hatred-filled than his last one, but still fairly high on the ‘I wish you would drop dead already’ scale.

“Well, I’ll show you to our room,” Zabini says, very politely, “shall I? Or do you already know the way, Potter?” He doesn’t wait for a response, though – just leads the way down a narrow, green-lit corridor, pointing out the other dormitories as he goes. When they reach the end of the corridor, he opens the last door, and Harry follows him in.

His bed is at the end of the long, large room – closest to the enormous floor to ceiling window, against which green-tinged water gently roils, and furthest away from the door.

The bed opposite his is Malfoy’s, of *course* it is.

Harry’s trunk is, thankfully, at the end of his bed, and he dives at it as if it’s his only friend, pulling out pyjamas and washbag and clutching them to his chest, before applying *Colloportus* with all his might. He wouldn’t put it past his new housemates to jinx his socks, the moment he leaves the room.

Someone makes a small noise of derision, and Harry tries not to work out who. “Bathroom?” he asks Zabini, who smiles at him as if he’s very, very stupid but must be humoured at all costs.

“Next door along,” Malfoy says, with his back to Harry. He bends down to fiddle with the lock of his own trunk; it swings open, and a stream of objects pour out and settle on his bedside table. One, Harry notes, is an enormous ivory-framed photo of Lucius and Narcissa, who scowl darkly when they catch sight of him.

He’s going to sleep well with *that* opposite his bed. He tries not to wonder if the frame is actually made of Muggle-bone; that way madness lies.

“You’ll find the bathroom empty, I expect,” Malfoy adds with cutting politeness as Harry’s halfway across the room. “Most of us learned as children how to use magic to meet our basic hygiene needs, you see.”

It takes every ounce of self-control Harry has not to turn and squirt toothpaste in Malfoy’s eye.

The large, communal bathroom does turn out to be empty, so Harry doesn’t feel selfish when he locks the door behind him. He won’t be long, and he’s not feeling strong enough to encounter any other members of his new house when he’s in the buff. He strips out of his clothes and puts on his pyjamas, possibly breaking the record for speed. The window in here looks out on to the green, murky waters of the lake too; he doesn’t know if he’s famous amongst the mer-people or not, but he’d prefer not to find out when he’s got his knob on view. When he looks in the mirror as he’s cleaning his teeth, his reflection is green-tinged – and worried.

When he goes back into the bedroom, it's almost a relief to see that the curtains around Malfoy's bed are firmly shut.

That fucker Zabini, though, is sitting on the edge of his own bed, dressed only in low-slung pyjama bottoms, and he fucking *winks* at Harry. "Sweet dreams, Potter," he says, and grins – it's the same smile he used on Hermione earlier that day, as if Harry's made all his dreams come true.

It's entirely disconcerting, even though Harry knows that's entirely the point.

He leaps into bed, and it only takes one quick swish of his wand for the curtains to draw roughly around him, plunging the room into darkness. "*Lumos*," he whispers on a breath, shoving his wand under his pillow, and the faint twinkle is like a tiny nightlight, casting green-tinged shadows on the green-tinged world. Harry notices, a bit too late, that the curtains are also tapestry, and the expression on the face of the closest figure – whose body is several centimetres away from his head – is less than pleasing.

Sweet sodding dreams. Harry can only wish. He'd cast Nox, only then it would be soft, thick blackness again, and he's never been overly fond of the dark.

I can't do this, Malfoy had said earlier. Well, what makes him think that *Harry* can either?

He stays awake for far too long, staring at the canopy over his bed and trying to not to hear his room-mates breathe.

Don't worry if you hit rock bottom; there's purest shit under there, just waiting for a guy like you

Draco dies again.

Draco always dies in Harry's dreams these days. Night after night, he wakes in a tangle of sheets, heart racing and his throat sore and scratchy, as if he's spent the whole night screaming. Sometimes, it's the Fiendfyre. Sometimes it's the maze – Voldemort dismissing him with a careless 'Kill the spare', and Draco, dressed in incongruous Hufflepuff robes, falling into piercing, violent green oblivion.

Sometimes, Harry yells *Sectumsempra* and Draco bleeds out on a bathroom floor.

And sometimes he just . . . dies. One moment he's standing there, looking at Harry with a strange, lost expression Harry has never seen him wear in life, and the next he falls, as if someone's cut out his heart. And Harry just stands there as the light goes out behind Draco's eyes.

Those nights are the worst.

At least, Harry has always *thought* those the worst. Turns out the worst is actually this: dreaming of Draco dying, and waking up with the familiar rush of unwanted guilt and shame and the *sheer fucking annoyance* of it all, to find Draco – no, fucking *Malfoy* – leaning over the side of his bed and staring at him, as if he's a particularly revolting specimen pickled in a jar.

Malfoy's definitely been working on that expression – and saving it up for a special occasion.

"Is this going to be a regular occurrence, Potter?" Malfoy says, his tone an infuriating mixture of boredom and spite. "You waking us all up moaning and sweating, I mean. Because honestly, Potter, if you're going to have erotic dreams about Weasleys, I'd really rather you just fucked off and died, already, rather than subject us all to it, *thank* you very much."

At least half a dozen angry replies flicker through Harry's brain while, simultaneously, his face heats up like a cauldron over a too-hot flame. "Why don't *you* fuck off and die, Malfoy," he lands on eventually, and scrubs a hand over his face, before reaching under his pillow for his wand and Accio-ing his glasses.

The world sharpens into green-tinged, gloomy focus. The curtains round his bed are still mostly drawn, apart from a gap through which Harry can . . . not see Malfoy.

"Are you not even going to unpack?" Malfoy asks disdainfully from somewhere around the foot of his bed. "*Alohomora*. Oh, *ugh*. Have you bought *any* new underpants since you were eleven, Potter? No wonder you couldn't keep your girlfriend – even Weasleys have standards, I imagine."

Harry shoots out of bed, faster than a speeding curse, and has his wand at Malfoy's throat before he can quite take in that Malfoy isn't actually bending over his trunk and rifling through it. He is, in fact, just leaning against one of the carved columns of his own bed, arms folded, though one hand shoots out to wind into the neck of Harry's oversized T-shirt. Whether that's to pull him closer, or push him away, Harry's suddenly not sure. "Go on then, Potter," Malfoy taunts, half under his breath, and tilts his head back a bit further, exposing more neck. "You know you want to."

A knot of confusion tightens, somewhere in Harry's chest, and he forces himself to lower his wand, wrenching himself out of Malfoy's grip as he steps away. There's a red mark on Malfoy's throat, and Malfoy reaches up to press at it thoughtfully. He's wearing very old-fashioned flannelette pyjamas with a pale-blue stripe, and his feet are bare. The whole situation strikes Harry as deeply incongruous, and he has to struggle to suppress a laugh – though he also suspects it's more hysteria than humour that has him in its grip.

"Just a small tip, Potter," Zabini says on a yawn, his curtains sliding smoothly back as he sits up in bed. "If you really want to wind Draco up, try ignoring him again. I tell you, he's never gone on about you more than when you stopped sniffing around after him. On and on and fucking *on*," he says with every appearance of enjoyment, barely pausing to block the casual hex Draco flings at him.

"Screw *you*, Blaise," Malfoy spits, his eyes blazing.

Zabini grins. "Get in the queue, sweetheart." He stretches, muscles rippling, and points his wand at his head, already perfect hair rippling as magic washes over it, his neat Afro knotting itself into equally neat cornrows. "Can't start the day a mess, now, can I?" he says, catching Harry staring, and slides out of bed to perch on the edge. A small hand-mirror floats over to him from his bedside table, and he examines himself critically in it, twisting this way and that, and running a hand over his bare chest as he turns. Harry half suspects he's planning on kissing his own biceps in a minute and can't stop gawping. No one in Gryffindor ever examined themselves quite so closely in the mirror of a morning – at least, not in public. He'd sometimes thought Seamus looked a bit tidier when he left the bathroom than when he'd entered it, but had put it mostly down to luck. Harry's own hair seems resistant to any form of tidying.

Thinking of his hair makes Harry feel twitchy, and he tries – and fails – to stop himself from carding his fingers through it. He knows from long experience that doing so only makes it worse. The look Malfoy gives him is particularly withering, and only becomes more so when something perverse inspires him to say, defensively, "It was a mutual decision, anyway!"

"Mm?" Blaise says, fabric zipping out of the wardrobe next to his bed to dance around him. He vanishes, briefly, behind a whirl of greens and blacks, to emerge neatly dressed in flowing robes that look too expensive to be regulation uniform. "What was?"

Harry's already regretting raising the subject, but he suspects if he drops it, things will only turn out worse. "Me and Ginny splitting up," he says, trying to sound blasé rather than sheepish. "It was a mutual decision."

There's a bit of a silence – disbelieving, Harry thinks – and he feels compelled to fill it, even though he knows it's a really, really bad idea. “We're still very good friends, but we just . . . haven't seen each other for a while. She's very busy with the Harpies,” he adds defensively.

“Very busy shagging her way through the entire British Quidditch League, you mean,” Malfoy sneers.

Harry's Stinging Hex hits Malfoy right on the cheek, instantly turning it red and blotchy. He doesn't even wince – just prods at it with something akin to satisfaction, eyes glinting strangely.

Harry wishes *he* felt satisfaction; what he feels is that he's walked into a trap. Malfoy didn't even *try* to block the hex. “Don't talk about Ginny like that,” he says, wondering if Malfoy will attempt to get him expelled for assault. He still wonders, sometimes, why he wasn't expelled for using Sectumsempra on Malfoy, what feels like a lifetime ago.

Goyle looms up behind Malfoy, and Harry briefly wonders why life thinks he deserves to be shown the terrible, horrible sight of Gregory Goyle in a pale-pink nightshirt right before he dies – because presumably Goyle is lumbering over to kill him, for daring to hurt his lord and master. “Idiot,” Goyle grunts, pulling Malfoy round without much care, gripping his chin, and casting a healing spell at his cheek. Malfoy suffers this in silence, eyes narrowed, and doesn't say thank you when Goyle releases him.

Goyle grunts again, and slopes off towards the bathroom, a droopy line of clothes bobbing after him.

“If you need to use the bathroom in the next couple of hours,” Zabini says thoughtfully, “my best advice is: don't.”

Harry digests this, and its implications, and casts a series of cleaning charms on himself. He prefers soap and water, and the familiar routine of toothbrush and minty foam; he never feels properly *clean* when he's washed with magic, even if it's just psychological, and as for the whole toilet business . . . It's not that he can't see, in principle, the benefits of just magicing, um, it away, but he's never been able to suppress that nagging feeling that Vanishing things just sends them somewhere else, and one day he might open his trunk to find . . .

Ugh. Better all round, Harry thinks, to rely on good old Muggle-style plumbing.

“I don't know whether it's basic unkindness that makes Greg want to stink up the place with his epic morning shits,” Zabini says thoughtfully, standing up and tweaking his robe; it falls in elegant, flowing lines, “or sheer joy in the vileness he produces.”

Harry shudders; neither bears thinking about. But nor does the imminent prospect of taking his pyjamas off in front of Malfoy. He can technically get dressed by magic too, he supposes, but he hasn't had much practice. Nobody in *Gryffindor* ever did it that way – they just used their arms and legs, like normal people. He suspects that if he attempts it now, with Malfoy watching, he'll end up with his pants on his head, his socks on his hands and his dick on display.

“Draco’s just jealous that the Weasley bitch gets to play Quidditch while he’s stuck at Hogwarts,” Nott says, emerging from the far side of the room to lean against the end of Zabini’s bed, fully dressed and arms folded. He still looks a bit dead in the eye when he glances over at Harry, but it’s tinged with a healthy unpleasantness that suggests imminent recovery. “Youngest ever person signed to a professional team, isn’t she? Not bad for a . . .” He trails off, and Harry feels glad he doesn’t have to hex Nott too, to defend Ginny’s honour. She wouldn’t appreciate it, anyway, if it ever got back to her – she’d probably hex his ears off, just to point out that she could fight her own battles, please and thank you.

No one says anything – not even Malfoy, though a muscle jumps in his cheek. He stalks back to his trunk, and is briefly surrounded by a hurricane of fabric, his school robes billowing out behind him as he bangs it shut. “I need some breakfast before I kill someone,” he announces, and strides out of the room without a backward glance.

Nott seems to dither for a moment, then follows after, leaving Harry alone with Zabini.

“Definitely jealous,” Zabini murmurs. “You didn’t think about joining a club, then, Potter?” he asks, turning his back.

Harry stands there for a moment, before realising that Zabini is, of all peculiar things, being considerate. “Oh, er, it crossed my mind,” he says, rummaging through his trunk and pulling out his crumpled uniform. “I was, er, asked by most of the teams before Gin was, but . . .” He nearly falls over when he tries to pull off his pyjama bottoms and put on his boxers simultaneously, but when he glances over suspiciously at Zabini, he’s still got his back turned. “It seemed a bit . . . pointless, you know? Flying is something I do for fun.”

“Ah. And, of course, it’s important to spend the majority of your time doing something that’s *not* fun,” Zabini says. “Salazar’s balls. Are all Gryffindors so sanctimonious? No, don’t answer that.”

This stings a bit. Harry can’t even remember the last time he flew for fun. Can’t remember the last time he did anything for fun, really. He’s been too busy. He tugs on the rest of his clothing, shoving on his shoes last. When he straightens up, Zabini is looking at him, eyebrows raised.

“What?” Harry asks defensively.

“You’re still in Gryffindor colours, Potter. Anyone would think you don’t *want* to be in Slytherin with us,” Zabini says with heavy sarcasm.

Harry looks down at himself to see that, yes, his jumper still bears the Gryffindor crest, and his creased robes are piped with red.

“Want me to do it?” Zabini asks, raising an eyebrow, when Harry doesn’t move.

It’s daft, Harry thinks, but it truly feels like the end of an era. “No,” he says, and does something he never, ever thought he’d do, other than as some kind of trick: he points his wand at his clothes, and watches as everything that makes him a Gryffindor is swallowed up by Slytherin green.

Harry hadn't expected to see Ron sitting at the Slytherin table eating sausage sandwiches with ketchup running down his chin. Clearly, neither had the other Slytherins, because some of the younger – and less streetwise – of them had chosen to sit near him, rather than positioning themselves as far away from the spectacle as possible.

Harry tells himself, very sternly, not to look down the table to see where Malfoy is sitting, and slides in opposite Ron. It occurs to him that this is the first time he can remember ever seeing someone sitting at the 'wrong' table, outside of the Christmas hols. This seems pretty daft, now he thinks about it.

Ron looks incredibly relieved – at least, the bits that Harry can see, through the ketchup – when he catches sight of Harry. "What took you so long!" he mumbles through a mouthful, swallowing hard. "I've been sat here for *ages*. Hermione was here too for a bit, but she said that if she had to watch me eating for a moment longer the love would die, so I thought it best to remind her about a book she's been going on about borrowing from the library." He pauses, to fill his mouth with an enormous bite. "It gives you – mmf – an appetite, sitting here with – mmf – this bunch of tossers, I can tell you." He chews enthusiastically. "Seemed wiser to eat than talk; you can't hex someone with your mouth full."

Harry glances about, a bit doubtfully, and meets the eyes of a few first years – they look fascinated, rather than offended, so he tries to relax. He helps himself to eggs and bacon; for some unknown reason, the sausages have lost their appeal. "How did Hermione sleep?" he asks.

Ron goes beetroot and makes a worthy but fruitless attempt to breathe his sandwich rather than eat it. "How should I know!" he gurgles, through the chokes. When he's finished nearly dying, he appears to realise what Harry actually meant and, if anything, blushes all the harder. "Oh, er, you mean with her new room-mates? Well, she was covered in cat hair, so at least one of them seems to like her." He eyes the remnants of his sandwich with sorrow. "It wasn't the same in our room without you, mate. I mean, Terry brought this amazing game he'd been given by his aunt for his birthday, and Justin shared a bottle of this delicious creamy stuff called Baileys that Muggles drink, and we stayed up till about three, but . . ." He stops, looking sheepish. "Er, it would have been better if you'd been there, mate, for definite. Maybe you can sneak into the Tower and join us next time? I think Neville suggested a party on Friday. He's pretty sure he's worked out a way to trick the castle into letting us into the girls' dormitory. Something to do with a new plant he's been researching." He pushes the rest of his sandwich into his mouth. "Mind you, the girls' dormitory holds a new terror, what with Parkinson and Bulstrode lurking within," he adds, spraying crumbs.

"We never had parties in our dormitory before," Harry says, pushing away his bacon and eggs – he doesn't feel all that hungry, for some reason.

"Well, no. But then us Gryffindors *were* a bit busy fighting the most evil wizard the world has ever known," Ron points out reasonably, and lets out a huge belch, before grinning at him. "Don't we deserve a bit of fun, to make up for all that?"

Harry grins back, and tries not to remember that he's a Slytherin now. And besides, he doesn't have *time* for fun. He has five NEWTS to pass, and he hasn't been at school for over two years – he's not sure he can actually remember anything he's ever studied, and although he has plenty of practical experience in the field, he's not sure that will count for much when he has to write five hundred inches on the various uses of Potentilla Tormentilla in potions.

When breakfast is cleared away, the heads of house come by with timetables, Slughorn passing over Ron's with a wink. "Perhaps the next time Harry stops by my office for a cup of tea, you'll join us, my young honorary Slytherin friend?"

"Er, yes, sure," Ron says, clearly suppressing the urge to punch Slughorn in the head for calling him a Slytherin, and then realising – a bit too late – that hoping for sympathy from Harry on this issue is a bit of a non-starter.

Harry snorts and opens up his timetable.

"Triple potions on Wednesday," Ron says in tones of dread and despair. "Twice!"

"Yeah," Harry says, with equal enthusiasm, scanning his own timetable. All his lessons are triples, but it looks like just Potions he has to suffer through twice a week. Most of his afternoons look gloriously free. He shoves his timetable over to Ron. "Are we in the same classes?"

"Yes, thank Godric," Ron says, after a tense moment, and Harry feels a knot of something loosen deep within him. He has to be in Slytherin, yes – but at least he can partner Ron for the majority of his classes. He tries not to wonder if Malfoy is taking the same subjects; who cares if he is or not?

He cares, Harry thinks gloomily. He wishes he fucking didn't, but he does. He's not even sure if he wants Malfoy to be in the same classes . . . or if he doesn't. It's beyond stressful, either way.

Ron makes an unusual gurgling sound, and Harry looks over at him, shaken out of his thoughts. "What?"

"Are you, er, expecting any mail today, mate?" Ron asks, and raises a trembling finger.

Harry's not – all his post should be being re-directed to his private mailbox, to be opened by his secretary. But, to his dismay, what looks like all the world's post owls are dive-bombing his head. Harry ducks, and is only lightly concussed by the shower of mail. When he surfaces, dazed, he can see a pack of Howlers fighting, and they explode out of their envelopes at the sight of him, each trying to outshout each other in their rage.

“—HOW CAN YOU BE GAY!—”

“—IF YOU NEED A WOMAN TO CARRY YOUR CHILDREN, PICK ME—”

“—WHAT WOULD DUMBLEDORE HAVE SAID ABOUT—”

“LOVE ME, NOT HIM! I BEG YOU!”

The headmistress has risen and is casting a volley of spells at the still-flowing letters; Flitwick, Sprout and Slughorn are spreading out and trying valiantly to accomplish a little crowd control. Harry fights the urge to hide under the table; there’s no stopping Howlers once they’ve started. The only option is to wait until it’s all over.

“I, er, think that photo of you snogging Zabini might have been published,” Ron says – redundantly – picking a tiny ribbon-wrapped parcel out of his hair and tossing it aside with disgust.

Harry thinks the best thing to do is to sit very still and look at his feet; at least, in the *direction* of his feet. They’re already covered in envelopes, and if he stays still much longer he’ll be up to his knees. So, of course, he finds himself looking down the Slytherin table, to see if Zabini is suffering from the indignity as much as him.

Zabini is *not* suffering from the indignity, of course he’s not. He’s grinning like the cat that’s got the cream and pushing a copy of today’s *Daily Prophet* over to Malfoy, who’s sitting opposite him.

Harry flinches. He’s too far away to hear what Malfoy says in response, but his face goes tight and pinched, and he pushes the paper away with the tips of his fingers, as if he’s so disgusted by it that he can’t bring himself to touch it.

Something twists, deep inside of Harry.

“Argh!” Ron says as another volley of letters hits, and shakes off a layer of pink goo that’s leaked out of one of them. “Crikey, I hope this is one of George’s joke love potions, rather than the real thing, and you’re not suddenly going to leap on me and try to stick your cock in my eye.”

Harry is shocked into laughter. “In your *eye*?”

Ron goes pink. “Common gay practice, I’ve heard,” he says, grinning.

“Rest assured, Ron, that I will never try to stick my cock in your eye. Unless it’s to save your life,” Harry adds thoughtfully, to make Ron squirm.

“I think I’d choose death, mate,” Ron says. “No offense.”

Soon, the professors have the unruly owls under control, the Howlers have screamed themselves to dust, and the letters, with their dubious contents, have been vanished – Harry hopes forever. He intends to write a strong letter of complaint, though to who, he’s not quite sure.

“Harry, darling,” Zabini calls out.

Harry looks over in abject horror and tries not to notice that Malfoy has left the room and the newspaper is lying abandoned on the breakfast table. Even from this distance, he can see photo-him react as Zabini plants a massive smacker on his lips. *He* knows it's a shocked flinch; taken out of context, though, it looks horrendously like a swoon. And once he's spotted the photo, he can see it everywhere – it's like every single Hogwarts student has taken out a subscription to the *Prophet*, just so they can take part in this historic moment: the moment when The Boy Who Lived became The Boy Who Loved, by admitting his hot gay passion for his sexy Slytherin classmate.

No wonder Zabini spent so long doing his hair this morning.

"I'm so sorry, but I'm going to have to break your heart – I'm straight, you see," Zabini says in a voice that's tinged with unbearable sadness but is, nevertheless, nicely designed to carry. It's spoiled, slightly, by the way his lips keep twitching, but it's almost plausible. "Our love was beautiful while it lasted, but I just can't keep trying – even you, our own dear saviour, can't turn me." He raises a hand to his brow, a picture of woe.

Harry wishes the breakfast things were still on the table, so he could storm over there and stick a sausage up the git's nose. Though, on second thoughts, that might be more suggestive than is wise right now.

The Hall is quiet, in an extremely expectant sort of way. Harry sort of hopes that someone else will break the silence – though he suspects nothing short of McGonagall threatening to take a thousand points away from Slytherin will shut Zabini up permanently – until Ron shoots up and says, his voice full of indignation, "As if Harry would want to date someone like you! And besides, he likes *girls*."

This, Harry thinks, is *not* helpful – and while it's one hundred per cent true that he does like girls, it wouldn't entirely be a lie to say he could, potentially, like boys too. It's something he hasn't thought too deeply about – the whole Dark Lord defeating and Dark Wizard hunting thing has taken up a lot of his brain space over the past few years – but . . . it's there. Is it a big deal? He doesn't think so, but . . . all the evidence is pointing to the fact that other people do. He tries to sink into his seat and melt under the table, without casting an actual spell. He doesn't want to face his doom as a puddle. Some people might think that being bombarded by hundreds of love-letters was doom enough, but Harry's got keenly attuned senses for doom. He knows more is coming; he can smell it, lavender-y and love potion-y, on the air.

Zabini sort of . . . snaps to attention, going still, as if he's scented weakness. "Are you sure?" he asks Ron, and smiles, just a little. "Who's he dating right now, then?"

"He . . . he just hasn't met the right person," Ron says loyally, and over half of the hall emits a coo of delight. It's almost loud enough to cover the Slytherin jeers.

Harry tries not to wince. He's barely had any breakfast; he's definitely not feeling strong enough for this. The only bright side to this situation is that Malfoy isn't here to see it and gloat over it. Though that's only because Malfoy saw the photo of Zabini kissing him and was so revolted he fled, Harry's mind points out, because he clearly hates himself.

“No, Potter hasn’t met the right *boy*,” Zabini says, and flashes a mean grin at Harry. “At least – not that he knows. Right, Harry?”

Harry’s barely listening, too tied up in a muddle of thoughts about Malfoy, and how much he wishes Ron and Zabini would just shut up, and why does it matter if he wants to date men or women, anyway, for fuck’s sake? So, he does something that in hindsight he thinks is exceptionally stupid: he nods.

“Today, we will be extracting Snargaluff pods, students,” Professor Sprout says, passing out long, thick leather gloves and thickened glass goggles. “Horace tells me that you’ll be brewing up a potion with these beauties in the coming weeks, so make sure you pick the largest, greenest pods – but remember, class! The more they writhe, the fresher they are, but the more likely they are to melt off your skin if you let them make contact.”

“Melt off our skin, right, right,” Ron says, hastily strapping on his gloves. “Do you think we should throw some at Zabini now, or save them for later?”

“Shhh,” Hermione says, elbowing him. And then, on reflection, whispers, “Now *and* later, to be on the safe side. But make sure you leave enough for *us* to use too! We don’t want to be behind in Potions before we’ve started.”

“I’ll partner Potter,” Zabini says, looming up behind Harry and nearly making him fall face first into the closest Snargaluff. “To show no hard feelings, Professor.”

Sprout gives him a kind look and absent-mindedly wipes a line of soil on to her cheek. “Of course, of course,” she says. “Off you go, Mr Weasley, Ms Granger – if you don’t strike now, the Snargaluff will be expecting you.”

Ron and Hermione shoot anxious looks at Harry, but allow Sprout to steer them off to one of the larger Snargaluff stumps, up in the corner of the greenhouse.

Harry prepares to push Zabini head first into their assigned Snargaluff and allow it to beat him to death with its spiny branches – it seems only fair – but, to his dismay, Professor Sprout comes back over and seems keen to talk.

“Brave of you, Harry,” she says, smiling at him.

“Oh, er, thanks,” he says awkwardly, wondering what she’s talking about specifically.

“You should come round to my – to *our* house – in Hogsmeade for tea one day,” she says. “Did you know I don’t live permanently in Hogwarts? Ethel and I . . . We’d love to show you round our little garden.”

Harry realises, in a rush of awkwardness, that Professor Sprout is coming out to him as lesbian. He can feel Zabini trying not to laugh beside him, and this gives him strength. *Zabini* might be the biggest arsehole in the wizarding world, but *he’s* not. “I’d like that, Professor Sprout.”

“Please, call me Pomona,” she says fondly, and when the Snargaluff reaches out with a tentative, spiny branch, she bats it away almost absent-mindedly, reaching in and popping out at least half a dozen enormous, jumping green pods in quick succession.

“Who would have thought that the way to an easy life was to reveal you might enjoy taking it up the arse, eh, Potter?” Zabini says under his breath, and reaches into the Snargaluff’s heart to snatch out another handful of writhing pods. “I’m taking full credit when she gives you an Outstanding in your final exam.”

To Harry’s deep annoyance, the Snargaluff fails to destroy him; indeed, it fails to even maim him. And the more the day goes on, the more Harry begins to think that Zabini really *deserves* to be maimed. Harry had wondered, for a brief, happy moment, whether being outed as gay by the wizarding press – even if he would classify himself more as ‘bisexual, probably’ – would mean a dampening down in enthusiasm from the women of the wizarding world.

What he *hadn’t* considered, however, was that the women of the wizarding world would fight back – while the *men* of the wizarding world, or at least a significant minority of them, would immediately consider it their life’s work to win him over.

As soon as he leaves the greenhouse, he’s bombarded by post birds again, and it’s only luck that one of his classmates has left the greenhouse door open a fraction – a branch snaps out to grab at the unwary birds, and they scatter, letters falling like leaves. Harry can see that some of the envelopes are sealed with kisses and decides that running away is the wisest cause of action – which is proved true almost immediately, when one of them explodes, and Terry Boot briefly, but passionately, declares his undying love for one Armandus Philips, before Slughorn is summoned to give him an antidote.

Harry thinks the low point of the day has to have been reached when, in the middle of lunch – after McGonagall has reassured him for the third time that his mail is no longer going to be a problem – his secretary Alistair’s head appears in the fireplace of the Great Hall, and he booms out that he’s received over seven tonnes of fan mail already in the last hour, and some of it is vibrating, and *next* time Harry decides to fancy men in public, could he do Alistair the courtesy of informing him beforehand? Harry seriously thinks Zabini might wet himself laughing, although Malfoy, by his side, just looks sour and disgusted, as if he hates everybody in general, but Zabini in particular. Even Ron looks a bit pained, as if he wants to laugh and only his loyalty to Harry prevents him.

The day continues to be excruciating, though, with every hour bringing new, fucking annoying challenges. An enormous round fly that buzzes into the library turns out to be a corpulent reporter, who transforms with a delighted, “Gotcha!” to take a photo of Ron squeezing his shoulder affectionately and telling him that a double-dose of laxative in Zabini’s tea is possibly a rather *boring* revenge, but nevertheless a good one, and why not try it some time? Harry thinks he would rather . . . would rather *kiss Zabini again* than kiss Ron, but the reporter zips off before he can be ejected more forcefully, and Harry gloomily suspects he’ll be receiving a Howler from Mrs Weasley the next day, accusing him of splitting up Hermione and Ron. At least, he *hopes* it will be a Howler, and not an ecstatic letter telling him she’s already picked out a new hat.

More than one student plucks up the courage to ask him out, and he has to watch their faces fall as he says no; he feels like a shit, but it's all too fucking difficult. He needs to date someone he *knows* – which reduces his dating pool down to, oh, pretty much Ron, Luna, Hermione and Neville, he realises with gloom. He's doomed to be celibate forever.

It's this realisation that makes him hesitate, for a fraction of a second, when Neville approaches him just before dinner, asks him if they could speak in private for a moment, and then, when they're on the castle steps in the darkness, sticks his tongue in his ear and tells him he's always loved him.

After that fraction of a second, Harry yells and casts Incarcerous on the creepy body-stealing fucker – because it's *not* Neville, of course it's not, it's some frightened-looking teenage girl who had enough cunning to get hold of some of Neville's hair a while back and Polyjuice into him, but not enough cunning to create any sort of plausible plan. But after it's over, he can still feel the aftershocks of that moment of indecision – when he wasn't sure if it was his friend, or someone wearing his friend's face – and he wishes, for just a moment, that he was a Muggle again, and lived in a world where such things didn't happen, and where he wasn't famous for doing something anyone else would have done, and where who he fancied and what shape their genitals were wasn't a matter of interest to anyone other than himself.

Hermione and Ron drag him to the Three Broomsticks for a drink after dinner – there are some perks to returning to school as an adult, it seems – but it doesn't really help. The place is packed, and when Hermione returns with three overflowing pints of Butterbeer, Harry casts a Revelio over their drinks, and his turns pink, indicating the presence of magic. Hermione gets him a new drink on the house, her jawline very set, but somehow he doesn't feel thirsty, after that.

He waits for his friends to ask him if he's *really* gay, or bi, or whatever, but they don't, and although he knows they're being tactful, and waiting for him to be ready to talk, he feels irrationally hacked off. Don't they *care*?

So it seems entirely logical, and to be expected, that when they leave the pub – not long after they arrive – a scruffy owl dive-bombs Harry and drops a letter into his hands.

It doesn't look like one of the usual love letters; it's typewritten, for a start, and crumpled, as if it's been sat on, with the circle of a tea stain on one side of the envelope. Hermione tries to snatch it off him, but Harry's had quite enough of today, thank you, and thinks that if he's hexed, well, that will round things off quite nicely. He opens it up.

Potter.

I know something secret about Ginny Weasley. If you meet me tomorrow, six a.m., where the Forbidden Forest begins to grow, you might be able to persuade me not to tell the world.

A Friend.

They're still arguing about it as they walk back to school, but in a desultory sort of way. Harry knows that however much Hermione tries to persuade him and Ron out of going to

meet this mysterious ‘friend’, they’ll still go – and they both know that if they *don’t*, Hermione will probably sneak out by herself and go alone. So they arrange to meet at five thirty on the stone steps outside the castle, in full knowledge that it’s probably a trap. Harry supposes he could tell the headmistress, or Owl Robards, but . . . this is about Ginny. It’s about *family*. So it’s not really anyone else’s business but theirs, is it?

Before they are safe inside the castle, Hermione shivers and looks around.

“What?” Ron asks, also looking.

Harry looks too, but he can see nothing; just the darkness of a Scottish night, and the twinkling lights of the school in the distance.

“Nothing,” Hermione says, and shivers again. “Just . . . I felt like someone was watching us. It was probably my imagination.”

It’s probably her imagination, Harry thinks, but they all walk a bit faster, towards the light. After all, just because you can imagine something, doesn’t mean it’s not also real.

‘Not Applicable’

Harry wakes up with a jolt at five o’clock exactly, sitting bolt upright in bed and casting a faint Lumos into the darkness. It’s not entirely reassuring; the silence is so thick it almost has substance. Harry feels paranoia bubble up through him. Surely his room-mates haven’t all stopped breathing? Or are they all gathered around his bed, just behind the curtains, waiting for him to pull the curtains open before they . . .?

Before they *what*? Shove a custard pie in his face? Throw him an impromptu, early morning coming-out party?

Harry, heart pounding, decides he’s an idiot. He slides out of bed carefully, hand covering the tip of his wand; he doesn’t want the light to wake anyone up, but if he tries to leave the room by only the green light of the lake, he’ll probably stub his toe, trip and end up launching himself into someone else’s bed.

That will do wonders for the rumours about his sexuality, no doubt.

He’s already dressed – he didn’t *undress* the night before, which Malfoy noticed, of course he did, and pulled a revolted face – so at least he doesn’t have to worry about that, but he can’t find his shoes, at first, and when he bends down to tie the laces he has to place his wand on the floor, so the light is much brighter.

The curtains around the beds of his room-mates are shut, and still, and he relaxes a little bit, but he doesn’t feel entirely safe until he’s left the castle entirely; it’s Hogwarts, of course, so there’s always the chance of a screaming portrait or a nosy ghost giving the game away. Just because McGonagall has relaxed the rules for the returning eighth year students doesn’t mean she’s suspended them entirely. He suspects that creeping about at five in the morning to meet a blackmailer will garner him more than a disapproving look and a mild ticking off.

He’s the first one there – well, he is early – and he walks down the steps, sitting on the bottom one and feeling the cold seep up from the rock and infiltrate his bones. It only occurs to him to cast a Warming Charm when he starts shaking, and he wonders, a little irritated at himself, if magic will ever become as natural to him as it is to the pure-bloods, brought up to consider it as fundamental as breathing. He tries to tell himself that at least he’ll never take it for granted, and as the warmth seeps into him, he starts to feel a little more like himself, rather than the moody bastard who seems to have replaced him over the past days – weeks – months.

Ron arrives next, running down the steps with his robe flapping out behind him, his wand a tiny beacon of light in the darkness. He’s wearing his Cannons pyjamas, Harry notices, and grins. They’re not *quite* glowing in the dark, but lit by wandlight they make Ron look a bit like a long, skinny pumpkin.

Ron nearly trips and falls on his head, but manages to catch himself, and stands there panting for a moment, before looking down at himself and swearing. “Bollocks! I forgot to get dressed,” he says, needlessly, his cheeks two bright spots in the dark.

“Just hold your robe closed,” Harry advises.

“I set an alarm,” Ron says, wrapping his robe tightly around himself and attempting to tuck it into his waistband to keep it in place, “like some sort of idiot. I only went and woke everyone else up, didn’t I? I had to wait till they fell back to sleep again before I could leave.” He looks around, squinting into the surrounding darkness. “If my toes get frostbite and drop off, I’m blaming you, mate.”

“Forget to put your socks on too?” Harry asks, grinning.

“I didn’t *forget*,” Ron says defensively, casting a charm at his shoes and then stowing his wand carelessly away. “I remembered my socks were at the bottom of my trunk, and decided that I’d leave them there to rest. Where the bloody hell is Hermione?”

At precisely half past five, Hermione emerges from the door and trots down the steps. “Not late am I?” she asks. “I didn’t want to hang about in the cold for longer than I had to. Come on – let’s go.” She walks off into the gloom at a quick pace, glowing wand held up high before her. It’s still dark – dawn isn’t for another hour – but the nearly full moon has come out from behind the thick cloud to cast a dim light on the proceedings, so it’s not as bad as it could be.

“This is a really terrible idea,” Hermione adds when they catch up with her. “We could still go back and inform the headmistress about it, you know. Or you could call in Auror Robards, Harry – I’m sure he’d investigate unofficially, on your behalf.” She doesn’t stop walking though.

Ron yawns, so wide it threatens to split his face. “You don’t really think it’s anything to worry about, do you?”

“No-o,” Hermione says, but there’s a note of hesitation in her voice. She shoots a glance at Ron, then narrows her eyes. “Though it would serve you right if it *is*, Ronald Weasley – are those *Cannons pyjamas* under your robes?”

“They will give me courage in the face of adversity,” Ron protests grandly, and Harry sniggers. The Cannons’ losing streak has been going for, oh, at least five years before dinosaurs walked the earth, and he suspects it’ll still be going strong after all life has perished and the earth itself has crashed and burned.

“Come on, Hermione. It’s not going to be Death Eaters, though, is it?” Harry says, because it’s *true*, and someone has to say it. “It’s going to be—”

“Filch Polyjuiced into Ginny, trying to trick Harry into bed,” Ron, who is clearly thinking along the same lines, only worse, interrupts.

This doesn’t lighten the mood, exactly, but by the time Harry’s stopped mock-vomiting, and a cackling Ron has managed to get some air back into his lungs, they’re past the school greenhouses, skirting their way carefully around the Whomping Willow, and on the outskirts of the forest.

Hermione's frost has melted about two degrees, but she still looks a bit chilly around the edges. "I still think we should be ready," she says with a sniff, and extinguishes her Lumos.

"I was *born* ready," Ron boasts, puffing out his chest – and revealing a flash of violent orange in the dark. They don't need wandlight, Harry thinks – tonight they have Ronlight. Harry notices Ron twitch, right after he says this, and pat frantically at his pockets, before subsiding in relief.

"Got your wand all right?" Hermione asks sweetly.

"BORN ready," Ron repeats, and shoots Harry a look of exquisite relief mingled with humour.

Hermione just snorts.

Despite all the joking, though, Harry does feel a finger of unease poke him in the guts as they loiter at the edge of the forest, where the safe, moonlit school grounds leech away into tangled, forbidding blackness. It's not that Harry's scared of trees, exactly – it's more the things that lurk between them. He's definitely scared of tents. He's had enough of forests to last him at least a whole lifetime, if not twenty.

"So, *do* you like bumming then, eh, mate?" Ron asks cheerfully, and then seems a bit surprised that he's said it out loud, crossing his arms and shuffling about a bit in an imitation of nonchalance.

"Ron!" Hermione hisses, as Harry tries not to fall over his own feet.

"I don't mind if you do, you know," Ron continues, with a note of desperation in his voice, and then grins. "Well, it depends *who* you want to bum, I suppose. If it turns out to be Zabini after all, I'm sorry, mate, but that's you off the Christmas card list."

"Oh, *Ron*," Hermione says. "I thought we were leaving Harry to talk to us in his own time?" She turns to Harry, and Harry braces himself for love and understanding. He appreciates it, really he does, but . . . there are no words to express quite how much he doesn't want to talk about his sex life – or lack of it – with Ron and Hermione. He has enough trouble not thinking about *their* sex life – he hopes there's a lack of it – without muddling them up in his mind with his own.

"We hope you know that we'll love you the same, *whoever* you love, Harry," Hermione says simply, to Harry's relief, and leans over to squeeze his arm.

"Even Zabini?" Ron says, in tones of horror, because he's a tosser who just can't let things go. Still:

"I DON'T LOVE ZABINI," Harry says, a bit too loudly, but he wants to be clear. A flock of birds – at least, he hopes they're birds – start cawing and flapping around in the murky gloom above their heads.

“You don’t need to love him to bum him,” Ron says darkly. Then: “Ow! Ow! Have mercy!” he adds, by which Harry presumes Hermione is sticking something sharp into one of Ron’s soft places. He almost hopes they’ll be attacked soon; it might be the only way to make Ron stop talking about bumming.

“It would have been helpful if our blackmailing friend had been a tiny bit more specific about where to meet,” Hermione says loudly, over the sound of Ron’s muttering. “Meeting at the edge of the forest is all very well, but the Forbidden Forest has rather a *lot* of edge. Are we just meant to walk up and down like idiots until someone leaps out at us?”

“No, we’re meant to walk up and down like brave, amazing human beings, who have got up *far* too early to defend the honour of their annoying little sisters,” Ron says, at practically the same time as a shape slides out of the forest and looms over at them. “What the—!” Ron says, starting, and fumbles for his wand, pulling his robes open in the process, revealing the full glory of his pyjamas to the waiting world.

The ominous figure, wearing a voluminous cowled robe that entirely covers its face, makes a choked noise that Harry would swear was a stifled laugh.

“Show yourself!” Ron demands, jabbing his wand in the figure’s direction.

With great ceremony, the figure drops its hood, to reveal . . . a slim, elderly wizard with an extremely twirly moustache and very shiny wavy hair. From beneath the neck of his robe, a vast swathe of purple lace froths out. The man looks expectant for a moment, as if expecting a reaction, then his face turns peevish when he meets nothing but blank stares from them all.

“Are you the . . . the *person* who threatened Ginny?” Hermione demands, after they’ve all stared at each other for a while. Harry has never heard anyone say the word ‘person’ in such a scathing way before; he entirely approves.

“Me? *Threaten*? I come to you as a *friend*,” the stranger says with a sniff. “I was quite specific in my note.”

Ron snorts. “If you’re a friend, you’d tell us your name.”

“My name? Come closer and I’ll whisper.”

The stranger has a funny look in his eye that Harry doesn’t like. He doesn’t *think* it’s the funny look of a Death Eater in fancy dress, but it doesn’t seem like the funny look of an idiot who’s ready to splash a love potion in his face, either. The man looks . . . nervous. As if his whole future is riding on this.

Who goes to meet their future wearing a purple lace ruff, though?

Harry dithers, unsure what to do, and Ron and Hermione both turn to look at him, the same thoughts clearly running their own minds. This proves to be a fatal mistake.

Almost simultaneously, three things happen.

First, the stranger whips his wand out of his voluminous sleeve and begins to chant, so low that Harry can't make out the words.

Second, Ron and Hermione leap in front of Harry, to try to shield him from the golden light swirling from the stranger's wand.

And third – and, frankly, most alarming – Malfoy emerges from under *Harry's own invisibility cloak*, followed in close succession by Blaise Zabini and Pansy Parkinson, of all people, and appears to try to fling himself bodily in front of Ron and Hermione to block the spell, only managing to jar Hermione and shatter her shield charm as he barrels past her.

As the spell hits, Harry realises that – of *course* – Malfoy isn't doing anything of the sort. He's attempting to rend the moustachioed stranger limb from limb.

It is at this point that Harry realises that perhaps the stranger isn't such a stranger to Malfoy. But before he can start to enjoy the battle, and pick which side to root for, the stranger makes an enormous flourish with his wand and the spell ripens. It feels a little like an explosion – at least, the aftershock of it vibrates through Harry's chest, making him stagger and nearly fall to the ground. When he blinks into the darkness – dawn is still some time away – he can see the imprint of golden stars behind his eyelids.

Malfoy, who was closest to the epicentre of the spell, has fallen to his hands and knees, but Harry can tell he's still alive. The fact he's spluttering with rage is a bit of a giveaway. Harry would be spluttering, too, to be fair, but he seems to have been struck dumb by the unavoidable truth that a moustachioed, purple-lace-wearing git has cast some flavour of unspeakable spell on him and his friends and Harry didn't have the common sense to cast a Protego of his own to replace Hermione's.

Hermione and Ron *seem* to be OK – they're still standing, at any rate, and holding hands; it must have been a reflex when the spell hit.

For a brief, unpleasant moment, Harry, standing alone, feels horrendously jealous.

“What the fuck was that?” Pansy asks – from behind Harry.

Malfoy rises – now lightly daubed in mud – and resumes his attempt to throttle the man.

“Your . . . your last article about me MADE MY MOTHER CRY,” he roars, and manages to rip away a handful of lace, before launching at the man and appearing to try to bite his nose off.

“Aren't you going to go and help *your friend*?” Hermione asks Zabini pointedly – who's also behind Harry.

Zabini shrugs. “He seems to be doing OK by himself.”

“He's not allowed to use non-essential magic outside of Hogwarts for the next year, though, is he?” Hermione says, sounding more than a little judgemental. “Or he'll breach the conditions the Wizengamot placed upon him, and . . .”

She trails off, but the end of the sentence – *be thrown in Azkaban* – echoes loudly in Harry's brain.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you, Granger?" Zabini asks curiously. He sounds like he already knows what the answer will be though.

"No!" Hermione says, her eyes widening. "Absolutely not!"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Pansy mutters, pushing her way past Harry and nearly bowling him over. "*I'll* help, shall I?"

Malfoy has got the stranger – the newswizard, by the sound of it – in a headlock, and appears to have given up on the nose, in favour of trying to twist off his face.

"Let him go, pet," Harry can hear Pansy say, and Malfoy reluctantly drops the red-faced wizard, who falls to his hands and knees, gasping. "*Incarcerous*," Pansy adds, wrinkling her nose and swishing her wand. Instantly, glowing light twines around the wizard's wrists, binding them together, and he jerks up again, struggling to his feet. His hair is a mess, and his voluminous robe has been half torn off. Under it, he is wearing green brocade knee-breeches, and a cream shirt, tights and shoes – now liberally smeared with mud. Even his moustache is now wonky.

To Harry's dismay, however, he is grinning – at *Malfoy*. "It worked," he says in a hushed whisper, and then, to deepen the dismay, he repeats it. "It WORKED!"

"What fucking worked?" Malfoy spits, running a hand through his hair and liberally distributing a bit more mud. His own robe is skew-whiff, and his school jumper torn at the neck. There is something . . . Harry squints, but can't make it out. Does Malfoy have some sort of *neck tattoo*?

"Draco, what the *actual fuck* is that?" Pansy – who is closest to him – asks, a note of hysteria in her voice.

"Do all teenagers swear as liberally as you?" the newswizard asks judgementally, and cringes when everyone turns to glare at him. Everyone, that is, other than Pansy, who is still staring at Malfoy. At Malfoy's *neck*. "Never mind, eh," the newswizard says, mock cheerfully, and attempts to shuffle closer to Malfoy without being noticed. "Let's have a look and see whose name is—"

Pansy leaps forward and grabs at Malfoy, spinning him around and then pulling roughly at his robe, so that it's practically up to his chin.

"What on *earth* are you doing?" Malfoy asks icily, and Pansy makes a noise of frustration, before leaning up and whispering frantically in his ear. Malfoy's eyes widen to the size of dinner plates, and he takes over the clutching; he must be strangling himself he's holding his robes so tightly. Pansy steers Malfoy past Harry and over to Zabini – taking a wide circle to avoid him, he notices – and the three of them conduct a hysterical-toned conversation in shrill whispers. He tries not to listen.

“Oh well,” the newswizard says, the look of manic purpose in his eye not diminished. “You’re not the main prize, anyway. Come here, Mr Potter, and let’s talk business.”

“I’m sorry, but who the hell *are* you?” Harry asks, feeling like in this morass of confusion he’d like at least one firm fact to be going along with.

The wizard gives a half bow. “I’m your biggest fan, Mr Potter. Basil Woodbead, Esquire, at your service. Call me Basil.”

Harry stares at him.

“Chief reporter on the magazine with the highest circulation in wizarding Britain?” Woodbead continues, this time a little tetchily. “*Witch Weekly*?” he adds, when Harry continues to stare.

“I don’t read it,” Harry says. It’s technically true. He can’t bring himself to read any wizarding press these days, other than the political reports, but he can’t stop other people from quoting things at him, and sometimes Mrs Weasley sends him heavily highlighted clippings and asks him pointed follow-up questions, so it’s difficult to wriggle out of it.

“I suppose not being a witch is a good enough excuse,” Woodbead says sniffily, and attempts to neaten his hair with his bound hands. It is a fruitless attempt. “You’re not part of our target demographic, to be fair. Now, to business, before dawn breaks.”

Zabini clears his throat meaningfully. “Potter?”

Harry half-turns. “Yes?”

“Can I trust you to deal with this maggot and get the counterspell out of him? No need to involve the headmistress,” he adds in an off-handed tone. “I’m sure it’s best all round if we handle this little matter *privately*.”

Harry can see, out of the corner of his eye, Woodbead grin nastily and incline his head in agreement. “I’ll do my best,” he says. It would serve them all right if he *did* involve the headmistress; there’s something here he’s not getting.

Anger flashes across Zabini’s face, which he quickly suppresses. “Then your best needs to be good enough,” he snaps back, and adds, equally quickly, and rather more awkwardly, “please, Harry.”

It’s the unexpected use of his first name that convinces Harry that this – this whatever it is – is serious. He shoots a quick look over at Malfoy. Malfoy is usually pale, as if he’s been carved out of marble rather than born in the normal way, but his face stands out in the darkness, pure white and panicked, as if he’s been shown a prophecy of some imminent disaster.

“We’ll wait for you in our dormitory,” Zabini says, and throws, “don’t be long,” over his shoulder as he and Pansy start to guide the boneless Malfoy back towards the castle.

“Are you guys all right?” Harry asks Ron and Hermione in an undertone.

Ron nods, and Hermione wrinkles her nose. “I think so. You?”

“Yeah, I don’t feel any different. Maybe only Malfoy got hit,” Harry says.

Woodbead’s self-satisfied, nasty smile widens. “It’s not a *painful* spell,” he says. “It’s a beautiful one.”

Ron releases Hermione’s hand to grab for his wand. He shakes it threateningly. “Malfoy didn’t look so pleased with it, you arsehole. You’d better spill or – what?” he says, breaking off in confusion as Hermione gasps.

“Your wrist . . .” she says.

“What?” Ron says, panicked, and lights his wand to see better by.

Harry takes a few hasty steps to close the gap between them, and he and Hermione stare at Ron’s wrist. As they watch, a small tattoo of a flowerbud, in bright gold lines, blossoms, leaves unfurling around it, and a circle of minute, intricate woodland creatures raise their noses, as if they’re sniffing the air expectantly. Within the heart of the flower, a name sharpens into definition.

Hermione Granger.

It occurs to them all, too late, that maybe they shouldn’t have let Woodbead see the mark, but he sniffs dismissively. “Not exactly a scoop, unless . . . What does yours say, Miss Granger?” And before Hermione can react, he’s used his bound hands to snatch at her robe sleeve, revealing an identical scene on her own wrist – flower, creatures, etc etc – but the name in the heart of *her* bloom reads: *Ronald Weasley*.

“Boring,” Woodbead says. “Entirely to be expected. *That* won’t get the readers’ attention for long, even if they *do* find the pair of you bafflingly interesting. Now *you*, on the other hand, Mr Potter . . .”

Harry blocks Woodbead with a quick flick of his wand before the man’s even finished speaking, and he subsides back, but he still looks worryingly pleased with himself.

“What does this mean?” Hermione asks in a very small voice, staring at her wrist with a very far-away look in her eye.

“Standard soulmate spell,” Woodbead says, smugness oozing from every pore. “Though when I say *standard*, I of course mean extremely complex – and extremely illegal – dark love magic. Harry Potter’s soulmate! This is going to be the *scoop of the century*, my young friends.”

Ron gurgles, like a blocked drain being plunged. “Soulmate spell?” he squeaks.

Something very peculiar seems to be happening to Harry’s insides. “Did you just admit to casting *extremely illegal dark magic* on us?” he says, trying to focus on the important parts. He doesn’t believe in soulmates. He absolutely doesn’t believe in soulmates.

He tries not to listen to the tiny voice in the back of his head telling him he didn't believe in magic for a long time either.

"Just take a look at your own soulmark and let me know the name, and then we can part as friends," Woodbead suggests.

"How about you cast the counterspell and we'll consider not shopping you to the Ministry?" Harry snaps, trying to shove down his rising panic and only just managing. Soulmark? What the *actual fuck*?

"Soulmate spell!" Ron says to himself again, looking a bit green around the gills. It co-ordinates beautifully with the orange of his pyjamas and the red of his hair.

"Tell you what, agree for me to publish the story, tell me what the soulmark shows, and *then* I'll cast the counterspell," Woodbead says, still smiling, but it's a bit strained around the edges. "You don't want to worry the Ministry, do you, Mr Potter – may I call you Harry? There'll just be a lot of nasty publicity, whatever you do. You might as well submit to it gracefully. I'll write a lovely story, you know I will, and you'll no longer be bothered by all these terrible rumours about who you're dating, then, will you?" he wheedles. "I'm doing you a favour, really."

Harry is rendered speechless by the sheer fucking cheek of the man. Amongst other things. He can barely breathe. He tries not to hyperventilate; passing out will only make things worse. He needs to keep his wits – what wits he has left – about him.

"And I'll keep your young Slytherin friend entirely out of it," Woodbead adds, and his eyes narrow. "I see you're wearing Slytherin robes yourself, Harry – do give me a quote about why that is. I don't need a quill; I have an *excellent* memory."

"Soulmark," Ron intones in a hollow voice, still staring at his wrist; his freckles are standing out like tiny beacons on his pale skin. "Merlin's *balls*."

Hermione shoots first Ron, and then Woodbead, a look strong enough to flay skin. "You've got some nerve," Hermione says to Woodbead, her voice rigid with fury. "Meddling in things that don't concern you! Undo the spell *right now*, or I won't be held responsible for the consequences. As if we'd make a deal with a toad like you!"

Woodbead raises his chin. "Name *first* – then I'll comply. Nothing else will make me do it!"

"I'm sorry, Harry, I know you hate the press like poison, and I know what you said to Zabini, but I really think we're going to have to take this to the headmistress, so she can call in Head Auror Robards," Hermione says, and squeezes his arm. "I can't see another way out of this mess." She gives a gusty sigh. "We should have told her about this right from the start."

Harry pulls a face, but nods. He knows he should do something – anything – but he can't manage to concentrate on anything other than the niggling knowledge that somewhere on his body there is a magical tattoo with a name on it. A name that reveals . . .

His heart catches in his chest. Does he even want to know? Doesn't that count as the biggest fucking spoiler in the story of his life *ever*?

If it's even true. Advice from long ago echoes in his mind: *Don't trust anything magic if you don't know where it keeps its brain*. Who, exactly, gets to decide who his soulmate is? Surely that's *his* job, and not the business of some dubious spell administered by a twit with stupid hair?

Harry and Hermione both move to stand either side of Woodbead, to drag him to the castle. Harry feels like he's wading through glue. Ron no longer seems to be noticing anything at all, other than the tattoo.

"Wait!" Woodbead says, and his face sags. "Have some compassion, dear friends. My editor . . . he is a harsh man. He let me go yesterday, for losing out on the scoop that *bitch* at the *Prophet* scored yesterday – your tender scene with Zabini, I mean. Does the Slytherin robe mean that you two are—?" He breaks off. "Ahem. Unless I bring back a story that is epic in scope, I will be jobless! Homeless! Penniless! Alas, Mr Mistlethorpe tires of my opinion pieces on the Death Eater child, Malfoy, despite my sparkling prose, and tells me that I am destined for the scrapheap unless . . ." He turns a quivering moustache on Harry. "Please, dear boy, I beg you. What else is an old man for, if he cannot continue in the work he has dedicated his life to?"

"Spreading gossip and smears, you mean," Hermione says tartly.

"My stories are *impeccably* researched," Woodbead says, regaining a little of his fight. "Sometimes my sources turn out to be wrong, but that is hardly *my* fault, now, is it? I am just too trusting."

Harry thinks – in the face of this pathetic pleading – that he'd almost rather the man had turned out to be a Death Eater, trying to kill them. He tries to pull himself together, and almost manages. "So you don't actually have anything on Ginny, then?" he asks, remembering why they'd agreed to this meeting in the first place. He suspects he's been an unspeakable idiot, but he needs to be sure.

"Oh, plenty," Woodbead says gloomily. "But, er, I spoke to her about a few, er, rumours a while back, and we came to a mutual agreement that I wouldn't publish."

This is not comforting. If he'd had the common sense to just *fire-call* Ginny, they wouldn't have had to get up so early to go on this fool's errand, and they wouldn't have been hit by a spell that . . . what?

Harry shivers, struck by a premonition of future troubles that he can't explain. His *soulmate* . . . Alleged, he tells himself firmly. His *alleged* soulmate. A completely different beast to an actual soulmate, which is – he also tells himself firmly – something he doesn't believe in.

"You will *not* be publishing anything about us," Hermione says suddenly, folding her arms. "The only question is whether you simply lose your job, or whether we report you to the Ministry and you lose your freedom too. When you undo the spell, we'll decide what to do with you."

“We will?” Harry asks, and Hermione shoots him an unreadable look.

Relief stands out starkly on Woodbead’s brow. Relief and . . . something shifty. The man licks his lips. “You’ll have to come with me.”

“Where to?” Harry asks suspiciously.

The answer, when it comes, is not reassuring. “Knockturn Alley, I’m afraid.”

Harry’s never Side-Along Apparated very far before. He doesn’t enjoy the sensation, and it turns out that journeying from Hogwarts to London, in a series of seemingly endless hops, only intensifies the ‘fish-hook in the guts’ sensation to unbearable levels. He hopes they can pick up a Portkey in Diagon Alley for the return journey, to speed it up, or he faces the prospect of vomiting his guts out in the near future.

Knockturn Alley seems deserted, but Harry keeps catching flickers out of the corner of his eye, and he suspects they’re being watched through every crack in every door and from behind every dirty curtain. It’s too early for shops to be open, but he’s old enough now to realise that evil doesn’t keep to a regular timetable. Whatever vile hole Woodbead bought his illegal spell from, Harry’s sure it will be open 24/7 to select customers. He tries to look less like Harry Potter, who’s never going to be welcome in a place like this.

They still have Woodbead bound, but his voluminous cloak makes it less obvious, and with him and Hermione on either side, and Ron – still quiet and thoughtful, still too orange to be out in public – behind him, Harry’s fairly sure he won’t be able to escape if he tries. Harry curls his fingers around his wand, though. This is the first time he’s been outside without being mobbed by fans, but the ringing silence is not a comfort.

They walk, guided by Woodbead, who pauses in front of an inoffensive brick wall, plastered in tattered Wanted posters. Harry notes, dispassionately, that all of those pictured – who scowl out at him from blurry black and white images – were caught months ago.

“Oh dear,” Woodbead says, and the sound of genuine panic in his voice makes Harry’s blood freeze. “It was here – I swear it was here.”

“What was?” Hermione asks, as if her patience is about to run out.

“The shop I bought the spell from, of course! Right where this wall is. I thought that they could help provide the counter-curse – I mean, counterspell.”

Harry tries not to twitch. “You have the original spell, at least? If you hand it over, at least then we know what we’re dealing with.”

“Yes, yes. Top-right breast pocket,” Woodbead says, and Harry reaches under Woodbead’s outer robe to retrieve it, withdrawing a tightly folded piece of parchment.

He unfolds it, holds it out so Hermione and Ron can see it too, and —

“Fuck!” he says, dropping it and shaking his burnt fingers. The thing continues to burn as it flutters to the ground, gusting away in a shower of ash and sparks. “Did you know it would do that?” he demands of Woodbead.

Woodbead has gone a bit green around the edges. “No, I swear it.” He clears his throat. “I think this incident may suggest that the chap who sold this to me – a very tall man, under a cloak, he was – prefers to remain anonymous. He *was* quite stern about me keeping our transaction a secret, now I think about it.” His voice takes on a wheedling tone. “If I can’t help *remove* the spell, you may as well just tell me what your soulmark says, Harry, before someone else finds out. At least this way you can control the story.”

“Harry, what are we going to do?” Hermione says, in something that’s almost a wail. “I think Ron’s having a nervous breakdown. I can’t . . .”

Ron appears to attempt to pull himself together at that, and wraps her in a hug.

Harry, who’s not sure he’s far off a breakdown himself, but has no one to hug, makes a decision. “Look – just fuck off, will you?” he says to Woodbead, trying to sound firm rather than desperate. “If you publish *anything* about this, the Ministry will know what you’ve done, and we’ll file a formal complaint. I’ll make sure you’re sent to Azkaban,” he adds, and to his ears it sounds like he means it.

Woodbead gulps. “For a little love spell?” he asks.

“For a fucking great big illegal dark love spell. A *curse* you called it,” Harry says sternly. “Understood?”

“Understood!” Woodbead says, eyes wide and sweat standing out on his forehead, despite the chill of the morning.

Harry breaks the bonds around Woodbead’s wrists. Woodbead is off so quickly, it’s almost as if he was never there.

“Azkaban?” Hermione sniffs, somewhere under Ron’s arm. “*Really*, Harry.”

“I didn’t *mean* it,” Harry says wretchedly. “You don’t get sent to Azkaban for casting shitty illegal spells unless they’re Unforgiveables. But I thought it might do the trick.” He groans. “I couldn’t think how reporting him would help, though. At least this way we might avoid the whole world knowing about this fiasco.”

“Er, is it a fiasco?” Ron asks, a bit indistinctly, his face buried in Hermione’s hair.

Hermione pulls herself out of his arms, and glares at him. Her eyes are red-rimmed, and Ron bites his lip, shuffling his feet and attempting to stick his hands in his pockets, which only draws attention to the fact he doesn’t *have* any pockets – he’s in his pyjamas.

“Um, I’m just saying,” Ron says, and clears his throat three times in a row.

Hermione’s frowns, and reaches up to feel Ron’s forehead with the back of her hand. “Are you feeling all right, Ron? You’ve gone a funny colour. I think we should get back to school

as soon as possible and get you checked over by Madam Pomfrey. You might be having some sort of allergic reaction to the spell, or something.”

She’s right – Ron looks extremely peculiar. Harry has a funny feeling it’s nothing to do with the spell, though – at least, not directly. Ron’s his *best mate*. He knows that look. It’s a look that suggests Ron is about to do something incredibly brave – or stupid – and he’s trying not to wet his pants.

“Listen, mate,” Ron says to Harry, his face suddenly flaming with the crimson of a rising sun. “This is going to be a bit weird, and I’m sorry about that, but you know, you’re closer than family in lots of ways, so it would be sort of weird if I *didn’t* do it with you here, you know that?”

“Um, OK,” Harry says, in the face of complete incomprehensibility.

Ron drops to one knee in front of Hermione, right there in the middle of Knockturn Alley, his robes billowing out behind him in the wind.

Oh. *Oh*.

It’s like a punch to the gut – if a punch to the gut could be the best thing that had ever happened to a bloke, Harry thinks, overwhelmed with emotion. He looks at Hermione’s face, and has to look away; it’s too much.

“Right, right. Er, Hermione, you know that I, er, love you very much, right?” Ron says, speaking to her waist. “I love Harry too, of course, and you two are basically my everything, but, er, you’re a bit *more* of my everything, to be fair, and I’d very much like it if you’d agree to become my family on a bit more of a permanent basis – you know, by becoming a Weasley.” He runs out of breath, and then clearly panics, turning to Harry and not looking at him, but adding, “I’m really sorry, mate, but while I’m a modern man and all that, I can’t really ask you the same question too. Mum would go *mental*.” He actually looks at Harry at that, and grins, but he’s pale behind the whole face-sunset thing. “And I think—”

“Ron,” Hermione says faintly.

Ron stops babbling and looks up at her, for the first time since he’s started speaking. “Y-y-y-y-yes?” His eyes widen. “Bollocks! I forgot the ring! I have one, honest, it’s a family heirloom – I asked Mum, and she said it was OK, but I left it in the Burrow, I think, and—”

“*Ron*,” Hermione interrupts. “Yes.”

“Yes what?” Ron says, stupidly.

“Oh, *Ron*,” Hermione says, so fondly it makes Harry’s heart hurt. “Yes. *Yes*.”

“Yes?” Ron says, and leaps to his feet as if he’s a spring in human form. “You mean it?” His smile is so wide it threatens to split his face.

“Granger-Weasley, mind – for both of us,” she says.

“I’m not sure Mum will—”

“*Granger-Weasley*,” Hermione repeats.

“Sure, sure, whatever you want,” Ron says contentedly, and sweeps her off her feet, swinging her round in a dizzying stumble, before putting her down, kissing her face at least a dozen times, and then pulling Harry into their hug.

It’s nice, but it’s awkward, and Harry feels like he’s intruding ridiculously on a private moment, though he’s so happy for them he could cry. He thinks if anyone says anything in the least bit soppy he *will* actually cry, and that would be appalling, so he pulls away and tries to make a joke of it. “Ron, did you really just propose to Hermione in Cannons pyjamas, or this is one of my stranger dreams?”

“Better than another dream about Malfoy, eh?” Ron says sympathetically, and whacks him on the shoulder. “I mean, I know you keep killing him off, which has got to be pleasant, but even so.” He shudders, but his smile is irrepressible.

“Such a romantic setting, too,” Hermione says sarcastically, but her whole face is lit up by happiness, and she leans over to peck Ron on the cheek.

“Hey, it was spontaneous,” Ron says, going red again. “But, er, perhaps we should celebrate by Apparating back to school? If we hang about here much longer, we’ll be late for Charms.”

“We can celebrate by me vomiting on you,” Harry says gloomily, at the thought of the journey ahead of them – and of what he might discover at their destination.

Ron appears to take this as a joke, because he grips hold of first Hermione’s arm, and then Harry’s, and screws up his face as he prepares to whip them away. Harry presses his lips together very tightly, shuts his eyes and tries not to think about anything – but particularly not the fact that somewhere on his body is the name of the person he’s allegedly best suited to in the world, and soon he’ll find out who that is.

He feels sick enough as it is, without dwelling on *that*.

Back at school, Harry – taking lots of deep breaths to try to settle his churning stomach – leaves Ron and Hermione in the Entrance Hall and heads down the steps to what he is rapidly beginning to think of as his doom. He would have put it off for a bit, but Ron and Hermione looked like they were gearing up to do a lot of intense snogging, and he thought he’d better leave them to it.

The corridor outside the Slytherin dungeons is empty, apart from the ghost of the Bloody Baron, who scowls blackly at Harry and floats off through a wall as soon as he catches sight of him – which is, frankly, a relief. Harry sags against cold stone and shuts his eyes. He’s not ready to read whatever name is written on his skin. Frankly, he thinks he’ll *never* be ready. *What if it’s Ginny?* he thinks. A cold, clammy dread sticks his shirt to his back. He loves Ginny, but he just . . . can’t. She means family, and safety, and friendship, and stability – and

he wants all that, but he wants *more* than that. He can't bear it if that's all there is. He'd die for her, but then he's the sort of idiot who'd die for pretty much anyone. He wants to date – to marry – someone he'd fight *death itself* to return to.

But, if the name on his skin isn't Ginny's, *who the bloody fuck is it?*

It's not that he *believes* that whatever's written there will be real, exactly. It's just . . . Ron had Hermione, and Hermione had Ron. If ever evidence existed that the spell does what it says on the tin, there's that.

Except . . . Harry doesn't know what's written on the bloody tin, so to speak, does he? The spell has disintegrated, as if it never existed. Leaving only . . . Bloody hell. He'd almost forgotten that the spell had hit *Malfoy* too. He feels even less disinclined to go in now, to find out that Malfoy's soulmate is some Slytherin pure-blood fanatic. It's Pansy, isn't it? Malfoy had looked as happy about it as you'd expect someone to look, finding out their soulmate was Pansy Pugface Parkinson.

The bile that rises up inside Harry surprises him unpleasantly, and it's this that makes him summon the passageway and enter the dormitory at a quick pace. He has to get this over with for his own peace of mind, and then he can get on with expunging the bloody spell. There has to be a countercharm to it; there is for pretty much *every* spell. Well, except Avada, for obvious reasons. Whatever this spell is, it's not as bad as *that*.

There are a few lone students dotted around the common room, and although they look up as Harry enters, they quickly look away again sourly, to concentrate on various scrolls and books. Studying before breakfast – has he made a mistake and accidentally wound up in Ravenclaw? Harry feels a pang for the Gryffindor common room, where people would mostly smile at you, unless you'd done something unforgiveable, like lose House Points or miss the snitch, and would *never* study before breakfast. Well, unless they were Hermione Granger.

Harry slips into the corridor that leads to the dormitories, speeding up as he walks down it, to get it over with that little bit quicker. He throws open the door and nearly falls on his face as someone on the other side pulls it open simultaneously.

Nott scowls at him, before closing the door behind him with a bang and slouching over to lean against the wall, wrinkling his nose.

“What – how?” Harry says stupidly as he regains his balance, when he sees Pansy and Millicent sitting next to each other, cross-legged, on Zabini's bed.

“What took you so long, dickhead!” Zabini says crossly, rising from the trunk he's been perching on.

Harry frowns, noticing that while everyone is sitting very close to Malfoy – who's hunched on his own bed, leaning forward, elbows on his knees, head bowed and hands tangled in his hair – no one's actually sitting *with* him. Goyle is on the floor by his bed, though.

Malfoy has at least two school scarves tightly wrapped around his throat, Harry notices, his eyes drawn immediately to where Malfoy's supposed soulmark is hidden; his neck is entirely covered.

An enormous yellow-tinged, fluffy pillow near Malfoy *moves*, and Harry nearly trips over his own feet. The pillow hisses at him, revealing an ugly face and enormous fangs. "Lady Voldemort, I presume," Harry says weakly.

Malfoy starts at Harry's voice, and his face colours a dull brick-red, but he doesn't look up.

"Go on then, show us yours," Pansy says, rising from the bed and reaching out a hand, as if she's about to start tugging at his clothes.

Harry shies away from her. "Er, no. How did you get in here?"

Pansy raises her eyebrows. "I walked? Using my legs?"

Millicent snorts. "Now, now, Pans. You know that girls aren't allowed in the boys dorms in Gryffindor." She turns to Harry and gives him a pitying look. "*Slytherin* men wouldn't dare get up to no good with women they aren't engaged to." She shrugs. "So, no need for stupid rules here."

"No sex before marriage, Potter," Malfoy spits, not raising his head. "Keeps the bloodlines pure. Not something *you'd* care about, I suppose."

Well, this is a jolly and not at all awkward conversation, Harry thinks, eyes still locked on Malfoy's neck. He can't see anything, but the knowledge that under the nest of scarves and the fabric of Malfoy's shirt lies . . . what, exactly? "No, I couldn't give a fuck about blood purity, you're right there," Harry says, though, because it's true and he's not letting Malfoy get away with any of his old blood supremacist shit while he's around, even if he can't currently take his eyes off him.

It occurs to Harry . . . maybe the name written on Malfoy's skin is a *Muggleborn*. Oh, now that *would* be rich.

"So, you got it sorted, then?" Zabini asks delicately. "I think our Draco's about ready for the countercharm, whatever it is."

Harry manages to drag his gaze away from Malfoy towards Zabini. He can feel his face *do* something, and Zabini sort of twitches, shoots a glance at Malfoy, and says – very meaningfully – "Ah."

Yes, exactly.

"Well, Potter," Millicent says calmly, from her cross-legged position on the bed, "if you can't undo the spell, I think Draco would appreciate an explanation for exactly *why* he has your name tattooed in massive letters across his collarbones, in a lovely frame of jolly forest creatures."

Harry's first thought is: this *can't* be happening. It's some sort of . . . dream. Any second now, Malfoy's going to explode, or choke, or something, and he'll wake up from another nightmare of Malfoy's oncoming death.

As Millicent speaks, though, Malfoy makes a noise rather like a steam train gearing up to take a steep slope. "Shut the hell *up*, Millicent, before I fucking *kill* you," he all but yells, leaping off his bed and trying to put his hand over her mouth. It's all a bit too late. "I thought we agreed we weren't going to *fucking tell Potter*?"

It *can't* be happening. It fucking *can't*.

Millicent pulls Malfoy off her roughly, and for a moment Harry thinks they're going to have a full-on punch up, but somehow in the process Malfoy sort of . . . deflates into her arms. It's less of a hug and more of a steel trap, but he seems to relax into it, his back to Harry, head tucked into the crook of her neck.

"Fawns, and rabbits, and butterflies, and all sorts, Potter," Millicent continues, as if there had been no sudden assault on her person by an enraged Malfoy. Malfoy twitches, as if he's considering leaping up and tearing someone's head off, but Millicent has a firm grip on him, and she gives him a comforting – restraining – bang on the back as she speaks.

Harry can't move. Can't look away. Can't *think*.

"You are *such* a cowbag, Bullers," Pansy says admiringly.

Millicent ignores her; she's still staring at Harry. "And then *your* name, Potter, covered in flowers," she says, still stoically patting. "Pretty, if you like that kind of thing, though a bit on the ostentatious side. So – what does it mean?"

If Harry could speak, he still wouldn't be able to answer. What does it mean? Disaster, probably. Doom. All things beginning with D.

"And do *you* have *Draco's* name too?" Pansy adds, shooting a sideways, spiteful glance at Malfoy.

A strange, awful sensation drips through Harry's body. Does he have Malfoy's name . . . ? Does he *want* Malfoy's name . . . ?

Malfoy twitches again, and now even his scalp is flushing red, glowing through his pale hair.

"I–I don't know whose name is on me," Harry manages to stammer out, mesmerised by the shape of Malfoy's back. By the knowledge that *Malfoy's soulmate is . . .*

Fucking, fucking *hell*.

"I haven't looked," Harry whispers, words dropping like a pebble into a deep, dark well. For now, all is cold and silent – there is only the fall, and the knowledge that at some point soon, he'll hit the bottom.

Zabini rises from his uncomfortable perch on his trunk, stretches, and half pushes Harry out of the room and into the bathroom. The door clicks shut behind them with a very final sounding noise.

“This is really fucking Draco up,” Zabini says in a very matter of fact voice. “I know he’s not your friend, but he’s *my* friend, all right?” There’s an edge of steel to him now. “Loyalty is not a fucking Gryffindor-only virtue, you know, even if it might suit you to think that way. So, why not get your kit off – don’t worry, Potter, I absolutely don’t want to look – and let’s see what you find, and take it from there.” He turns his back, leaning against the wall with one shoulder, and crosses his arms.

Harry suppresses his instinct to tell Zabini where to stick it – fucking *Draco* up? Does Zabini think Harry’s finding this hilarious fun? – and peels off his outer robe and jumper, rolling up his sleeves and examining his arms, heart in his mouth.

Nothing.

He unbuttons his shirt, peering at himself in the mirror, before pulling it off entirely and craning his neck to examine his back in the glass.

Still nothing.

He shoves his shirt back on, and removes his shoes and socks, stepping out of his trousers when he can’t see anything on his feet.

Nothing.

Feeling ridiculous, he pulls down his boxers and twists, examining his arse. It’s as arse-shaped as expected, but the skin is clear, and so is that of his cock. In some ways it’s a relief – he doesn’t really want to see the name of his soulmate emblazoned on his knob – but a seed of panic has planted in his stomach and is putting out hundreds of tiny, wiggling roots.

He pulls his boxers up and gives himself another thorough examination all over, coming up with . . . nothing.

He must have missed it. It must be small, and discreet, and somewhere hidden. He swallows hard. “I can’t find it,” he says, in a voice that comes out extremely small.

“What?” Zabini asks.

“Fuck’s sake, you can turn around,” Harry says, running a hand roughly through his hair. Maybe the tattoo is on his scalp.

Zabini turns around, wrinkling his nose. “This is not my idea of a dream come true, Potter,” he says, eyes flicking over Harry’s half-naked form in distaste.

“It’s not exactly mine either!” Harry snaps back, folding his arms defensively across his chest. The panic’s properly implanted itself now, coiling throughout his entire body; he’s not sure he can stand up for much longer.

“Thank fuck for that,” Zabini mutters, and strides towards Harry. “That thing with the *Prophet* was a *joke*, Potter, just to be clear. My mother fire-called me in the *Headmistress’s* office to tell me off, and she only shut up about it when I agreed to give an interview about my extreme straightness to *Witch Weekly*, so don’t think I got away with it unscathed.”

“What are you doing?” Harry asks, panic flaring to new, unexpected heights as Zabini moves to tug his shirt off.

“Checking out your fine physique,” Zabini says with a snort. “And then working out how to Oblivate myself afterwards.”

Harry suffers Zabini to examine him in excruciating detail, and tries not to punch him in the head when he mutters, “I’m going to have nightmares about this for *weeks*,” halfway through. It’ll be worth it if Zabini can find his sodding soulmark, and put an end to the panic that’s threatening to entirely envelop him and swallow him up. Even if it’s *Malfoy*.

Oh god, Harry thinks, squeezing his eyes tight shut. What if it’s Malfoy? And a small part of him wonders, with equal panic, *what if it isn’t?*

Finally, Zabini grasps Harry’s head in his large hands and tilts it to and fro, painfully carding his fingers through Harry’s hair in silence for several minutes as he digs at his scalp. “Ow,” Harry says.

“Sorry,” Zabini says, not sounding at all sorry. He releases Harry and goes to wash his hands ostentatiously.

“Well?” Harry demands, managing to do up his shirt buttons with fingers that are all thumbs. His whole body is vibrating. It’s not exactly terror, but then it’s not exactly *not* terror either.

“Well?” Zabini repeats mockingly, then shrugs. “There’s not a mark on you, Potter, other than your old scar. Whatever spell’s been worked on you, the answer to the question it asked is . . . Not Applicable.”

Harry takes this in. At least, he tries to. The answer to the question ‘Who is Harry Potter’s soulmate?’ is . . . N/A? There’s a buzzing in his ears, as if he’s underwater, and he shakes his head to clear it, but it doesn’t help. He manages to get himself over to the low bench beneath the window and sits down, on legs that won’t stop dithering.

“So, Potter, just out of interest . . . what *does* the spell show?” Zabini asks, drying his hands and shooting him a very sharp look.

“Who your soulmate is,” Harry says dully. “Apparently.” The buzzing in his head is worse, now, and there’s a band of steel around his forehead, tightening by the second.

Zabini considers this, closes his eyes, and scrubs over his eyelids with the tips of his fingers. “Ah,” he says, and fixes Harry with an unsettling look. “I don’t think we’ll tell Draco that if we can help it. I’m presuming that sounds OK to you?”

“Absolutely fine by me,” Harry says. He wonders, vaguely, if he’s having a panic attack. The world seems filmed with grey and everything is spinning, ever so slightly.

Zabini makes to go, and then stops, turning back. “You’re not going to keel over and die, or anything stupid, are you?” he asks, narrowing his eyes. “I mean, not that I care overly much, but you’re proving to be marginally less horrific than I expected, and I’m looking forward to finding out if you can move up a level to just being ‘awful’ by the end of the week.”

“Who knows, by the end of the year, I might even make ‘tolerable’,” Harry mutters, stung.

Zabini snorts. “That’s the spirit, Potter. Don’t let the fact that you’re doomed to be alone forever, while Draco pines after you in an interminable, arsey fashion, get you down, eh?” And on that repellent note he opens the bathroom door and leaves, to tell Malfoy . . . what?

The only thing that stops Harry from sinking down to the floor and having a little cry – all right, a massive, snotty wail – is the thought that Zabini, or one of the others, might come back at any minute, to *see* him having a massive, snotty wail. Instead, he staggers back to his feet, splashes cold water on his face and tries to think calmly.

All right, so today *is* turning out to be a nightmare of epic proportions, that’s true, but on the plus side . . .

On the plus side . . .

Harry wracks his brains, but the only plus side he can think of is that Malfoy doesn’t know for certain what the writing on his skin signifies. So all he has to do now is take immediate steps to make sure he never, ever finds out. Starting by . . . avoiding Malfoy for the rest of his life, he thinks. It’ll be tough, but he’s always liked a challenge.

The incredible shrinking Potter

Harry wakes up in the middle of night on high alert, his heart hammering; he's got his wand in his hand and his assailant pinned under him before he's fully awake, and he's just about to cast something painful and disabling when the figure hisses, "*Stop*, you wanker. Salazar, do you always overreact so massively?"

Harry freezes. In his mind's eye, he can still see his dream unfolding – Draco, covered in blood, reaching out to him as his life slips away – and for a moment he's not sure what's dream and what's reality. It does seem unlikely, on the whole, that he's currently pinning the *actual* Malfoy to his bed, but then Malfoy's fairly unlikely to reach out to him as he dies, either. Unless it's to attempt to hex him with his dying breath, perhaps.

"Potter – get the fuck *off* me," real-life Malfoy hisses, right in his ear.

Harry scrabbles off him at top speed, hitting his back on the foot of the bed and nearly tangling himself up in the curtains. He can hear Malfoy moving to sit up, but can't quite see him, other than as a black shape against the green-tinged dark.

When he casts Lumos, Malfoy is pointing his wand at him. "If you scream and wake the others up, I'll hex your balls off," Malfoy hisses.

Harry considers this, and casts Muffliato, before shoving his glasses on his nose. His heart is still threatening to pound its way out of his chest, and he's not sure whether it's actually *worse* that he's trapped in a small space with Malfoy, rather than tackling a Death Eater trying to kill him. Harry knows where he is with Death Eaters. When it comes to Malfoy . . .

Malfoy is – was – a Death Eater, though, Harry's brain reminds him helpfully. And then adds, equally helpfully, *And you're his soulmate*.

Panic takes a grip of Harry once more as he looks at Malfoy. His soulmate. Or . . . not. He doesn't *have* a soulmate. He just has Malfoy.

Malfoy's upper lip curls as he observes Harry having a crisis. "Are you some sort of *coward*?" he asks. "Don't for one minute think I *wanted* to conduct this little midnight tête-à-tête, Potter. But if you will spend the whole day avoiding me . . ." He trails off, the words sticking in his throat. He's alight with rage – his whole face is shining with it.

Although . . .

Harry swallows, hard, as he takes in the tendrils of tattoo that curl over the V-neck of Malfoy's old-fashioned pyjamas. They're spreading, and budding, even as he looks at Malfoy, the dark-grey of the tattoo softening into silver before his eyes.

Perhaps it's not rage, exactly, that's shining out from Malfoy's face. Harry knows from personal experience that rage and terror can, occasionally, be indistinguishable, dancing

together cheek to cheek. He's doing a pretty good line in terror himself right now, he thinks, and it's certainly not because he's scared Malfoy's going to hurt him in some way.

Colour blooms high in Malfoy's cheeks, and he raises his chin. "I'm not stupid," he says witheringly. "I know that you know what *this* means." He waves dismissively at his neck. "And I know you fucking told Blaise. I know you Gryffindor arseholes set a lot of store by being *fair*," he sneers. "So I would be *extremely grateful* if you'd fucking tell *me* too. *Now*," he adds, when Harry opens his mouth but nothing comes out.

Harry wets his lips and tries again. "I'm, er, Slytherin now, though."

The look Malfoy gives him is . . .

There are no words to describe just how *arsey* Malfoy looks right now. He's vibrating with tension, like a coiled spring that's about to explode and skewer him in at least half a dozen places.

"It's, er . . . um . . . Well." Caught between the terror of actually telling Malfoy the truth, and Malfoy suddenly discovering how to do a wandless, wordless killing curse, Harry dithers – and then snaps. It's not like Malfoy's never going to find out, is it? Zabini will tell him eventually, even if Harry doesn't, and the longer he keeps it a secret, the angrier Malfoy will be. "Look, it's . . . it's . . . it's fucking soulmates, OK?" he says, and winces at how that sounds, wishing he could take it back as soon as the words are out. So much for never, ever telling Malfoy the truth, he thinks, and wishes he'd thought up a plausible lie. His head bangs; he's had a headache for what feels a hundred, thousand years.

God, he needs a drink. And then, for preference, at least half a dozen more.

"I beg your pardon?" Malfoy says with aching politeness. "For a moment there I thought I was going to have to get you committed to the Janus Thickey ward, along with all the other loonies. When you said . . ." Malfoy attempts to say the word 'soulmate' and then swerves it last minute. "What was it you *actually* meant to say?"

Harry presses his lips together and tries to pretend that this isn't his life, it's not happening to *him*. "The spell shows your soulmate," he says firmly, directing his words at Malfoy's ear, in preference to his face. "Apparently. Er, sorry."

Malfoy just . . . sits there, for a moment, completely rigid. Then, as if he can't help it, he – and there's no other word for it – shudders. His whole body trembles, and once he's started, he can't seem to stop, although he reaches up to hide his face behind his hands.

It's excruciating. Harry doesn't know what to do – is he meant to comfort Malfoy, or something? He suspects if he tries, Malfoy will kick him in the teeth. *He'd* kick him in the teeth, if he were Malfoy.

Malfoy manages to pull himself together, enough to say, wildly, "Blaise said *you* don't have a mark at all."

“Er, no,” Harry says, and saying it out loud makes it feel worse, somehow. He can’t stop his eyes from dropping, to look again at the spirals of tattoo twisting at Malfoy’s neck. Just how big *is* the fucking thing? He has to knot his hands together to stop himself from reaching over and . . .

Malfoy takes a huge breath, and then another, pressing his lips together so hard they turn white. “Stop looking at me like that, Potter,” Malfoy grinds out, through gritted teeth.

“Sorry,” Harry says, but he can’t seem to make himself stop, and Malfoy doesn’t move to wreak a hideous revenge either. Harry almost wishes he would.

After a bit more awkward staring – the tattoo’s *moving*, Harry realises, even as he watches, dancing softly against Malfoy’s skin – Draco rubs his hands over his face again and says, in a voice raw with spite, which is now only trembling a little, “So you’re asking me to believe that my destiny is to pine after *you* for all eternity, while you, Potter, remain as . . . what? Some kind of fucking chaste saint, or something? Saint Potter the Perfect – I can’t say I didn’t expect to see this in your future. It’s entirely typical of you. I just wish you’d fucking left me out of it!”

Harry isn’t sure what to say to this – it’s all appalling – so he says nothing. Unfortunately, Malfoy seems to take this as some kind of admission of guilt.

“You know what, Potter?” Malfoy hisses, not pausing for an answer. “I thought better of you. I know you might find that hard to believe, but I really thought that despite the fact we despise each other – really, I don’t think there’s anyone on this earth I hate more than you – you had a basic set of morals. But to set up—”

“I didn’t!” Harry interrupts, and Malfoy gives him such a horrible glare that it steals the breath from him.

“To *set up* something so . . . so *spiteful* as this? It’s beneath you.”

Malfoy chokes on his words, and Harry takes the opportunity to repeat, again, “I *didn’t*.”

Malfoy doesn’t reply, so Harry digs his fingers into his thighs, staring fixedly at the quilt in front of him, and hopes he’s finished.

He hasn’t finished.

“You come from a family of bullies, Potter,” Malfoy says slowly, and when Harry is goaded into looking up, his eyes flash. “There’s no use in denying it, Potter – I know all about what your vile father was like – but to try to crush an enemy who’s *already fucking defeated*—” He makes a noise of pure frustration, and reaches up to scrub his hands through his hair. “Wasn’t lording it over me in court *enough* for you, Potter?” he yells, striking the mattress in front of him with the flat of a hand, and winding himself up into a frenzy of rage. “You . . . you *won*! How much *more* of my soul do you want to fucking *destroy*? How much embarrassment and . . . and *shame* will it take for me to be *properly punished*, for fuck’s sake! Fucking, fucking—*God*—”

Harry is finding it extremely difficult to breathe. He can't— Did Malfoy really just *say* those things? Out loud? Is this . . . how he really thinks? He gets that Malfoy's angry – of course he is – and upset, and frustrated, and fucking *hell*, so is *he*, but . . . God. The way Malfoy spoke . . . as if Harry's some sort of *monster*.

He's not that person, he's *not*.

But . . . how long has Malfoy been building up to this?

It's got to be a dream – a nightmare. Harry's going to click his fingers and wake up, in a world where Malfoy *isn't* wearing his name around his neck, while they both choke to death on the knowledge. Only . . . Only, Malfoy's sitting *right there*, his chest rising and falling as if he's just run twenty laps around the Quidditch court, his hands balled into fists and looking as if he's not sure whether he's about to scream or cry, or possibly just be sick.

And even as Harry watches, struck dumb, the tendrils of tattoo are writhing, and darkening from glittering silver to gunmetal grey.

Oh *god*. "I. Didn't. Set. It. *Up!*" Harry says wildly. "How many times?" It only occurs to him when he's said it, though, that in Malfoy's mind the only thing worse than Harry setting the whole thing up is Harry *not* setting the whole thing up. Because that means it's *real*.

Malfoy's face closes down. "I don't believe you," he says, and reaches blindly for the curtain at his side, yanking it open and scrabbling off the bed.

Harry snaps, stung by the fucking *unfairness* of it all. It's at *least* as shit for him as it is for Malfoy, and he's not going to let Malfoy get away with swanning around like some put-upon martyr. "I fucking *didn't* set it up, OK!" he yells at his retreating back. "Why on earth would I do something so *stupid*? And I *don't* fucking want to . . . to destroy you, you . . . you self-centred tosser!"

"To be fair, Potter, you are pretty fucking stupid," Zabini says sleepily. His curtains twitch, and his head sticks out; his hair is not nearly as neat as usual. "Also, hello, is it time to get up, or are you just putting on some kind of impromptu late-night entertainment?"

Malfoy slams himself into bed, and there are some loud, muffled thuds that suggest he's beating the crap out of his pillow.

"Can you two have your lover's tiff in the morning, please," Nott drawls from the other side of the room. "Some of us like to actually sleep at night, you know."

"Yeah, so why don't *you* shut the hell up too, turd-face?" Goyle grunts.

"Well, now we're all wide awake – thanks, Potter," Zabini says loudly, with aching politeness, "what shall we chat about? The price of fish?"

Harry can hear Malfoy making little snuffling, snorting sounds across the room, in-between thuds. He tries very hard not to listen. And to be fair, he's shaking so hard that it's difficult to do anything at all other than sit there and try to pull himself together. He's a fully-grown

man, he thinks. He shouldn't be so sodding pathetic. Thinking that doesn't help much, though – and doesn't he have a good reason for being pathetic?

“What the fuck has the price of fish got to do with anything?” Goyle asks, also loudly. “I don't get it.”

“No, there's a lot of things you don't get,” Zabini bites back.

“Yeah – like why I have to put up with you constantly taking the piss out of me,” Goyle grumbles.

“Friends tell each other the truth,” Zabini says, sounding hurt. “Surely you wouldn't want me to lie to you, Gregory?”

Goyle snorts. “You're just jealous of my massive dick, Zabini, admit it.”

Harry makes a shocked snort, pulled out of his self-pitying thoughts by Goyle's crudeness, and Zabini laughs. “Yeah, maybe,” he says. “Maybe if you're lucky, Potter, Goyle will show it to you at some point. Might help soothe your agonising, empty loneliness.”

It's not funny. It really, really isn't funny, but Harry finds himself exhaling something that's a cross between a snort and a sob, and he can almost feel the tension in the room deflate. He's managed to calm down a bit, although his insides are still in turmoil, his heart hammering so hard he feels nauseous.

“Sorry, Potter, but you ain't my type,” Goyle says. “I like a big bust. No offense.”

“Sometimes, the deep love, friendship and respect we have between us overwhelms me,” Nott drawls.

Zabini and Goyle laugh. “Finished blubbing yet, Draco?” Zabini asks.

Malfoy says, sounding like he needs to blow his nose, “I'll have you know, you unspeakable tosspot, that they were tears of PURE RAGE, thank you.”

Goyle mutters something, and a shape flits across the room, followed by the sound of Malfoy snuffling into a tissue.

“Thanks,” Malfoy says, sounding bunged up still and, to be honest, not very thankful, either.

“Next time, bathroom, please,” Nott – a distant shape in the dark – says. “You know the house rules, Draco.”

“*Unofficial* house rules, Theo,” Zabini amends on a yawn. “Let's not confuse Potter, eh. And for the record, Potter – no one in this dormitory gives a fuck how long and loudly you wank, as long as you don't shoot in anyone's face without permission, but any late-night blubbing is strictly to be done in private. No one wants to hear *that*; even we have our limits, you understand.”

“You know,” Harry says after a frozen moment, “I always thought you were a bit on the reserved side, Zabini.”

Zabini laughs, sleepily. “I think you’re confusing a natural desire to mix with people like oneself with being a *prude*, Potter.” Then: “No! Don’t tell me that you Gryffindors all wanked in total silence? Or did none of you wank at all?”

“I am not talking about this,” Harry says, feeling himself go scarlet in the darkness. It’s good to have a distraction from his buzzing brain, but . . .

“I guess we know who *Draco*’s thinking about when he rubs one out now, though, eh,” Nott says thoughtfully. “Bleugh. Maybe we should amend the rules – no self-love for Malfoy, ever. The thought’s enough to make me want to be celibate for life.”

It’s not good to have a distraction from his buzzing brain, Harry thinks wildly; this one’s making things *worse*. Nott’s definitely joking, he tells himself. One hundred and ten percent joking.

“I’m still fucking *here*, Theo,” Malfoy says tartly. “And for the record, I would rather fuck a flobberworm than think about Potter when I’m tossing off.”

“Cheers,” Harry says, startled out of panic and into irritation. And then it dawns on him – along with a crashing relief, that threatens to overwhelm his senses completely, like being submerged in a warm, scented bath – that he has been spectacularly stupid. Really, he has. Stupid, right down to his toes.

Of course – of *course* – the soulmate spell has to be some kind of fake. Because – and how could it not have occurred to him before? – it’s just a fundamental impossibility that Malfoy is in love with him. Could *ever* be in love with him. Malfoy hates him like poison – always has, always will do.

The relief Harry feels is so intense he can barely breathe. “Draco!” he says. “Er, Malfoy, I mean.”

“What?” Malfoy grinds out suspiciously, as if he can’t bear talking to Harry.

“The thing is – you hate me. So I can’t see on what planet I’m your soulmate.”

“Potter, why the FUCK do you think this is a suitable subject to talk about in public?” Malfoy hisses. “Salazar give me strength.”

“I’m hurt, Draco – positively wounded,” Zabini says delightedly. “Go on, Potter. We’re all waiting.”

“Fuck off,” Harry says. “But seriously, Malfoy—” Malfoy utters a piteous groan, but Harry decides to forge on regardless. “You just *can’t* be, er, in love with me. So the only possible conclusion is that this spell is a load of bollocks, and we just need to find out exactly *which* load of bollocks it is, reverse it, and then never speak of it again. Right?”

Zabini gurgles, as if he’s trying very hard to suppress laughter but failing.

“Blaise – if you say *anything* right now,” Malfoy says, very quietly but in a way that Harry suspects can be heard right up in the Gryffindor Tower, “I’m going to fill your bones with fire, or lead, or possibly . . .” He trails off, as if he can’t think of anything bad enough to threaten Zabini with.

“Firey lead?” Zabini chokes out, through snorts.

“Yes!” Malfoy snaps.

“Right, right,” Zabini gurgles. “Oh god, oh god.” He takes a massive, snorting breath. “Well, Potter, I hope you meet with great success in your scheme,” he says, and refuses to elaborate any further.

Harry is left with the impression that there is some fucking enormous elephant in the room, which everyone apart from him can see. Zabini is . . . more like Hermione than he’s entirely comfortable with, he thinks, staring at the canopy of his bed. Except, he knows Hermione always acts in his best interests, even if she can be a pain in the arse at times. When it comes to Blaise Zabini though . . . really, who the hell knows?

Harry doesn’t entirely lose his sense of relief – the idea that there’s no planet on which he’s Malfoy’s soulmate, of all people, is too compelling and plausible for that. Nevertheless, the feeling of foreboding Harry’s filled with is so deep it’s less than a pit, and more of a bottomless chasm.

When Harry’s alarm goes off the next morning, he’s not sure if he’s actually had any sleep at all – although when he looks over at Malfoy’s bed, it’s empty, so he concludes he must have dozed off at some point. He can’t believe it’s only Wednesday; he feels like he’s been back at school for a hundred years. As soon as he wakes, he’s hit first by the memory of Malfoy’s most recent death in his dreams, and then by the memory that Malfoy *isn’t* dead – he’s . . . He’s definitely not got Harry as his soulmate, that’s what. Harry tells himself firmly not to be a plonker. OK, so yesterday was overwhelming, but today is a new day – a new day where he can be logical, and rational, and definitely not be Malfoy’s soulmate. There is no planet on which he’s Malfoy’s soulmate; it’s his new mantra.

And there’s no planet on which *he* doesn’t get to have a soulmate too, he tries to tell himself firmly, but decides he won’t focus on that; even the thought of being single forever is making him panic, and he isn’t going to panic. Absolutely not. As soon as he gets up, he’s going to talk to Malfoy like a grown-up, find a counter to the spell and get this whole mess sorted out as soon as possible – by the end of the day would be good. He feels almost positive by the time he’s forced himself to sit up in bed.

Almost.

Wednesday means Potions – a triple lesson in the morning, followed by a triple after lunch. At least, a triple after lunch for *some* of them. Turns out that not all the returning students are considered to need the extra help.

“Not all of us are thick enough to need to study the same thing twice,” Zabini says, smirking, as he enters the classroom five minutes late that morning, and attempts to sit next to Hermione, before Ron throws an eye of newt at his face and he decides to grace some other unfortunate with his presence.

Hermione stops walking on cloud nine for long enough to be offended, before she remembers that *she’s* not repeating the year, like some of the others – she was too busy hunting horcruxes to study properly, even though she did read a chapter of the set text every evening, just in case. And besides – she *likes* studying.

Harry’s not offended. He’s too busy being irritated by the fact that the moment he entered the classroom, Slughorn swept him over to partner with Goyle – at least, the irritation blossoms in the brief moments when he can stop his brain turning over and over the problem of how to counter a spell when you don’t know what the spell *is*, precisely. Underneath the churning and the irritation is the constantly thrumming thread of anxiety he can’t quite manage to suppress. He needs to talk to Malfoy properly – to plot a plan of action. But it’s hard to talk to someone, and plot a plan of action, when they didn’t turn up to breakfast, and couldn’t be found before class in the common room, or the library, or the grounds.

Not that Harry’s been looking – other than out of a sense of practicality, of course. And he definitely hasn’t noticed that Malfoy hasn’t turned up to class, either. Sod Malfoy. Sod him right in the balls.

Slughorn – the git – smiles at them all and gives them a list of seven potions they’ll need to perfect to pass their exams. Their task over the next few weeks, it seems, is to attempt to brew them, so he can judge their current level of competence. Harry hasn’t made a potion since school; he’s not entirely confident he can make one now without it exploding. Still, at least there’s one benefit to partnering Goyle – the man is huge. If it threatens to blow, he can just duck behind him and be entirely shielded from the blast. Harry’s had enough of being hit by random, horrible spells to last him an eternity plus one.

Halfway through brewing the first potion on their list in total silence – it’s a fucking love potion, of *course* it is, because life hates him – Goyle grunts, “I’m not thick, Potter.”

“Er, right,” Harry says.

“I know you think I’m thick, but I’m *not*,” Goyle repeats. “Old Sluggy let me take Potions at NEWT level, didn’t he? I dunno how to else prove it. Go on then – stir the sodding thing.”

Harry stirs carefully, three times counterclockwise, and the potion makes a *glop* sound and turns virulent pink. He thinks it’s probably OK, but he doesn’t want to examine it too closely; knowing his luck, it will explode and he’ll fall violently in love with Goyle. He’s already kissed Zabini (ugh), and become Malfoy’s Alleged Soulmate; he’s on his way to collecting the full, vile Slytherin set. It occurs to him, though, as he stares into the foul pink liquid that Potions would be so much easier if the textbook came with colour illustrations, and he files the idea away for future reference. He could make a fortune. A fortune he could swap for an illegal time-turner, so he could go back to the day before and tell himself not to be a massive wanker and go to a meeting that was obviously a trap.

“I just find some things more difficult, all right?” Goyle says sullenly. “You’re not exactly a natural at this Potions stuff either.”

“I never said I was!” Harry protests.

“Yeah, but I can see you looking at me, you and your little friends – Granger and Weasley. And thinking, ‘That idiot has to have *extra help*, even though he’s repeating a year.’ Yeah, well, maybe I do. But I had other things on my mind than studying that last year, yeah?”

“Yes – torturing the other kids, is what I heard,” Harry says, feeling goaded. He’s not in the mood for this. Where the fuck is Malfoy?

Goyle grunts. “Bit strong, Potter. And besides – my dad was a Death Eater. You think I wanted to end up like Malfoy? Or get Dad in trouble? I played my part. Doesn’t mean I liked every bit of it. It ain’t black and white.” He shrugs. “Like *you’d* understand.”

Harry wearily wonders if he’ll ever be able to have a conversation in future that doesn’t lead right back to the war. It’s almost enough to distract him from his soulmark troubles. He stares at the potion, and then re-reads the textbook page. *Wait for it to cook – fifteen minutes should do it* is the unhelpful instruction; there isn’t even anything to chop. “I played my part too, Goyle. It wasn’t much fun either,” he says tightly. “And I *don’t* think you’re thick,” he mutters, even though it’s not quite true. He’s never thought about whether Goyle might be more than Malfoy’s unpleasant henchman, to tell the truth.

Goyle grunts again and doesn’t reply. When the potion’s ready for the next step, though, and they’ve added the requisite pinch of ground cumin to give it spice – it smells delicious – Goyle says, “Call me Greg, if you want,” in an off-hand manner, and stomps off to grab the next ingredient, leaving Harry staring at his broad back in total surprise.

Harry spends almost the entire lunch hour looking for Malfoy, only pausing to grab a quick sandwich from the spread laid out in the Great Hall. Which makes it even more infuriating when he returns to the dungeon classroom at a half-run – he doesn’t want to be late – to spot the back of Malfoy’s head. Malfoy is sitting alone, surrounded by empty desks, near the front of the room.

Harry skids to a halt and remembers all the many, varied reasons he doesn’t actually want to talk to Malfoy, after all. It’s curiously disheartening, knowing Malfoy has been purposely avoiding him, even though he supposes it’s only fair – he spent most of the *previous* day dodging Malfoy, too terrified to talk to him in case he accidentally told him what the soulmark spell meant, after all.

It occurs to him that Malfoy hasn’t returned the invisibility cloak he clearly pilfered from Harry’s trunk, either. Irritation turns to rage; he wouldn’t put it past Malfoy to have spent the whole morning right next to him, sticking up two fingers from under the safety of the cloak.

Goyle – sitting near Hermione and Ron – twists round in his seat. “Oi, Potter, come and sit down,” he calls across the classroom. “This potion ain’t gonna brew itself. More’s the pity,”

he adds gloomily.

Professor Slughorn looks up from the copy of *The Practical Potioneer* he's flicking through and beams at Harry. "Yes, come in, come in, my boy. You can sit with your friends, if you choose. Class, this is a less formal session than you'll be used to. I'd like you to consider this your potions playground – try out everything in your textbook, test ingredients, discover the difference that cooking a potion slow and cool and fast and hot makes to the end result. I'll be here to offer advice – be your mentor, if you will. Use me however you think will help." He waves a hand idly, then settles back with his journal and takes a large slurp of a mug of hot chocolate.

Ron waves at him and pats the desk next to his. Goyle turns back with a shrug, clearly expecting Harry to sit elsewhere.

Harry makes a decision. He walks over to Goyle. "Goyle – er, Greg, I mean, shall we work with Malfoy?" he asks. "Since he wasn't here this morning."

Goyle stares at him like he's nuts. "You got a death wish?"

Harry takes that as a no. Malfoy hasn't turned round either, which is less than encouraging. But . . . he's never been a coward, and he isn't bloody well going to start now. So he strides over to Malfoy, dumps his bag on the table next to his, and sits down.

It's more anticlimactic than he expected. Malfoy doesn't leap up and hex him, or flee from the room, or anything like that. He just sits there, staring dead ahead, although his nose wrinkles, as if he can smell something horrid wafting past him.

The shirt under his robes, Harry can't help but notice, is buttoned up so high and tight it looks almost choking.

"So, shall we brew a potion then?" Harry asks, trying not to stare at Malfoy's neck. It will only enrage him further, Harry thinks, staring.

Malfoy appears to consider this. Then he shrugs. "I suppose so," he says, as enthusiastically as if Harry has just offered him a nice cold dead slug to munch on, and doesn't move.

"Well, what shall we brew?" Harry asks, after they've sat there for a bit in chilly silence.

Malfoy taps his well-thumbed copy of *Advanced Potion Making* thoughtfully. "Draught of Living Death?" he suggests, with an unpleasant smile.

Harry pulls a face; he thinks it might be wise to give that one a miss, with Malfoy in this mood. It cheers him a little, though; if he really was Malfoy's soulmate, it would be unlikely that Malfoy would want to murder him . . . wouldn't it?

"Well, whatever, Potter," Malfoy says, with another shrug. He picks up his textbook, flicks randomly through the pages and then stabs at a page with a long, bony finger. "That one will do." He stands up, pushing back his stool with a screech, and carelessly cracks the spine of

his book; Harry can almost feel Hermione's shudder from across the room. "I'll get the ingredients – you set up the equipment. *If* you can manage it," he adds poisonously.

It only occurs to Harry that maybe Malfoy's choice of potion wasn't entirely random after all, when, just as the simmering potion turns acid green, some time later, Malfoy dips a spoon into it, examines the shining liquid with disinterest, blows on it to cool it, and then flicks it at the side of Harry's face.

It's not that it's a dangerous potion, as such. But it's hard to think that way when you're shrinking down to the size of a pencil – the sensation is extremely peculiar – and Malfoy, enormous eyes glinting oddly in his enormous, pointy face, raises his boot, ready to—

Harry closes his eyes and prepares to be flattened. The fact that as he does so, he can hear Goyle boom out, "*Told* you so, shit for brains," is just the cherry on the undercooked cake.

Ron and Hermione turn up in the hospital wing to see how Harry is, just as he's pushing away his almost untouched dinner. It's stupid, he supposes, but he hasn't had much of an appetite for months, and having been six inches high for most of the afternoon hasn't helped with that.

"All right, mate?" Ron asks sympathetically, popping one of Harry's rejected roast potatoes into his mouth as he sits down on the end of the bed.

Harry shrugs. "Yeah, I suppose so. I think I'm nearly back to normal. Poppy said the last few inches are often the slowest." He winces as his fingers throb; he feels like every bit of him is being stretched out on a rack – gently, but persistently. "It's a bit sore."

Hermione frowns but doesn't say anything, just pulls a plastic chair over from the corner of the room and perches on the edge of it.

"So, is it Ginny?" Ron blurts out, through another mouthful of cold potato. "I know you guys split up, and she's my sister, so I should be punching you in the head for making her sad, but . . . I dunno. I guess I always thought you'd change your mind." He pulls an awkward face. "I mean, she did tell me that if she ever agreed to go out with you again, I should drown her in the nearest pond, but where there's life there's hope, eh?"

It's not Ginny. Harry wonders if he'd feel better if it was Ginny, and concludes . . . no, he wouldn't. And then feels even worse, because it's *Ginny*. He still loves her, just not in the right way. He tries to pull himself together, though, safe in the knowledge that the spell *isn't fucking real*.

Hermione rolls her eyes at Ron. "Honestly, is this meant to be helping?"

Ron shrugs and pilfers another roastie. "Dunno." He stops chewing for a moment, and his eyes go wide. "It's not *Zabini*, is it?" he splutters, through his mouthful. He slides off the bed and falls to his knees, looking up at Harry in mute, overblown appeal. "Mate, tell me it's not Zabini!" he jokes. Then he grins, and hops back up on to the bed, swallowing the remnants of

the spud. “Did you eat your pud?” His expression goes far away and dreamy. “It was treacle tart. The Hogwarts treacle tart is even better than Mum’s. Sometimes, when we were in that forest, I *dreamed* about the Hogwarts treacle tart.”

“We’ll have it as a wedding cake,” Hermione says tartly.

Ron doesn’t take offense at this. “Great idea!” he says, and grins warmly at her until she cracks, reluctantly smiling back.

“So – who is it, then, mate?” Ron says, turning back to Harry. “Come on – it can’t be *that* bad.”

Harry reminds himself again that the spell isn’t real, and can’t possibly be real. But even so, the thought of his . . . his *lack* makes his breath catch painfully in his chest.

“Fuck,” Ron says, and shifts uncomfortably on the bed. “I’m sorry, Harry. I’m a dickhead. I just presumed it would be someone perfect for you, you know? You *deserve* someone perfect.” He attempts a good-humoured grin. “We all know Ginny’s not perfect – she’s a pain and a half, and no mistake about it.”

Harry had thought he deserved that too – not someone perfect, but at least *someone*. The fact that Ron thinks so too is threatening to undo him. He can feel his bottom lip start to wobble. He really is a massive idiot. He’s alive, isn’t he? And . . . and he’ll be an Auror, and Ron and Hermione will get married and have children and he’ll be a sort-of uncle, and his life will be *fantastic*, regardless of whether he ever gets married himself.

“Oh, *Harry*. You don’t have to tell us right now,” Hermione says, and reaches over to squeeze his hand. He tries not to wince. Fantastic! His life will be fantastic! “You can tell us when you’re ready. We just want you to be happy, Harry. Is . . . is it someone you think will make you happy? Eventually?” Her eyes are very kind, and he can see the anxiety stark in her face.

It makes it worse, somehow.

It’s not real. It’s not real. *It’s not real*, he repeats to himself in his brain. “I don’t have one,” he says, and tries to smile, to show he doesn’t mind. It’s not real, after all.

“You don’t . . .?” Hermione repeats, her expression morphing into horror.

“No soulmark. Nothing. It’s fine!” he says quickly at the look on her face. “I’ll be fine. I mean – it’s not like I had my eye on anyone, is it? I . . . I just want to pass my exams, and become an Auror properly, and – and – I suppose it would be good to be Head Auror in the future.”

Hermione schools her face into something intended to be cheerful. “That’s the spirit!” she says, and pats the back of his hand as if he’s an elderly aunt who’s close to death and must be humoured at all costs. “I suppose the spell couldn’t really show those things, could it? That you’ll be married to your job, so to speak. Oh, *Harry*,” she says, her eyes misting over. “I always knew you were single-minded, but this is . . . I mean, not that I’m not happy for you, if you really want to dedicate your life to your work, but . . .”

If this is meant to be comforting, it's not quite doing the trick. A memory flashes across Harry's brain – Ginny, her eyes flashing with anger, telling him that she'd quite like it if he put *her* first for once, now the war was over, rather than his work for the Ministry. At the time, he'd thought she was nuts – tracking down the remaining missing Death Eaters and keeping the whole world safe was more important than missing a date or two, wasn't it? But now . . .

He gives himself a mental shake. Keeping the whole world safe *is* more important than missing a date or two. But he didn't know he had to *choose* – the world, or dating anyone at all. When was *that* decided? A cold dread creeps through him when he remembers that Dumbledore was single most of his life. Is that how it works, then? To be truly great, you have to be alone?

What if he doesn't fucking *want* to be truly great? What if you've already *done* the truly great thing, and now all you want is to do is continue to be helpful, and have someone who loves you to come home to? But . . . even the thought of being Head Auror makes him yearn for it, with a desperate longing – for the stability he can help bring to Wizarding Britain. For the good he can do.

Bloody bugging *bollocks*.

"Still, at least Malfoy got someone really awful," Ron says, in his best 'bucking up' voice. "The look on that scumbag's face! Was it Parkinson?" He wrinkles his nose. "She'd've looked happier, though, if it was. I suppose he still counts as a catch, in an odd sort of way. Oh! Oh! Was it Greengrass? The kid sister, I mean. She has the most amazing teeth . . . Almost mesmerising." He shudders.

"I don't think Malfoy's soulmark is . . . accurate," Harry says, testing the waters. He's not sure how Ron and Hermione will react if he tells them he thinks the spell is bollocks. They seem so happy about it. How can he piss on their parade?

Ron scowls. "Don't tell me he scored someone good? Just goes to show there's no justice in this world."

"I'm . . . not entirely sure the spell itself is accurate," Harry tries tentatively, winding his fingers into the bedsheets.

Ron reaches up to scratch at the back of his neck, and in doing so accidentally flashes his own soulmark – it really is pretty. "I dunno," he says doubtfully. "I mean, there's me and Hermione, you know?"

"No, perhaps Harry's right, Ron," Hermione says, but Harry can tell her heart isn't in it. She's rubbing her own wrist looking anxious, though the expression fades into contentment when Ron leans over to peck her on the cheek, colouring up as he does so.

It's pretty much what Harry expected, although it doesn't make it any easier to stomach. Still, it would be cruel to make a fuss, Harry thinks, although his heart sinks at the idea of trying to fix the spell without Ron and Hermione's help. It's not just the practical assistance – what Hermione can't find out by researching doesn't exist. It's the emotional support. And it

dawns on him that, given he doesn't *have* a fucking mark of his own, he needs someone who does – how can he tell if he's ended the spell otherwise? He doesn't know why it's so important, ending the spell, but it just *is*. He can't bear the thought of going through life knowing the spell is thrumming through his veins and producing . . . nothing.

But how can he ask Ron or Hermione to treat something as a curse, when it's clear they view it as something beyond perfection? When he looks at the pair of them – at his dearest friends – he can almost believe the spell is beyond perfection, even if just for a moment, before the truth breaks through again.

No – he can't ask it of them. He *won't* ask it of them. But he does need help, that much is clear – and the obvious person, despite the equally obvious drawbacks, is still Draco sodding Malfoy. Why does everything in Harry's life always end up back with Draco sodding Malfoy? But he is, after all, the only other person, Harry thinks, who is as much invested in disproving, and ending, the spell as he is.

By Friday, however, Harry has seen less of Malfoy than he's seen of Millicent's frankly terrifying cat. It seems to have picked Malfoy's bed as its new favourite hang-out spot, so whenever Harry nips into the dormitory, hoping to find Malfoy sulking in there, he has the dubious pleasure of being hissed at by the off-white furry monstrosity. At least, he *thinks* the thing hangs out most on Malfoy's bed – by the amount of cat hair that's adorning the formerly black robe he pulled out of his trunk that morning, it's been spending at least ninety per cent of its time rolling in his things.

It's not that he hasn't seen Malfoy at all, of course. He even tried to sit next to him in Transfiguration yesterday – despite the unfortunate incident with the Shrinking Solution the day before, and despite Goyle treating him like a Bludger and attempting to knock him off course. Malfoy simply turned and said, with his worst sneer, "I hardly *think so*, Potter, do you?" before twisting back to face the blackboard. Harry had just decided not to be put off by a little rabid hostility, when Pansy and Zabini shoved past him and filled the seats either side of Malfoy, although Zabini turned around quickly when he'd settled in and *winked*.

But seeing Malfoy in public is not, in any shape or form, the same as actually getting to *talk* to him. And to be frank, Harry just wants this whole nightmare over with, pretty please, and he can't see why Malfoy doesn't feel the same way. The waves of hostility pouring off Malfoy – he can feel them even when the wanker isn't in the same room – are making him feel pretty hacked off, and the fact that if they just put their heads together, he's sure they could sort it all out, is only making the whole thing more infuriating. Is Malfoy doing this to piss him off, or something? Harry wonders. It can't be that he *wants* to spend a second longer with a fucking great big name label round his neck; he must have a good reason. And the only reason Harry can come up with is that Malfoy thinks he can piss Harry off more by keeping it than by not.

Besides, it's not as if this whole soulmate nightmare is the only thing Harry has to worry about. He can still barely move outside the classroom without being 'accidentally' bumped into by other students – and even the castle's ghosts have started to follow him about at a distance. Nearly Headless Nick cornered him after dinner yesterday and gloomily told him

that he'd love an autograph, only it was pretty difficult to put together an autograph album when you were dead and couldn't actually touch anything, and did Harry have any ideas? He had to promise to investigate a solution before Nick – staring with infinite sadness at Harry's Slytherin tie – would let him leave.

And that's not even *mentioning* the whole 'gay' thing. Harry's fairly sure he does like blokes that way, but the presumption by the worldwide gutter press – Mrs Weasley sends him a file of clippings, nearly ninety percent highlighted – that he's on the hunt for his Prince Charming, while simultaneously rogering his way through every eligible witch in sight, is making his blood pressure soar to dangerous heights. The press even brought out that photo of Pansy on Ron's lap; she looks even more leggy in photo-format than she had in real life, and Mrs Weasley's annotated that one with a comment not repeatable in polite company.

Maybe that's why Malfoy's avoiding him, Harry thinks grumpily, trying not to pull all his hair out in frustration. He thinks that if he spends more than a second in Harry's company, Harry, the insatiable sex pest, will try to mount him. It's fucking ironic though, Harry thinks, trying not to die inside. He barely got to third base with Ginny, and she's been his only proper girlfriend.

MORE THAN FRIENDS? the headline in yesterday's *Prophet* had read, accompanied by that photo of Ron squeezing his shoulder, and even Hermione had frowned at that, and wondered out loud if she and Ron should make a little announcement in the following day's edition.

So, it's not entirely a relief when he dashes up to the second floor Defence classroom for the first period of the triple lesson, to find that none of the other Slytherins are there. Who *is* there is Head Auror Gawain Robards, who scowls at Harry, asks him – unfairly – why he hasn't had the courtesy to turn up on time, given that he's come all the way from London to teach a bunch of ungrateful teenagers the finer arts of Defence Against the Dark Arts, and launches a volley of curses at him that Harry only manages to block by the skin of his teeth. Harry takes from this that Robards is still angry Harry agreed to go back to school. It's not like Kingsley gave him much of a choice, though, was it? he thinks as he dodges spell after spell. What else was he meant to do? Say no, and then be barred forever from becoming an actual Auror? It wasn't a choice at all.

The rest of the morning passes by in a blur, and Harry almost – almost – manages to forget the whole Malfoy and soulmate thing. He's not sure he likes Robards, exactly, but he respects him, and when it comes to Auror training that's the important thing.

"It's not Auror training, though," Hermione pants when he expresses this, and for a moment Harry just looks at her as if she's mad, before he remembers that she's right.

"Were you *actually* trying to kill me in those practice duels, Harry, or did it just feel like that?" Hermione says after class, when they're flopping bonelessly in one of the lesser-used classrooms a bit further along the corridor. Hermione's stuck a 'Danger! Boggart loose!' sign on the door, for good measure. The last time they tried to hang out in the Gryffindor common room together, Harry was mobbed. It was a friendly mob, sure, but that didn't make it less of a mob. Harry had suggested the Slytherin common room instead, but Ron had looked a bit mutinous at that. "I'm not prejudiced, mate – I just think they're a bunch of tossers," he'd

said with a shrug. “You excepted, of course, but then you’re only a pretend Slytherin, really, aren’t you?”

“Earth to Harry?” Ron says now, waving a hand in front of his face, before rolling up his sleeves with a happy sigh. “I did wonder for a moment if I was going to melt in there – hard work, duelling.” The soulmark stands out, a golden brand on his skin, twinkling more brightly when Hermione reaches over to squeeze his hand.

“Would it be *so* bad if people knew that Hermione and I had these . . .?” Ron asks awkwardly. “It’s going to come out eventually, even though I’m doing my best to cover it up. Pretty sure Justin thinks I never have a wash,” he adds thoughtfully. “He’s started wrinkling his nose whenever he sees me. We don’t have to bring you into it.”

Harry hadn’t even considered the problem from this angle, but now he’s struck by a new, urgent danger. He has nothing to reveal, so it would be perfectly plausible for him to claim he was nowhere around when the spell hit. But *Malfoy* on the other hand . . .

Harry hasn’t seen it yet – though not for want of trying – but by the sound of it, Malfoy’s soulmark is practically the size of the planet. If Ron and Hermione share their marks with the world, how long is it going to be before one of the other Slytherins spills the beans about *Malfoy’s*? Harry can feel panic, his old friend, rising again, though he can’t work out why.

“I, er, don’t think Malfoy would be too chuffed if it came out about his soulmark,” Harry says, wrapping his arms around himself. He really wants to tell Ron and Hermione the truth, really, he does. But at the same time . . . he really, really doesn’t. He hasn’t even *begun* to work out how he feels about the whole thing, despite the fact he can barely stop thinking about it. Every time his brain attempts to pin down how he feels, his thoughts just slide away, panicking, to rest, instead, on . . . Quidditch. Or cheese. Or, really, anything else that’s not the fact that Malfoy’s soulmate – his *soulmate* – is allegedly . . .

“Even better!” Ron crows. “I just *know* it’s someone entirely unsuitable,” he continues with relish. “Someone really, really embarrassing. Someone who—”

Harry groans, and gives in to what he’s starting to feel is the inevitable. “It’s *me*, you tosser,” he admits – what else can he do? He can see Ron’s already three-quarters of the way to just opening the door to the classroom and shouting out MALFOY’S GOT A SOULMARK! QUICK, EVERYONE, POINT AND LAUGH!

Ron flails and falls off his chair. Literally. Even Hermione looks a bit like she’s about to keel over, though she reaches down and helps drag Ron up from his prone position on the floor.

“Crikey,” Ron says.

Harry thinks this isn’t quite strong enough, but . . . yeah.

“He always did seem a bit obsessed, mate,” Ron says, screwing up his face in disgust. “But even so. *Ugh*. What a loser. And the things he said about Hermione! As if he deserves . . .” He frowns. “Well, I guess he *does* deserve what he’s got. I mean, you’re never going to go *there*, are you?” His voice rings with conviction.

Harry feels something unexpected twang within him: sympathy. For sodding *Malfoy*.

Hermione says something just as unexpected. “Poor Draco.”

Ron’s eyebrows zoom up to his hairline. “Are you nuts?”

Hermione sniffs. “No, but it’s not exactly nice, is it? I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy – being fated for someone who doesn’t want you back. It’s worse than having no one at—” She breaks off, twisting her hands together and looking wretched. “I didn’t mean that, you know I didn’t! I just . . .”

The words hang on the air, and Harry briefly wonders if he should let himself burst into tears; he can feel the pressure building, hot and painful, behind his eyelids. But he’s never been much of a crier, and he sees no reason to start now. Besides, she’s *wrong*. It’s coincidence that she and Ron have each other’s names, written on their bodies, he tells himself – either that, or . . . or . . . well, they were standing very close together when the spell hit, weren’t they? And Malfoy . . . he was probably just looking at Harry at the time. Or something. There’s got to be *some* explanation. Other than the obvious.

Either way, he’s not ready to admit defeat – that there is no one in this world who is right for him, and loneliness is his destiny. Bugger that! He’s going to find Malfoy later today and *make* him cooperate. He’ll threaten him, if he has to; surely, even the suggestion that Ron and Hermione are gearing up to reveal their own soulmarks to the world will be enough? Malfoy’s enjoying tormenting him, Harry thinks, but even *he* must have his limits.

“Don’t worry,” Harry says, sticking up his chin and taking steady, measured breaths. “I’ll sort it out, Hermione. You’ll see.”

Hermione, wearing an expression of extreme guilt, nods and looks unconvinced. But that’s OK. Harry’s going to sort it out. He’s absolutely going to sort it out.

Harry’s going to sort it out. But not, it seems, until bloody *Monday* at the absolute earliest. “What do you *mean* Malfoy’s gone home for the weekend?” he says, when Zabini corners him after dinner and steers him down to their common room.

Zabini smiles lightly and picks a cat hair off Harry’s robes. “He’s gone home. For the weekend. That’s what I mean,” he repeats. “Now, about this party tonight.”

Ron’s suggestion of an after-hours gathering in the Gryffindor common room seems to have morphed into something mushier and more romantic in Hogsmeade – though hopefully, Harry thinks, just as Firewhiskey-fuelled. “What party?” he prevaricates, wondering if he can dodge Zabini and get to Hogsmeade without him. Malfoy *still* hasn’t returned his sodding invisibility cloak. It’s not that he doesn’t want to spend an evening getting pissed with Zabini, but . . . he doesn’t want to spend an evening getting pissed with Zabini. He wants to go to fucking Malfoy Manor and drag Malfoy back by his collar. But even through his fug of annoyance and frustration, he realises this wouldn’t be a good idea. Narcissa Malfoy would probably call the Aurors on him, claiming harassment. And she would, unfortunately, be

right. Malfoy, turd that he is, is allowed to go home for the weekend without asking Harry's permission.

Zabini raises a carefully groomed eyebrow. "Granger and Weasley's engagement party," he says. "Don't tell me you haven't been invited?"

Bollocks. "Of course I have," Harry says. "So, er, I'd better go and—"

"Can I come?" Zabini says, and he leans in a tiny bit too close, as if he's going to . . .

"Sure, sure," Harry squeaks, and Zabini immediately pulls away, with an amused snort.

"Jumpy, aren't you, Potter?" Zabini says, smiling like the cat that got the cream.

To Harry's dismay, he can't even summon the wit to give Zabini the slip, either when they're getting ready, or when they're walking the short walk to Hogsmeade. Zabini's in a chatty mood, and Harry really isn't, the words *Malfoy* and *soulmate* still going round and round and round in his head, in a loop that threatens to send him round the twist too. Still, Harry finds himself listening with interest, despite himself. He'd thought it odd that the other Slytherins were all in a different Defense class to him that morning, but had suspected it was all tied up in politics, somehow – he knows McGonagall received a lot of letters from concerned parents about malign influences, and although he thinks that's so much bollocks (a malign influence? *Malfoy*? He couldn't charm his way out of a teacup), he can still see that it might be . . . odd to have a former Death Eater learning how to counter dark spells in the same class as, well, him. But he *hadn't* known that one of the conditions for the other Slytherins being allowed to return to school was that they all take Muggle Studies.

He thinks he'd better not tell Hermione; if she finds out she's been excluded from a class, she'll go mental.

"We get *homework* and everything," Zabini says in disgust as they walk along the dark drive. "And I can't even bully any sixth or seventh years into doing it for me, as they know fuck all about Muggles either."

Harry clenches his jaw. "I don't think—"

"It was a jo-oke," Zabini says, like a wanker, and Harry flushes in the darkness and then regains a little of his spirit, giving Zabini a firm shoulder barge.

Zabini stumbles – laughs – and barges back.

When they arrive at Madam Puddifoot's – Ron chose the venue, and he appears to have lost his wits in the process – it's ram-packed, and Harry nearly turns and walks back out again when the crowd turns and cheers.

"Oh, no you don't," Zabini says under his breath. "Whatever would Granger think if you skipped out on her night of romance?" And he grabs Harry's arm and pulls him inside, calling out loudly, as he does so, "So, who's for a rendition of 'He saved us all', eh?" and batting time with his other hand like a dreadful conductor as the crowd begin to sing.

Harry's so flustered by the whole vile business that when Zabini buys him a dubious bright blue cocktail with an accompanying creamy chaser of unknown origin, he doesn't even cast a magic-detection spell over the drinks, he just downs them. A fact that only occurs to him when he's weaving his way back to school some significant time later, arm in arm with Ron and Hermione, and while it's clear he's pretty drunk, it's equally clear that while Zabini had an ideal opportunity to spike his drink . . . he didn't.

He's Blaise Zabini though, Harry thinks as he stares at the canopy over his bed and tries to persuade his brain into sleeping without dreaming. He's bound to have an agenda. Except . . . tonight his agenda just seemed to be pleasant, and to distract Harry from his thoughts. Almost as if he was a real-live person, rather than a snake wearing a human skin. It's almost as unsettling as the thought that Malfoy's soulmate is . . .

Nah, it fucking *isn't*. Nowhere close. Harry stares at the canopy some more, and almost looks forward to Monday, when he can finally collar Malfoy and make him cooperate.

Why does it always raaaaain on Malfoy? Is it because he cried when he was seventeen? (No. It's because he's a wanker.)

When Malfoy goes down to breakfast on Monday morning, there's a black cloud over his head.

Literally.

Harry, who is sitting at the Ravenclaw table with Luna, because she invited him, and with Zabini, because he is a disease for which there is no cure, stares. As does pretty much everyone else.

Malfoy stomps over to them, his face like thunder. A tiny bolt of lightening crackles out of the cloud and stings him on the cheek.

"Nothing to do with me," Zabini says breezily. "If you cheer up a bit, maybe it will blow away?"

Harry's starting to know Zabini a bit better now. The breezier he is, the less he is to be trusted. So when Malfoy's stamped back out of the Great Hall again (Harry briefly considers grabbing him before he leaves, and demanding he stop being a wanker for long enough to sort out the whole soulmark business, but even *he* can see that Malfoy might not be at his most receptive right now), Harry turns to Zabini and fixes him with an accusing look.

Zabini dips a chunk of his pain au chocolat in his milky coffee and contrives to look innocent. "What?"

"I think Draco might be feeling a bit sad today," Luna says.

No shit, Harry thinks.

"Spontaneous manifestations of weather are so interesting, don't you think?" she continues. "We investigated it for an article in the *Quibbler* once. One poor chap had been raining for over twenty years! I hope it clears up soon for Draco."

"Are you for real?" Zabini asks, pausing with his pastry halfway to his mouth.

"Oh, yes, I think so," Luna says seriously.

"Er, I think Zabini might be responsible for Malfoy's, er, cloud coverage," Harry explains.

Luna turns her large, solemn eyes towards to Harry. "Yes, but spells like that can only bring out what's already in the heart, can't they?"

“Bit peculiar, isn’t she, your friend Luna,” Zabini says thoughtfully as he and Harry walk to the greenhouses together, after breakfast. “Is she right in the head?”

“Don’t speak about her like that!” Harry snaps, and storms off down the steps, in an attempt to leave Zabini behind.

“All right, all right, keep your hair on,” Zabini says, a little out of breath, when he catches up with him outside. “I was just *saying*. It wasn’t me that nicknamed her Loony, was it? Wait, wait—” he says, when Harry glares at him and prepares to make another attempt at dashing for freedom. “I was going to add: she’s right, though. I dunno what’s wrong with Draco. Well, other than the obvious. Baby’s come back from seeing his mummy in a worse temper than when he left here, and that’s saying something.”

Harry tries not to grind his teeth. He thinks ‘the obvious’ is quite enough to be going with. And besides – a weekend spent with Narcissa Malfoy must be enough to put anyone in a foul mood, even her own son, surely? He strides across the grass and pauses outside the greenhouses. He’s not sure which one they’ll be in today. He hopes this week he’ll be more successful in feeding Zabini to a man-eating plant. “Kind of you to help him feel better then, wasn’t it?” he says as he looks around, wondering if he dare ask Malfoy to be his partner, when the git turns up, or if that will result in *him* being fed to the aforementioned plant.

“Ah, I think Draco will live,” Zabini says unsympathetically, just as Ron and Hermione turn up. He grins, suddenly. “If not, I think a little snow will help pep him up, don’t you agree?”

All of a sudden, Harry’s sick to death of snide, sarcastic Slytherins and their snide, sarcastic remarks. “No, I *don’t* agree,” he snaps.

“What’s up with you today?” Zabini says, at the same time as Ron shoves at him and says, under his breath, “Don’t rise to it, Harry. Whatever it is, he’s just trying to wind you up.”

“I just don’t think you’re a very good friend,” Harry says to Zabini, feeling goaded beyond his limits. As soon as he’s said it, he feels like a dick. Mostly, it has to be said, because he sounds like the worst sort of prig. It’s *true*, though – he doesn’t think Zabini, or any of them, are very good friends. Friends are there to make you feel better when you’re hurting, aren’t they? Not humiliate you, and make everything feel a thousand times worse.

Zabini gapes at him, and then shrugs, moving away to lean sulkily against the glass of the nearest greenhouse. He folds his arms, and his face goes sullen.

Harry feels a tiny prickle of guilt – the fact he’s shut Zabini up suggests he might actually have scored a point, and it occurs to him he doesn’t actually want to get one over on Zabini. He just wants . . .

God knows what he wants. Mostly he wants to rewind time, and go back to a point when he’d never had to consider that Malfoy might . . . what?

He doesn’t want to consider it now. Even apologising to Zabini would be better than considering it. So: “Sorry,” he says gloomily, and tries to ignore Ron’s elbow in his side, suggesting he’s crazy to even make an effort with Zabini. “That was a shit thing to say. But it

was a pretty shit thing to do to Malfoy,” he adds, unable to help himself. What is he – Malfoy’s knight in shining dragonhide armour? Malfoy would love *that*.

“Life lessons from Perfect Potter, eh?” Zabini says nastily, looking into the middle-distance. “Lucky me.” But before Harry can tell him to sod off, he turns, rolling his eyes. “I’m not *completely* heartless,” he says, peeling himself back away from the wall. “I meant to take the spell off before he left the dormitory, after I’d seen his reaction, but the stupid git obviously didn’t even *notice* it, and he must have snuck out when I was getting dressed. I mean, who doesn’t notice a fucking raincloud over their head?”

Someone who has a rainstorm in their heart, Harry thinks gloomily, channelling his inner Luna.

Malfoy doesn’t turn up for Herbology, and he doesn’t show up for lunch either. Harry makes a noble attempt to force down half a sandwich, and wonders what to do. Should he spend the afternoon tiptoeing around the castle, and leaping out around corners with a loud, “A-HA!” to try to catch Malfoy unawares? The thought is unappealing. And, besides, to his annoyance, the whole ‘fame’ thing hasn’t died down yet, even though he’s been back at school a week. He supposes the fact that his sexuality is headline news again in the *Prophet*, even though there’s nothing new to say, isn’t helping, but then he’s pretty much *always* headline news in the *Prophet*. Wherever he goes in the castle, anyone who isn’t in lessons – and a good number of kids who *should* be – contrive to be there too, as if he’s someone worth following about.

It’s fucking hard to be stealthy when accompanied by half of first year, most of whom are clutching quills and posters of his face, with innocent expressions, as if they just found them lying about, and aren’t *really* waiting for him to sign them, oh no.

He doesn’t especially want to hang around with Ron and Hermione either at the moment. He adores them, he really does, but they’re so . . . in love with each other, it makes him feel uncomfortable. And it’s not just that. Hermione’s enforced cheerfulness, whenever she speaks to him, is getting on his nerves. He doesn’t think he can stand another afternoon of her trying to buck him up, and boost his spirits, while Ron hovers, rubbing thoughtfully at his wrist and occasionally coming out with spontaneous insults about Malfoy. He knows they’re only trying to help, but he doesn’t think he *can* be helped at the moment.

Maybe quality sulking time is what’s called for here. But . . . that doesn’t exactly solve the missing Malfoy problem, does it? And he wouldn’t need to fucking sulk, if he could just find a quick way to end the spell. Malfoy’s an expert in shitty Dark magic, isn’t he? He probably already knows how to end it, Harry thinks, winding himself up. He might even have already done so – but just for himself! “Hermione,” Harry says, interrupting her monologue on the value of work and the purpose it can bring to a life. “If you needed to talk to someone who was avoiding you, what would you do?”

Hermione frowns at him. “I’d wait until they were ready to talk to me,” she suggests.

“Or, you know, a good old tracking spell could do the trick,” Ron says, cracking his knuckles. His gaze goes dreamy. “Followed by a good old hex to the stomach, if it’s Malfoy you’re talking about.” He sniggers. “I saw he caught clouds this morning. Good one, mate.”

“It wasn’t me!” Harry protests.

“Yeah, right,” Ron says, slinging one arm around Hermione and reaching for a slice of sponge with the other.

“If you drop crumbs on me, you’re a dead man,” Hermione says, wriggling out of his grasp. “I’m not sure a tracking spell is entirely ethical,” she adds pointedly.

Ron shrugs, spraying crumbs. “Effective, though. What if Malfoy never wants to talk to Harry?”

What if, indeed, Harry thinks. Still, he supposes Hermione has a point. And besides, if he can’t manage to track down a fellow classmate, who sleeps in the same room as him, he’s not worthy to become an Auror. If the worst comes to the worst, he’ll just have to pull the same trick Malfoy pulled on him and ambush him in bed in the middle of the night.

“You OK, mate?” Ron asks. “You’ve gone a funny colour.”

“Er, yes, fine,” Harry says, feeling like he’s gone completely round the twist. He makes a decision. OK, so he might not be able to talk to Malfoy this afternoon, but there’s nothing to stop him from researching love spells – love curses – in the school library, is there? He has full access to the Restricted Section, after all. At least he can have a head start on Malfoy, when he finally talks him into helping. If, that is, Malfoy hasn’t already fixed things, the horrible fucker. “I think I might go to the library this afternoon and do some potions research.”

Hermione beams at him, and he feels surprisingly bad. “What a good idea,” she says bracingly. “Nothing like studying to take your mind off things. I’d join you, but Ron and I are constructing our exam revision timetables this afternoon.”

Harry blinks. “Already?” he asks, and behind Hermione he can see Ron gloomily run a finger over his throat and mime his own death. “We’ve only been back a week!”

“It’s never too early,” Hermione says with a sniff. “Is it, Ron?” she adds pointedly.

“Er, no, dear,” Ron says hastily, removing his finger from his neck and trying to look studious.

Because life hates Harry, when he turns the corner in the Restricted Section, to find the section on *Love, various*, as well as the books he finds . . .

Well, he finds Malfoy’s back, not to put too fine a point on it. Malfoy doesn’t turn, but his back shows exactly what he thinks about being discovered by Harry, loitering amongst the

dusty tomes on love spells. Though, mind you, they're not all that dusty; the books on the shelf have a sort of shiny quality, as if they've been recently well-thumbed.

"Oh! I, er, I've been trying to talk to you," Harry says apologetically to Malfoy's back, his heart suddenly going a mile a minute. Any anger he's been feeling towards Malfoy is suddenly swept away, in a tide of panic and emotion that can only be expressed by the word: *Shiiiiiiiiit*. Harry manages, with some difficulty, not to say it out loud.

Malfoy's shoulders indicate Harry should fuck off; how does he do that? Harry wonders. Is it a genetic thing, or a Draco thing? At least Malfoy seems to have managed to remove the cloud. The only way this could be more awkward was if it was raining.

"Sorry, Potter," Malfoy says, not turning around. "Give me a moment. I'm trying to decide whether to lead with '*Have you?*' or something a bit stronger."

"Right," Harry says, and when Malfoy doesn't speak, or turn, he panics. It's not good for him to panic; he turns into a blithering idiot. "Er, good weekend?" he finds himself saying.

Malfoy turns, and from behind his right ear a tiny cloud scuds out and up, to drop a surprising number of raindrops on to Malfoy's hair. "Oh, for fuck's *sake*," Malfoy says angrily, shaking his head and spraying water about.

Almost immediately, the books around them begin to scream.

Harry looks at Malfoy; Malfoy looks back.

"Bollocks," Malfoy says eloquently, and, exchanging slightly panicked glances, they both turn towards the direction of the library's inner sanctum, where Madam Pince most often sits.

"Liquid! In MY library!" comes a yell from somewhere close. "This is EXPULSION, if I have anything to say about it!"

Malfoy hesitates, then whips a cloak out of his pocket – *Harry's* cloak – and vanishes under it.

For a moment, Harry's jaw drops at the unfairness of it, but then he shuts it with a clunk as Malfoy's head emerges briefly, scowling, and for a moment the world flickers as Malfoy flings part of the cloak over his head. By the time he's blinked away the strangeness – being under the cloak always takes a small period of adjustment – and tugged at the fabric to make sure he's fully covered, Madam Pince is upon them.

Malfoy grips his arm so tightly it hurts and yanks him back; they only narrowly miss her walking into them.

Madam Pince walks up and down for what seems like hours, but Harry gloomily suspects it's five minutes, tops. He'd accuse her of being overly suspicious except, of course, she's right to be. And once she's satisfied herself that the culprits have escaped, she spends more time soothing the books, stroking their spines in a slightly creepy manner and talking to them in a cooing, sickly sweet baby tone.

And then, to Harry's dismay, once she leaves their section of the library, she doesn't leave *properly*. She takes up a position right in the entrance to the Restricted Section, folding her arms and glowering up and down, before dragging a chair over to block their exit, sitting down and sitting bolt upright like a sentry. She's clearly in it for the long haul.

Harry can feel something wet running down the back of his neck. "I hope that's rain, and not snot," he whispers, to break the tension. It's either that or rip Malfoy's shirt open at the neck, to see if a) he even has a bloody soulmark and b) what it actually looks like. If he does that, he suspects his life will end with a swift, sharp hex to the head.

Malfoy, who's still gripping his arm so tightly that Harry suspects he's going to bruise, drops his arm like a stone and bats ineffectually at the cloud above his head, nearly pulling off the cloak. In the distance, Madam Pince's ears prick up, and she sniffs the air, as if she's a hound scenting the fox.

"*Muffliato*," Harry breathes, and Malfoy glares at him suspiciously. "It's just a silencing spell, Malfoy, don't look at me like that," Harry says uncomfortably. "At least we won't get busted by Madam Pince now. Although she's going to get suspicious if you try to storm off and accidentally start waving a disembodied leg around, so maybe we could sit down, or something?"

Malfoy mutters something under his breath that Harry thinks it's best he doesn't listen to too closely – he really *hadn't* meant to use the word 'storm' as a pun, honest – and they manage to sit down without uncovering themselves, or hitting each other in the face. Harry regrets that, once he's on the floor. He thinks, wistfully, that he would have rather enjoyed hitting Malfoy in the face.

"So, what shall we talk about?" Malfoy says sarcastically, after they've sat there for a bit in awkward, unpleasant silence. Harry's been trying to talk to Malfoy for days, it feels like; now he has him right there, he's finding it a lot harder to actually start than he'd expected.

"Oh, I don't know. What about the weather?" Harry says. He can't help himself. There's a tiny rumble of thunder, as if in response, and Harry has to press his lips together hard to stop himself from laughing. It's all too ridiculous.

More silence. Harry's been getting lots of practice recently in awkward silences, but he's never going to like them. So he reaches into his brain, and pulls out the mighty power of Small Talk, which had worked so well a few minutes ago. "Er, good weekend?" he asks again.

"Wonderful," Malfoy says, as if Harry's just offered him a freshly dropped turd. "A little chat with Mother was just what I needed," he adds bitterly.

Harry suspects Malfoy is not being entirely sincere. But even so, his annoyance spills out. "Well, I'm glad you had a good time, Malfoy, because my weekend was shit, thanks. I especially enjoyed the bit where I really needed to talk to you, but you'd bugged off back home to your mum, and then you avoided me *again* in class today, and at lunch, and you'd still be avoiding me *now* if I hadn't practically tripped over you. What are you *doing* here, anyway?" Harry can hear his voice rising as he speaks, to an embarrassing squeak.

Malfoy turns slightly and regards him as if he's a beetle he's about to crush. Sort of calm, and uninterested, and yet spiteful. He is still wearing a very high-necked shirt, so perhaps his visit home to mum wasn't a success on that score, Harry realises. This close, Harry can see the bags under his eyes. "Maybe if you think very hard – be careful now, you don't want to strain yourself – you can work out what I'm doing looking up love spells and their antidotes in the Restricted Section, Potter. I have faith this task isn't beyond you."

"Yes, all right, there's no need to be sarcastic," Harry says, resisting the temptation to biff Malfoy on the nose. He's so *close* – close enough that Harry can smell his cologne.

"Are you *sniffing* me, Potter?" Malfoy says, eyes widening. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

The temptation to biff is almost overwhelming. Harry has to close his eyes. He finds, to his relief, it's easier to get the right words out that way. "I'm just wondering why you've been avoiding me, like a massive dickhead, when we both sodding want the same thing here! All I want from you is your help to find out what this spell *actually* is, and how we can remove it, as soon as possible. What the fuck's wrong with *you* that you won't work with me on this?" he demands.

"I hoped I wouldn't need to work with you," Malfoy says disagreeably, and shrugs, as if that explains things.

Harry bites back his sharp reply – he just *knew* Malfoy was trying to fix the spell without him, and then not share the counter-curse – and waits; he's had experience of what he's starting to call the 'Slytherin silence' quite a lot over the last few days. Leave a massive great awkward pause, and your victim will rush to fill it with some kind of dread confession.

To his surprise, it works.

"Look, Potter," Malfoy says, sounding supremely hacked off, "I went home to ask Mother for her help and support to get this fucking *thing* off my skin, all right?" He pauses; his breathing has quickened. Harry can almost feel him vibrating with tension, next to him.

"And?" Harry prompts. The temptation to kill him is overwhelming.

"And nothing!" Malfoy snaps. "She went fucking *nuts*. Told me it was the best thing that had ever happened to us in a long time. I almost had to Body Bind her – my own mother! – to stop her from calling in that fucking Woodbeard to write up the story immediately. She told me—" His voice cracks, though which emotion it's cracking with, Harry's not sure. "She told me that once the story was out, you'd probably feel honour bound to . . ." He clearly can't make himself say it out loud. "And the worst thing about it is –" he laughs without humour – "you're such a martyr, you probably *would*."

"Would *what*?" Harry snaps, because he's had enough of skirting around things that can't be named. If you can name something, you can fight it – and win.

Malfoy turns and regards him with a look of outrage, which morphs into something sharper. He leans in very close, and Harry tries not to flinch away. "Fuck my brains out," he whispers

fiercely in Harry's ear, and Harry really does flinch away at that, his heart pounding so hard that he thinks Malfoy must be able to hear it. Perhaps he doesn't want Malfoy to name things after all, he thinks, rather weakly.

Malfoy snorts derisively. "We're talking about my *mother*, Potter. She thinks you'll marry me, you great lummoX."

To be fair, this isn't much better for Harry's blood pressure. "And, er, would you?" he asks stupidly.

Malfoy's expression turns almost kind. "You really are an idiot, aren't you?" he asks. "Don't fret your little woolly head. I wouldn't marry you if the Dark Lord rose from the grave and destroyed everyone in this world except you and me."

This strikes Harry as a bit strong, but he thinks it's probably best not to say that out loud. And besides – he doesn't want to marry Malfoy, for fuck's sake. On this issue, they are one hundred percent united. What the actual hell? How is this even his life?

"*Anyway*," Malfoy continues, "I managed to persuade her not to tell anyone, but she refused to swear an Unbreakable, so who knows how long she'll keep her word. If it occurs to her that you being romantically linked to me could get Father released from Azkaban sooner, I give it five minutes, tops," he adds bitterly.

Harry considers this unspeakable idea in silence for a moment. Then: "Ron and Hermione are making noises about telling the press about their soulmarks," he says, thinking he might as well share the good news so Malfoy can enjoy it too. "Ron's a soppy bugger, underneath the red hair. They're quite happy about the whole thing."

"I always knew there was a reason I hated the Weasel like poison," Malfoy says wearily, after he's digested this. He pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs. "All right, Potter. I admit the marginal possibility that you might be able to help me get this monstrous imposition off my skin, rather than bollocks things up even further."

"Great," Harry says, trying not to clench his jaw, and trying to expunge from his mind the knowledge that Malfoy's mother is quite keen for them to get married, allegedly. "Then shall we—"

"But just before I *commit* . . . Just so I can get this straight in my head," Malfoy says, in tones of infinite arsiness. Harry braces himself. "What is that offends you *most* about our . . . our little situation, Potter?" He doesn't wait for a response, but plunges on with his sharp knife. Stab stab stab. "Is it that you're supposedly the perfect partner for someone like *me*, or—"

Harry tries to interrupt, though what he's going to say, exactly, is beyond him, but Malfoy raises a hand. "*I'm* speaking, Potter," he says tetchily. "You can have your turn next. So, as I was *saying*, are you most desperate to prove that you can't possibly be a Death Eater's heart's desire, or is it that now you've discovered you're just so fucking perfect that no one on this earth is good enough for you, you're finding that a little hard to take in?"

“Are – are you always this melodramatic?” Harry asks, because he has to say *something* to fill the ringing silence. Malfoy seems to have this amazing knack for twisting everything he says, or does, to make it mean and self-centred. Trust Malfoy to take the worst situation in the entire world, and somehow still manage to make it even worse. It’s quite a talent.

Malfoy is shocked into a laugh. “Frequently,” he says, lips twisting into a smile with no humour behind it. “Comes with being a pampered only child.”

“I’m not your heart’s desire, Malfoy,” Harry says firmly, because he thinks Malfoy’s in danger of getting carried away by his own manpain and forgetting that. “And I absolutely am not going to marry you to please your mother.”

Malfoy gives him a look like he has a screw loose. “You don’t say?”

“And I *don’t* think that – what was it you said? – that no one on this earth is good enough for me.” He can feel his lips tremble, though he tries to suppress the wobble; Malfoy’s gaze drops immediately to his mouth, but he says nothing. “I know you’re a tosser, but could you try to believe me on this one?”

Malfoy shrugs. “What is it you’re after then? You could have anyone you like, Potter – who cares if you don’t have some stupid mystical mark on your body.” He waves his hands in derision at the word ‘mystical’. “Somehow I doubt not having one fated partner is going to put a crimp on you shagging whoever you please.” He scowls. “*I’m* a pure-blood, though, and this whole Death Eater business has not been good for my prospects. I know you don’t care, and to be frank, I’m not sure I fucking care either, but even on the off-chance we manage to keep this whole clusterfuck secret, my lucky bride to be is not going to be overly impressed when I disrobe on our wedding night to reveal I’ve got *your* fucking name tattooed across me in two-inch high letters, is she? That’s if you cruelly refuse to marry me, that is,” he adds with a snort of derision.

What, exactly, is the point of this conversation? Harry wonders. He doesn’t want to know these things about Malfoy; they’re making him feel like shit. He doubts saying them out loud is exactly cheering Malfoy up either. What does the tosspot need from him before he’ll agree to do what he’s obviously going to agree to do – help him end a spell that’s bloody awful for both of them? It seems like the best thing to do is ask outright, so he does, which seems to disconcert Malfoy.

Malfoy looks away from him. “Potter,” he says, as if he’s at the end of his patience. “I have *your name around my neck*. Is it any wonder I want to dissect you, and your emotions, alive on a slab? Give me something to work with here. Just a *tiny* deep dark secret you never thought anyone else would know. Just to make me feel better.”

Harry doesn’t think Malfoy means it. Except . . .

“I’m terrified that not having a mark means I’ll never be loved by anyone again,” he says.

Silence curls around him like a poison gas.

“Well, all right, Potter, that sounds pathetic enough to be sincere, so I suppose it will do,” Malfoy says eventually, and . . . and . . . leans over to press his shoulder against Harry’s, for one fleeting moment. When he pulls away, Harry can still feel Malfoy’s body heat against his skin, through their robes.

Harry clears his throat, his face flaming all of a sudden. “So, what shall we—”

“What we’ll do, Potter —” Malfoy interrupts, uncrossing his legs and half-stretching them out in front of him — “Salazar, this floor is hard on the arse — is *you* will help me with my stupid Muggle Studies homework. We get a practical assignment every week, can you believe it? You were brought up as a Muggle, so for you it should be a piece of piss.”

“I don’t think—” Harry says firmly. He is *not* going to do Malfoy’s homework. If he gives an inch, he’ll end up doing Zabini’s too. It’s a slippery Slytherin slope.

“Yes, I know you don’t think, otherwise you wouldn’t have gone to meet that fucking reporter, and we wouldn’t be in this mess now.”

“You didn’t have to steal my cloak and follow me!” Harry protests, stung. “That’s all on you.”

“You were sneaking around again!” Malfoy snaps. “We had to find out what you were up to.”

They glare at each other for a moment. Harry looks away first; he finds it annoyingly difficult to maintain eye-contact with Malfoy for any length of time. It’s nothing to do with the spell though, he thinks; he’s always found it difficult. “What *I* was up to?” he says. “If anyone’s up to anything, it’s you! You and Zabini, and all the rest.”

“*What?*” Malfoy says scathingly.

“You know — all that sitting with me and Ron and Hermione in the Hogwarts Express, and pretending to want to be my friend,” Harry explains. It’s not much of an evil plot, now he comes to think of it.

Malfoy is staring at him as if he’s wearing his underpants on his head. “Seriously, Potter?” he says, incredulous. “You really need me to explain why us Slytherins decided it might be wise to put our feelings aside and try to make a fresh start with possibly the most powerful and influential wizard in Britain and his best friends? No one’s fucking *pretending* to do anything.” He flushes, as if he hadn’t quite meant to phrase it that way. “Personally,” he adds, his tone shading back to nastiness, “I was all for bearing a grudge for the rest of eternity, but I was overruled. So don’t go getting any ideas.”

Harry’s not sure how to take this. Powerful and influential? Is that really how Malfoy sees him? He doesn’t *feel* powerful and influential. He feels like an idiot, most of the time. Especially now, sitting in the library, too close to Malfoy for comfort. Though, to be honest, he’s not sure how far away from Malfoy he’d need to be to be actually comfortable — he carries Malfoy in his head wherever he goes, both asleep and awake. Someone truly powerful would be able to get a grip on their own thoughts and feelings, rather than go round and

round in circles, increasingly unsure of what they actually want from their life, wouldn't they?

"*Anyway*. As I was *saying*," Malfoy says, "the task should be a piece of piss, but it's a good excuse for why I might be hanging out with *you*." He waves a hand dismissively. "Once you've finished, we can spend the rest of the time playing Aurors, or whatever your idea of a good time is."

Malfoy really is irritating, Harry thinks, trying not to be irritated. Deep breaths – in, out. In, out. He can do this without murdering Malfoy. He can do it. It will work out for the best in the end. The spell, he reminds himself for the umpteenth time, isn't even real. He tries out optimism. "That's a good idea, Malfoy," he says, as cheerfully as he can manage. Maybe by fixing the spell he'll be able to fix himself too, work out what it is he truly wants.

"I aim to please," Malfoy says sweetly.

It would be an adequate end to their conversation, except Madam Pince is still sitting at the entrance to the Restricted Section, blocking Harry's escape route. So they sit there in silence – well, it is a library, Harry thinks, a bit hysterically – for a while, until Malfoy begins to sing 'He saved us all' under his breath. When he's finished every excruciating line of the song, he just starts again.

Harry notices – hard not to, really – that the arsehole knows every single one of the words.

Draco Malfoy vs Imperial Leather (RRP £1.79)

By the time Madam Pince has moved from her position as Restricted Section guard dog, rumour has spread that famous Harry Potter is inside the library. Malfoy looks out at the knots of students, loitering throughout the tangle of shelves and sitting oh-so-casually at the study desks, and his lip curls. "It's like a hormonal obstacle course," he mutters, and then shoots a glance at Harry. "I'll leave you to it, shall I?" he says, like a wanker, and before Harry can protest, he gives the cloak a massive tug. The slippery fabric whooshes over Harry's head, and Malfoy disappears from sight.

Harry shoots back behind a shelf and hopes no one's spotted him; he doesn't want to get a reputation for hiding in libraries. People might start buying him books for his birthday. What should he do now, though? He could go back to the Restricted Section, he supposes. He and Malfoy had agreed that they'd do some further research, and since he's *here*, and has to run the gauntlet to leave, he might as well feel as if he's accomplished something when he does so.

As soon as Harry drops his armful of books on to the desk in front of Madam Pince, though, he realises he's made a mistake of epic proportions. It's too late to take it back, so he daydreams, briefly, of time-turners. Sure, the Ministry had them all destroyed, but maybe one was missed . . .

Madam Pince looks down at the books and a grim understanding dawns in her face. Harry can see a tiny water mark on the corner of the uppermost leather-bound tome, and he tries to look innocent. Innocent and . . . dry. There's nothing that can link him to the crime, now, is there? The water-source itself – Malfoy the Stormy – is safely out of the library, thank Merlin.

Madam Pince sniffs the air, narrowing her eyes. "If I find out you have vandalised *my books*, Potter," she says, trailing off significantly. "Now, what have we here?" Her tone sharpens into derision and judgment. "A large stack from the Restricted Section, I see. I'm aware that as one of our older, returning students, the Headmistress has decreed you are allowed to borrow freely from this section." Her tone implies this is the worst decision that has ever been made in any library across the wizarding world ever.

Harry wishes she'd bloody well hurry up. The library isn't *entirely* full – but it mostly is. The students are doing impressions of studying that range from adequate to poor. Harry thinks, crossly, that Madam Pince should chuck them out, but he's not sure saying so will do him much good. Pince is already suspicious enough as it is.

Madam Pince is still scowling at the books. Then she brightens, counting out loud with satisfaction. "—seven, eight, *nine* . . . That's *nine* books, young man. Students may only take out *eight* books at a time. Now . . . which would you like to leave for next time?" She picks up the books, one at a time, squinting at the titles. "*Erotic Love Magick?*" she reads. Loudly. They can surely hear the judgement in her voice across the sea in France. "*Bonds That Last Forever? Conquer and Control? 100 Tricks To—*"

They sound even worse read out than they do written down – both mushy and creepy. “Any! I don’t mind!” Harry interrupts, before she can go through the whole foul bunch. He should have been more discriminating when choosing what to check out, he supposes – but then the section on love spells was disappointingly small, when he actually looked, so he’d just pulled anything vaguely relevant off the shelf.

It’s almost, Harry thinks darkly, as if this is a school library, rather than a den of iniquity.

Madam Pince pinches her lips tight shut and draws one raspberry-coloured book towards her, placing it with care in a basket next to her desk, ready to be re-filed. The delicate book squirms away from an enormous, black volume that roars and rustles its pages threateningly, only quietening down when the librarian gives it a stern look. Her quill rises of its own accord, writing the details of Harry’s eight books in a massive ledger, then floating back down. Madam Pince slides the books over to Harry with extreme reluctance. “Enjoy your reading,” she says, and sniffs.

Harry picks up the stack – they reach up to his chin – turns . . . and realises that ninety-five per cent of the school are now packed in the library, staring at him. And they’re not just staring at *him*. They’re having a bloody good ogle of the books in his arms, too – the spines are helpfully facing the wider world, so it’s obvious at a glance that the Boy Who Loved is carrying an entire library’s worth of love spells in his arms.

If this doesn’t make the papers, he’ll eat his hat. And he doesn’t even *have* a hat. Probably, Harry thinks with total gloom, because he’s already eaten it, in a different universe. Still, there’s nothing he can do about it now, so he just has to get on with it. The only thing that will make it worse, Harry decides, is if he looks embarrassed – as if he looks like someone who actually plans to *use* the spells. On Blaise Zabini, his brain adds helpfully, finding a further level of ‘worse’ exists and plunging down into it. So he attempts to school his expression into that of an academic chap who’s doing some important academic research and focuses on the library door. He can make it, he can definitely make it. One step at a time, and it’ll soon be over.

Harry walks a little too fast, and to his amazement he actually finds himself at the door – which is, also miraculously, wide open and not barred by fellow students lurking ‘casually’. He zips through, and finds – alas – that the remaining five percent of the school population appear to be congregating outside. His morale sags, right down to his socks. He can hardly zip back inside the library though, can he? So he raises his chin in defiance and attempts to continue his double-quick pace, intending to zoom through the crowds as fast as possible. It’s not *that* far to go from the first-floor to the dungeons. Maybe if he’s just a blur, no one will have time to actually read the book titles.

In hindsight, Harry thinks, raising your chin in defiance, when you’re using said chin to steady a whacking great stack of spellbooks, is something he wouldn’t recommend. “Bollocks!” Harry says as the tower of books wavers and falls; he tries to grab them, at the same time he tries to grab his wand – is he a wizard or what? – and is successful in neither. The books fall with a crash, and Harry jabs the closest person in the stomach with his wand as he flails wildly.

“Oof,” Slughorn says. “No running in the corridor, Harry, even if you *did* save the world, eh?” He twinkles at Harry and a quick swish of his wand has Harry’s embarrassing books rising from the floor and re-stacking themselves in Harry’s waiting arms. “I won’t take points this time.”

“No, sir, sorry, sir,” Harry gabbles, his face on fire, and prepares to attempt to break the world’s land-speed record for walking away.

“Heading back to the common room with those books?” Slughorn asks jovially. “I am dungeons-bound myself. Let us walk together.”

The land-speed record will have to wait for another day; today, it seems, it is time for a good attempt at the World’s Reddest Face, Harry thinks, and shifts his books uncomfortably in his arms.

“Interesting reading material,” Slughorn says mildly as they walk. “I hope it’s research only, my boy? Not that Mr Zabini is not a fine young man, but . . .” he trails off, clearing his throat delicately.

“It’s definitely research, sir!” Harry says, dying inside. “One hundred percent research!” And he adds loudly, for good measure, “On love potion *antidotes*, sir. Not love potions at all.”

“I have always considered love potions a little *beneath* people of our calibre, Potter,” Slughorn says, just as mildly, as if Harry hadn’t spoken. “I hope you know, dear boy, that if you need an introduction to anyone, I would be more than happy to oblige? Why, I must know dozens of eligible young chaps! Collecting interesting young people is my passion, did you know, Potter? It keeps me feeling youthful to surround myself with intelligent, ambitious people who are really *going* places. Just say the word!”

“That’s very kind, but I’m really not looking,” Harry manages to get out; it’s hard to speak when you’re dying inside, and even harder when the whole world is turning their heads to the side to read the titles of the books you’re carrying, balanced beneath your chin.

“Of course, of course,” Slughorn says, and beams at him as they descend the staircase at the speed of slow snails. He seems oblivious to the fact that all the third year students he’s just led to the library are following closely behind them, giggling. “I just don’t want to see you wasting your time with love spells, when a quick word in the ear of the right person from yours truly will do the job just as well.” His tone changes to include a warning note. “Love spells can prove ruinous – to hopes and dreams. Not that I need to tell an intelligent young man like yourself that, eh, Potter?” He laughs warmly.

Harry joins in with the laughter, because there’s not much else he can do. Banging his head on the wall and howling will only draw further unwanted attention to himself, after all.

After dinner that evening, Harry intends to go straight back to his dormitory and do some intense reading. So how he ends up sitting in one corner of the cavernous Slytherin common

room, sharing a green-leather Chesterfield sofa with Malfoy, he's not quite sure. He only knows one thing for certain: it's Zabini's fault. The man is a curse in human form.

Nott passes him a drink in a black-metal goblet engraved with – surprise, surprise – skulls, and Harry isn't sure whether it's more dangerous to drink it or *not* to drink it. But the others are giving him funny looks, so he takes a ginger and potentially unwise sip.

It's water – ice-cold and pure, and surprisingly delicious after what has proved to be a trying day.

Greg Goyle grins at him unpleasantly, and raises his own goblet in a mock salute. "Expecting poison?"

Harry tries not to squirm. "Possibly."

"And you drank it anyway!" Zabini says gleefully. "You've got to admire someone who sees the trap and springs it anyway. That kind of stupidity is quite beautiful. How you're still alive, Potter, is beyond me."

"I didn't think it would be *fatal* poison," Harry protests, and then realises he sounds like an idiot.

"Ah. Just merely agonising?" Malfoy says, turning his head so that Harry can better experience his 'Potter is an idiot' expression, and press it, like a dried flower, in the memory-book of his heart. "I'll be sure to remember that for next time – 'merely agonising' is A-OK for Potter the Idiot."

Harry decides not to dignify this with an answer. He's too busy trying to remember how to sit casually, without looking like a knob. Malfoy is sprawled across the large sofa, taking up at least three-quarters of the space. He's not exactly touching Harry, but there's not much of a gap between them. Harry keeps feeling a perverse urge to shift, and press their legs together, just to see what Malfoy will do. He doesn't, though; he's too busy sitting bolt upright, one hand folded in his lap and the other clutching the goblet, and trying not to twitch.

Harry – his back already starting to ache at the unnatural position – feels a bit like he's sitting an exam; whatever he's being tested for, he's sure he's failing. Malfoy – who must be doing it on purpose, Harry thinks – relaxes a bit more into the sofa, spreading his legs even wider. Harry tries to shift away without being noticed, and ends up dripping water in his lap. He thinks he's got away with it, until Millicent Bulstrode and Pansy Parkinson turn up, closely followed by Millicent's enormous evil cat, and Zabini says, unkindly, "You'll have to pull up some chairs, my loves – I'd suggest one of you could sit on Potter's lap, but I think he's wet himself, so probably best not."

Pansy wrinkles her nose, but Millicent – who seems to be made of sterner stuff – rolls her eyes and *appears to actually take the suggestion seriously*, walking over to Harry, before giving Malfoy an ungentle shove. He moves his legs with bad grace, and Millicent sits between them. The cat walks up and down – judging them, and finding them all wanting, Harry thinks – and eventually jumps up disdainfully and settles on Malfoy's lap. Oddly, the

sofa seems more spacious with the three – four – of them; Harry supposes it's the effect of Malfoy's enormous ego, which Millicent and the cat are currently shielding him from.

Harry still can't get over seeing Pansy and Millicent in Gryffindor uniform. Even the cat is in Gryffindor colours – its collar is red, and someone's dyed several tufts of its dingy white fur red too. Millicent sees him looking. "I did Lady V's hair," she says, and then pauses triumphantly, before adding, "with *Muggle hair dye*."

No one looks impressed. "The homework was to *buy* the dye, not use it on your cat," Pansy says, dropping down on to Zabini's lap. "Who knows what that Muggle shit will do to her?"

Harry feels like he's missed an important part of the conversation, somewhere along the line. Possibly the stress of sitting on the same sofa as Malfoy, and not talking about Malfoy's soulmark, or looking at Malfoy's neck, has turned his brain to mush. "Um, what?" he says, and takes another drink of water, managing, with great skill and panache, not to dribble any down his chin.

"Muggle Studies homework," Zabini says, which is an explanation of sorts, but is lacking in the finer detail, Harry thinks. He's pretty sure 'dying Millicent's cat red' is not on the syllabus.

An argument ensues over whether it's safe to use Muggle products or not, because who knows how they've been produced and what they're actually made of? It could be *anything*, Pansy says, wrinkling her nose.

"Why are you dying cats, though?" Harry asks, interrupting.

Millicent considers this. "Why not?" she says. "Passes the time."

"All us Slytherins have to do boring Muggle Studies," Greg adds gloomily, addressing Harry. "Had to agree to it before they let us come back to school. Got to prove we aren't gonna eat Muggles for breakfast, or something."

"I have definitely changed my ways," Zabini says, into the sudden awkward silence. "I only eat *one* Muggle for breakfast these days."

"A whole one? What a pig you are," Malfoy murmurs. "No wonder you're getting fat."

Zabini – who is, Harry thinks, mostly muscle and ego – attempts to levitate Harry's goblet of water up and over Malfoy's head, but Malfoy blocks the spell.

Refreshing as the ice-cold water is to drink, Harry wishes, as it pours over his head and drips down his neck, that perhaps it was a tiny bit warmer.

"Arseholes, the pair of you!" Millicent – who is also soggy round the edges – says crossly, and casts a Hot-Air Charm over herself and Harry. As the warm air starts to dry them out, she says, "The first lesson was jolly interesting, Potter. We have a real Muggle for a teacher, did you know? It would be too awkward for him to come to Hogwarts each week, so we met him in a little café in Muggle Edinburgh, and had tea, Muggle style. So primitive!"

“It was a bit like going to the zoo,” Nott says drily, “to admire the Muggles in their natural environment.”

Malfoy snorts. “Now, now. You’ll offend Potter if you talk like that.”

Harry’s *already* offended, but he supposes the fact that the group of wankers he’s currently sitting with actually made it to Muggle territory and back without incident is a good first step in their paths to becoming real-life actual human beings.

“Have you done *your* homework yet, Draco?” Millicent asks, as if she knows the answer.

“No,” Malfoy says sulkily. “I’ve been a little *busy*, recently, if you haven’t noticed!”

“Yes, skiving off lessons to sulk in corners,” Millicent replies sternly.

“I haven’t been sulking in corners!” Malfoy folds his arms and glares.

“I apologise,” Millicent says, snorting. “As if the heir of the House of Malfoy would sulk in corners! No – he’d sulk right in the open, so everyone could *see* that he was sulking and be appropriately penitent.”

“Or he’d sulk in a bathroom,” Greg adds, under his breath – but not quite under his breath enough.

“You’re all a bunch of absolute wankers!” Malfoy says loudly, shooting up to his feet, as if he’s going to storm out, and dislodging the cat.

The cat looks around crossly for its next victim – it really is the ugliest thing he’s ever seen, Harry thinks, with its squashed, evil face – and decides that Harry looks the most comfortable. It sits, and begin to knead his leg; its claws are fucking *lethal*. Harry tries not to squeal.

Malfoy hasn’t managed to storm off like an idiot, by the time Harry looks up, tears of pain in his eyes; Millicent has the edge of his robe in her grasp, and Malfoy, sensing imminent farce, sits back down again heavily. “*Anyway*, Potter’s going to do my homework for me,” he says. Sulkily.

“And you’re not doing ours too, Potter?” Zabini says, in tones of unbearable disappointment. But then he perks up. “In your defence, we didn’t ask you. You can do next week’s though! If I never have to step foot in a Muggle supermarket again it will be too soon.” He shudders delicately.

“I’m not doing your homework,” Harry says loudly, at the same time Malfoy says, equally loudly:

“*No*, Blaise. Harry is *my* mug – you can go and find your own. What about Granger?”

“Mug?” Harry repeats, trying to send Malfoy a glare through Millicent’s – solid – head.

“We already asked her,” Pansy says in disgust. “She said she doesn’t help other people with their homework on principle, and then she went on an extended rant about how unfair it was that *she* hadn’t been offered the chance to do Muggle Studies too.”

“Granger’s parents are Muggles, though, aren’t they?” Nott says with thinly veiled distaste.

“Yes,” Harry says firmly. “They are.”

“All right, keep your hair on,” Zabini says peaceably. “We won’t eat *them* for breakfast. Unless we’re really hungry,” he adds, snickering.

“I suppose it would be better to be a Muggle than a Squib,” Pansy says doubtfully. “At least then you wouldn’t know what you were missing.”

“Unless you’re Granger’s parents,” Nott murmurs.

Harry’s not sure it matters either way, if he’s honest – knowing about magic, vs not knowing about magic. Would knowing about his magic have made his childhood any happier? He supposes he could have used it to threaten the Dursleys into treating him better; he couldn’t have used it to make them love him, though. Not *real* love, at any rate.

Harry shakes himself out of his thoughts; they’re not the sort to do anyone any good.

“I suppose we’d better get it done tomorrow afternoon, then,” Malfoy is saying disagreeably. “OK, Potter?”

“Do what?” Harry asks, to universal derision. Even the skulls dotted around the room seem to be smirking at him, which he thinks is pretty unfair, given that no one’s fucking *explained* what this homework assignment is, other than it involves dying Millicent’s unfortunate cat red, and as far as he can see that mission has already been accomplished.

Malfoy explains, as if he were talking to a five-year old, that the first Muggle Studies lesson was on money and shopping for essentials. Every student was given a list of items to purchase, and in the next lesson they will share their experiences of mixing with Muggles in a commercial environment.

Harry remembers Malfoy describing his Muggle Studies assignments as a ‘piece of piss’ that would be quick to do. Malfoy, he thinks, could be sued under the Muggle Trades Description Act. This sounds like a full-on afternoon trip. With *Malfoy*.

To *mix with Muggles*.

Harry briefly closes his eyes and counts backwards from ten. Malfoy interrupts him when he’s only at seven. “Hellooooo?” Malfoy says.

“Yes, all *right*,” Harry snaps, opening his eyes. “Maybe, though, if I’m going to be busy all afternoon tomorrow, I should go and do some reading now? You know – about that thing we were discussing?”

Malfoy cranes his head around Millicent's solid form. "Great idea, Potter," he says, with an infuriating smirk. "Off you go – don't let us keep you from, what was it I heard on the grapevine you'd checked out from the library for private reading?"

"*Erotic Love Magick*," Pansy says helpfully.

"Enjoy!" Zabini adds.

If there was any fairness to life, Harry thinks, Pansy, Zabini and Malfoy would all be suddenly struck by . . . by . . . boils, he thinks. And then he remembers he's a wizard.

He dashes out of the common room faster than he's ever dashed anywhere, pretty much, before the three fuckers can extract their revenge. But he can't resist looking back, as he passes through the doorway, to see Zabini's horrified expression as dozens of enormous purple lumps spring up on his face. He can still hear Pansy's cry for vengeance as he dashes along the corridor and into their dormitory.

He grins as he shucks off his shoes and dives into bed, grabbing one of the books – carelessly heaped on his bedside table – and starting to read. He would shut his curtains, for preference, but he suspects his room-mates will arrive soon to wreak their terrible revenge, and he'd prefer to see his doom coming, rather than meet it unawares.

"Are you *sure* this is soap?" Malfoy says in tones of mistrust. "It doesn't fucking say 'soap' on it." He warms to his theme. "Do Muggles wash in leather? Let me remind you, Potter, that leather is the dried hide of cattle. I can't see how that would be at all hygienic."

"Imperial Leather's just the brand name," Harry protests, trying to take deep, regular breaths. It's OK, he tells himself. He can do this. He just has to get through the afternoon without killing Malfoy, and then they can finally – FINALLY! – make their plan of action, and the nightmare will be over. Soon. Probably.

Possibly.

"Well, it's pretty stupid," Malfoy says, as if Harry is personally responsible for all the world's ills.

Harry reaches down into his well of infinite patience, and finds it has almost run dry. "*I* didn't choose it!"

Malfoy doesn't appear to be listening, though. "One pound and seventy-nine pence," he says, and pulls a face that suggests Maths Is Happening. "That's . . . six sickles, three knuts. That's an outrageous rip-off for soap," he accuses. "Even Plongeur's Finest Bar Soap is only four sickles, and that washes your body *for* you."

Harry has never come across a bar of soap that does your washing for you. A tiny part of him blushes, intrigued, and files it away for future reference. The larger part of him is too irritated by Malfoy to blush. "Choose another soap, then! The list just says soap!"

“You’re the expert, Potter,” Malfoy says ungratefully. “I’m sure this will be fine. Even if it *is* in Gryffindor colours.” He puts the red and gold package into the wire basket he’s carrying, wrinkling his nose. “What’s next?”

Harry takes a moment to admire the scene – although he’s aware that ‘admire’ is possibly not quite the right word. ‘Goggle at’ might be more apt. He definitely hadn’t expected life to bless – curse – him with the sight of Draco Malfoy, dressed in full wizarding robes and stiff dragonhide boots, stalking the aisles in Tesco, a shopping basket under his arm and an expression that is simultaneously disgusted and . . . anxious. By the looks of the people around him, they weren’t expecting life to bless them with this sight either.

“People are staring at me,” Malfoy hisses.

“It’s because you’re so devastatingly attractive,” Harry says. He can’t help himself. And he supposes— No. He absolutely doesn’t suppose. Not in the slightest.

Malfoy goes beetroot.

“It’s because you’re wearing robes!” Harry says quickly. “I told you that you’d stand out. Didn’t you stand out before, when the whole class turned up in robes?”

Malfoy shrugs. “I suppose so. Someone shouted out that . . .” He frowns, trying to remember. “The festival was over? Something like that? Anyway, you’re wearing robes *too*.”

Harry is, indeed, wearing robes, and feeling like the biggest plonker in history. “I’m wearing them for *you*,” he hisses.

Malfoy’s eyes widen. “I beg your pardon?”

Harry was wrong; while he may have *felt* like the biggest plonker in history before, it is only *now* that actually deserves the title. He has reached Peak Plonker. “I thought it might make you feel less stupid,” he says.

Malfoy regards him in withering silence for a moment. “I never feel stupid about being properly dressed,” he says. And then, to Harry’s absolute amazement, he says, turning back to the list in his hands, “But thank you, I suppose. This trip isn’t exactly my dream come true.”

Harry tries not to leap to offense and wonders what Malfoy actually means. Ever since they arrived in Muggle Edinburgh, Malfoy’s been tense and snappy. Harry supposes that the combination of being out and about with a ban on your magic must be enough to make anyone tetchy, but then they’ve both spent most of their lives restricted by the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, haven’t they? And while Harry also thinks that Malfoy’s finding it hard to relax, being one-on-one with him – Harry isn’t exactly finding it easy himself – he still thinks there’s something more to it.

“Do you never normally go shopping yourself?” Harry asks.

Malfoy looks up from the list, his expression wary. “Of course I go shopping,” he says. “I’m not *poor*.”

Harry tries not to snap back; Malfoy still seems primed to take every comment he makes as an insult. He’s like a . . . cornered animal, Harry thinks. He bites, in case something bigger bites him first. “I meant everyday kind of shopping,” Harry says, trying again. “Food. Household stuff.”

Malfoy frowns at him.

“Toilet roll?” Harry tries. “Bleach? Washing up liquid?”

Malfoy’s frown deepens. “I think most of that is Muggle stuff, Potter. I buy the odd toiletry, but magic takes care of most household cleaning, as far as I’m aware. If potions are required, I suppose Mother instructs the house elves on what to purchase.” He shrugs. “I don’t know much about running a household. I used to think—” He breaks off, suddenly awkward.

“What?”

“That I’d have a wife to take care of that sort of stuff,” Malfoy mumbles, and has the grace to look sheepish. “I suppose you think that’s pathetic,” he says, raising his chin.

Harry does, a bit. “It’s not your fault you were brought up to be useless,” he says cheerfully. “Now, what’s next on the list?” he asks, as Malfoy splutters at him.

What’s next is hair gel, and Harry zooms off to the haircare aisle before Malfoy can throw anything at his retreating back.

They end up in the cafe where Malfoy and the others had their first Muggle Studies lesson. It’s called The Elephant House, and the owner seems to have the same affinity to elephants as Slytherins have to skulls – there are hundreds of the things, dotted about the place. It’s charmingly eccentric, and when the waiter leads them through to a quiet back room, and seats them by the huge window – beyond them, the castle rises up on a mound of rock – Harry feels surprisingly happy for a brief moment, overwhelmed by a sense of *deja vu*. He’s been here before, his mind tells him, even though he knows he hasn’t; he *belongs*. Then the whole ‘doomed to be alone forever’ thing rises in his mind again when Malfoy sits down in a swish of robes, wrinkling his nose at the simple wooden chairs and tables, and that takes the shine off it somewhat.

Malfoy withdraws an intricately carved golden fob watch from his pocket and looks at it, before slipping it away again.

“Got somewhere else to be?” Harry asks sarcastically, and looks down at the menu, in preference to looking at Malfoy. He’s had enough of looking at Malfoy today. He’s had enough of looking at Malfoy for the rest of his *life*.

Harry looks up, at Malfoy. Malfoy is smirking, the annoying, pointy git. “Where else would I want to be but here, with my heart’s desire?” Malfoy asks, pointedly. “Light of my life, fire of my loins, centre of my—”

“Um, what would you like?” Harry interrupts. *Fire of my loins*? He supposes he’s glad that Malfoy can see the humour in the situation – although, there *isn’t* any humour in the situation, is there? He feels instantly suspicious.

Malfoy, it seems, is also suspicious – but of the menu. “I’ll have apple pie and ice cream,” he announces. “And a mint hot chocolate. That all sounds fairly normal.”

When the waiter returns, Harry relays this dubiously, adding, “Just a tea for me, please. English breakfast.”

“*Scottish* breakfast,” the waiter amends, with a smile to take the sting off.

“So, shall we talk about it, then?” Harry says, after Malfoy’s looked steadfastly out of the window for longer than’s comfortable.

“About what?” Malfoy says, turning back towards him, though his body language still screams that he’s longing to jump out of the window.

“The . . . the *soulmarks*,” Harry hisses. The café is by no means empty; other customers sit dotted about, some scribbling in notebooks and others – students, by the looks of it – chatting quietly in small groups.

Malfoy instantly relaxes. Which is also suspicious, Harry thinks, wondering what it is he’s not getting here. “Oh, that,” Malfoy says, and Harry has the strangest premonition that he’s about to say *that’s all sorted*, but he doesn’t. “Go on then, Potter,” Malfoy continues, and leans back in his chair – he could make sitting on a jagged rock look comfortable, Harry thinks. “Dazzle me with your research. I feel supremely confident you’ve fixed everything already. That book you borrowed from the library – what was it? Ah, yes.” His eyes sparkle maliciously. “*Erotic Love Magicks*. I’m certain you found the answer to our little dilemma there.”

“There’s no need to take the piss,” Harry says stiffly.

“I don’t know why you’re bothering with research, though, Potter. You just need to snog Blaise again, I reckon, and the vileness of witnessing it will wipe the tattoo straight from my skin,” Malfoy continues, as if Harry hadn’t spoken. His eyes are suddenly sparkling with inexplicable rage.

“That wasn’t my fault!” Harry erupts, determined not be blamed for Blaise fucking Zabini being Blaise fucking Zabini. Why the hell does Malfoy even care? It wasn’t *him* that had to suffer it – either the foul, though thankfully brief, kiss itself, or the resulting media storm – now, was it?

Malfoy’s expression is bitter beyond the telling, but whatever he’s planning to say in reply is, mercifully, lost forever; the waiter trots over with a tray, placing drinks and an enormous

serving of apple pie in front of them. There are, Harry notices, two spoons.

Malfoy looks at the spoons balefully, then slides one over to Harry. “I don’t like sharing,” he says, “but you have the look of imminent death about you, Potter. Are you intentionally trying to starve yourself? Is this the martyr thing again?”

Harry doesn’t want any apple pie – his appetite has still shown no signs of returning; he sometimes wonders if Ron stole it, when he wasn’t looking – but when he balances out ‘not wanting any pie’ with ‘Malfoy clearly not wanting to share his pie’, annoying Malfoy wins. He’s choked down about half the dish before Malfoy’s even picked up his own spoon. “Mmm,” he says facetiously, and Malfoy snorts.

“Don’t forget the erotic love magic, Potter,” Malfoy says, picking up his hot chocolate and taking a delicate sip. He gets whipped cream on his lip, and he licks it off fastidiously, like a cat. “I’m still waiting for your report.”

Harry takes another spoonful of apple pie and ice cream – it’s actually quite tasty – to cover up his embarrassment. When he thinks he can speak without stammering, he says, “No joy so far. Most of the books . . .” He trails off as he thinks how to explain it. “They weren’t very *nice*,” he says, and pulls a face at his own incoherence.

“Love magic *isn’t* very nice,” Malfoy agrees. “It’s mostly Imperius in different flavours. I was looking at your favourite book before you joined me in the library, though,” he adds.

“It is *not* my favourite book!” Harry protests, to no avail.

“Not entirely relevant to our situation, is it? *Erotic Love Magick*, I mean,” Malfoy says delicately.

Harry tries not to turn purple.

“Amazed they have something like that in a school library, really,” Malfoy says, watching Harry’s face and taking another sip of his drink.

“I really hate you,” Harry says glumly.

Malfoy’s eyes flash.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake – that was a joke,” Harry says, and takes refuge in the pie before he can dig himself in the hole any further.

“Very funny, then. Ha ha,” Malfoy – the git – says.

“I couldn’t see anything, really, about soulmates or soulmarks, or anything,” Harry says, after he’s swallowed his mouthful.

“All porn or Imperius, eh?”

Harry’s glad he doesn’t have his mouth full, or he’d have spat macerated apple pie over Malfoy – and never been forgiven for it. But – “Basically, yes,” he admits. He hasn’t finished

reading the books he's borrowed cover to cover, but he's skimmed through them all. If he needed a potion that causes infatuation, a spell that makes a partner susceptible to suggestion or, er, a paste that promises to make an erection last at least three hours, he'd be all set. Nowhere in the pages of the books, however, could he see any spells that spoke the *truth* about love – only potions and charms to, at best, amplify an existing longing.

Malfoy attempts to surreptitiously slide out his timepiece and check it, without Harry seeing.

Harry waits until Malfoy's taken another sip of his drink to say, "I'm sorry erotic magic bores you, Malfoy," and it's Malfoy's turn to nearly choke. Harry's not sure, though, whether he prefers Malfoy when he's smirking and gittish, to when he's all pink and flustered, after all. He's practically human, when he's embarrassed. It's disconcerting – and reminds Harry that Malfoy is someone he could have been friends with, once.

"You finished my apple pie," Malfoy says accusingly, when he's recovered.

Harry looks down at the empty bowl – and Malfoy's clean spoon – to discover that this is, indeed, the case. "You snooze, you lose," he says. "Did *you* find out anything useful, then?"

Malfoy twitches, slightly, and then shrugs. "Not really," he says. "Shall I get you some more apple pie? Since you are clearly the Vanishing charm in human form, despite your skeletal appearance."

Harry regards this as a poor attempt at changing the subject, but . . . maybe Malfoy has a good reason for not wanting to talk about things, he thinks dubiously. Even though they're only eating apple pie together in Muggle Edinburgh because they sodding *agreed* they were going to talk about things. So far, the plan of action Harry had hoped they could construct together is rather lacking in, well, both plan and action. Harry tries to think of something useful to raise, though, and fails. He doesn't especially want to run the risk of Malfoy interrogating him about the exact spells he read about in the erotic magic book. "I wish Hermione was more enthusiastic about ending the spell," he says gloomily, and takes a swig of his cooling tea. "We could do with her research skills right now."

Malfoy looks over at him, and a strange expression flits across his face, as if something's only just occurred to him. "Potter . . ." he says, then stops, as if he's holding himself back from exploding. "For the love of all things holy . . . You didn't *tell Granger* what my – my fucking soulmark says, did you?"

Harry tries to remember if it even crossed his mind that he shouldn't tell Ron and Hermione about what Malfoy's soulmark said, and concludes that . . . no, it didn't. He's officially an arsehole. He shifts uncomfortably on his chair and doesn't reply.

"I'm just checking, you understand," Malfoy continues, staring at him. "Because no one would be so *stupid* as to share something like that, without getting my permission first. I mean, it's not like you could *ruin my life* by spreading gossip about this, or anything, is it?" Malfoy is holding himself very still, and Harry takes from this that he is truly angry, rather than indulging in his usual childish tantrumming.

"Hermione and Ron are my best friends," he says uncomfortably.

“Oh, even better!” Malfoy says incredulously. “The Weasel has always been such a friend to me. There’s no reason at all that *he’d* want to ruin my life, is there?”

“You did wish Hermione dead on more than one occasion,” Harry says hotly. “If he hates you, it’s your own bloody fault.”

Silence, hot and heavy, hangs between them for a moment, punctuated by the clatter of cutlery and the ebb and flow of other people’s conversations.

“Thank you for your fulsome apology,” Malfoy says, and stands up. “I’ll see you back at school.”

And with that parting shot, he storms out, his robe flaring dramatically behind him – leaving Harry with the bill.

When Harry gets back to Hogwarts a while later, Malfoy’s not back yet, as far as he can see. Harry thinks that’s a bit odd – he left quite a while before Harry himself did – but he squashes down his uncomfortable feeling and tells himself that Malfoy’s just sulking in a corner somewhere, possibly under Harry’s bloody invisibility cloak. He doesn’t really care, anyway. It’s not like he feels bad about it, or anything.

Harry’s making another attempt to properly read *Conquer and Control*, and starting to wonder, vaguely, if the Wizarding world was actually *worth* saving after all, when Pansy Parkinson bursts into the common room and makes a determined beeline to his dark corner.

Harry realises the common room is empty, apart from him – and now, Pansy. It must be dinner time, he supposes; he didn’t mean to skip the meal, but he was so engrossed in judging the frankly vile book in his hands that he appears to have lost track of time. If Pansy is coming to fetch him, though, she’s looking pretty pissed off about it.

“Frankly, I couldn’t give a toss if you starved to death,” she starts, unpromisingly, and crosses her arms, coming to a halt in front of him. “But *someone* thinks you’re more entertaining alive, so hurry the fuck up, Potter – it’s dinner time, and you’re late.”

It’s probably Zabini, Harry thinks crossly. He *would* send Pansy. Harry’s trying his best, but he still gets the creeps whenever he sees her.

“Besides, I want a word with you, and now’s as good a time as any,” she continues, when Harry stands up. He nearly sits right back down again, but he faced Voldemort, didn’t he? He can face an angry Pansy.

“What about?” he asks warily, shrinking the book so it fits neatly in his pocket.

“Not *here*,” Pansy says, wrinkling her nose. “You don’t know who’s listening.”

“Don’t you trust your former housemates?” Harry asks.

She shoots him a look of absolute poison. “*I* know how to keep a secret. Only a fool trusts people just because a *hat* once decided they had a similar outlook on life. Are *you* the same now as you were when you were eleven, Potter?”

Is he? Harry has no idea. He does, however, have an inkling of what Pansy’s talking about, and he braces himself for the onslaught. He doesn’t have to wait long. Once they’re in the Entrance Hall, he attempts to cross the huge, echoing space to enter the Great Hall, but Pansy tugs impatiently on his arm, leading him out of the huge, oak entrance doors and down the stone steps outside. He’s not dressed right for this, and he shivers, though a wave of warm air washes over him as Pansy draws him away from the castle, across the lawn and towards the dark shape that’s the empty Quidditch pitch. The season hasn’t begun yet, and even the keenest players are at dinner right now.

They sit on the bottom row of the stand, and Harry hopes Pansy hasn’t brought him out here to murder him. Though he supposes it would serve him right, if she did – he’s showing a total lack of sense in just following her to his doom.

“Where do I even begin?” Pansy says, and makes a noise of frustration that is almost a screech. “You’re such a dimwit, I bet you don’t even know what you’ve done wrong!”

It doesn’t *sound* like imminent murder, but equally it doesn’t sound like Harry’s in for a treat. “Well, no,” he says, and winces; it doesn’t sound brimming with intelligence.

“Have you even stopped to consider, for a moment, what this awful mark around Draco’s neck means?” Harry goes to speak, but Pansy raises a hand. “If you say, ‘It shows Draco’s soulmate,’ it will go very ill with you,” she snaps. “That’s *obvious*. But – oh my god, Potter – the rest should be obvious too.”

The rest? Harry presumes Draco has shared with Pansy that Ron and Hermione now also know what Draco’s mark reads. “I know I shouldn’t have told Ron and Hermione,” he says defensively. “I trust them though – there’s no way they’ll spread it.”

“You *know*?” she spits. “Did you make them swear?”

“Well, no,” Harry says, shifting on the hard, cold seat. “But they won’t,” he adds weakly.

Pansy runs her hands through her hair, leaving her careful hairdo in disarray. “I *love* Draco, you absolute cuntweasel,” she says. “Not like that,” she adds dismissively, answering a question Harry hasn’t asked. “There was a time when the Malfoy name could have overcome the . . . disadvantages of making a match with him, but that’s all gone to shit now. But as my friend . . .” She presses her lips together, the tension stark in her face in the gloom. “You are so, so stupid. I can’t believe I’m actually going to have to say this out loud.”

“Well, go on then,” Harry says crossly, getting a bit fed up of being constantly insulted.

“All right then. I seriously think you’ve got so caught up in the fact that the name round Draco’s neck is *yours*,” Pansy says coldly, “that you’ve forgotten you’re a *boy*.”

“Er, I don’t think I’ve forgotten that,” Harry says, wondering if she’s gone completely off her rocker, and then . . .

The point she’s making stabs him right through the guts.

“*Precisely*, Potter,” Pansy says, when she sees his face, and her upper lip curls. “It’s not a bit of simple burning embarrassment and shame that Draco fears, if it all comes out – he’s had plenty of practice at that, thanks to you.”

“I don’t think—” Harry protests.

“He’s *his father’s sole heir*,” Pansy continues scathingly, as if he hadn’t spoken. “If he doesn’t have a child, the Malfoy name will die out, and the Sacred Twenty-Eight will be reduced by one. And which noble family, exactly, would knowingly marry their daughter to a poofster, who might not be able to get it up for a woman? Let’s not forget that Draco’s also a convicted criminal. He’s growing more of a catch by the minute!”

Harry thinks that if he ever made a list of the truly excruciating moments in his life, although there’s a lot to choose from, this one would be a top contender.

“Maybe you want him to die alone, the last of his family, though?” Pansy asks politely.

“He can marry whoever the hell he wants!” Harry snaps, stung. “He doesn’t *have* to bother with the pure-blood thing. It’s fucking stupid.”

Pansy glares at him. “Don’t you think that’s his choice to make, though, not yours?”

Harry glares back, but he supposes – uncomfortably – that she has a point.

Harry doesn’t really fancy dinner, after being told off by Pansy for what felt like a million years straight. He definitely doesn’t fancy sitting near Zabini, who’s a wanker, and Malfoy, who’s . . .

Gay. He’s *gay*. Pansy was quite clear on that point.

And Harry’s his soulmate. Allegedly, he adds firmly in his mind, but it doesn’t make much difference. He’s still entirely convinced that the spell isn’t real, and doesn’t mean anything, and he’s definitely not going to die alone. It’s just a shame it’s only his brain that’s convinced of that, and not his heart, and his roiling stomach.

“Oh no you don’t,” Pansy says grimly, when he tries to escape and run back to his dormitory to hide under the bed. “Draco sent me to get you, so he’ll think I’ve gone nuts if I turn up without you. He’s in a bad enough mood as it is. I expect he’s planning on slipping poison in your drink, or something.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Harry mutters, and allows himself to be dragged into the Great Hall.

“You’re so welcome. I hope you enjoy the anticipation as much as I do.”

Malfoy, who still looks cross, but not so cross that he’s going to skewer Harry on a spit, narrows his eyes. “You were a long time, Pans.”

“Caught Potter wanking,” Pansy says blandly, sitting down next to Zabini. “Had to go to Madam Pomfrey first to get Obliviated.”

Millicent laughs loudly. “Watch it, Pansy, or you’ll come down with boils again.”

“Er, sorry about that,” Harry says, remembering too late that neither Zabini, Parkinson nor Malfoy have wreaked their terrible revenge yet for the previous day’s hex. He suspects they’re playing the long game.

Pansy sniffs. “Don’t give it another thought,” she says through gritted teeth. “It was extremely funny, wasn’t it, Draco?”

Malfoy starts, as if he wasn’t listening. “Yes, definitely,” he says, and raises an eyebrow at Harry, who hasn’t put any food on his plate yet. “Doing the martyr thing again?”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. Harry helps himself to a slab of lasagne and makes an attempt to eat it. As he does so, the Slytherins exchange pointed barbs and sarcastic remarks, as if they like to upset each other, just for kicks.

Halfway through dessert, Malfoy’s enormous snowy owl swoops down and drops a letter into his waiting hands; the note – crumpled, and written by someone functionally illiterate, as far as Harry can see – vanishes into his robe pocket extremely quickly. Malfoy rises, equally quickly. “Important business,” he murmurs, looking both excited and sick, and strides out of the hall at top speed.

“He’ll give himself indigestion,” Zabini remarks, patting his stomach. “That was a good meal. Fancy a walk after the coffee’s been brought in, Potter?”

“Er, no, thanks. I thought I’d—”

“It’s a nice night,” Zabini continues. “I thought we could—”

“Sit uncomfortably and coldly on the Quidditch pitch stands, and have an awkward conversation?” Harry asks, which seems to throw Zabini. “I already did that today. With Parkinson.”

“I see,” Zabini says, grinning. “Maybe I don’t need to bother, then. Did you do a good job, Pans?”

Pansy considers this, a spoonful of fruit salad halfway to her mouth. “Adequate,” she says, and takes a bite. “I didn’t make Potter cry, but I think he suffered.”

“Did you tell him that if that thing we were discussing becomes common knowledge, we’ll band together and destroy him?”

“No,” Pansy says.

Zabini turns to Harry. “Potter, if that thing we were discussing becomes common knowledge, we will band together and destroy you.”

“Also, castration,” Millicent adds. And when everyone turns to look at her, she shrugs. “Just saying.”

“All right, we’ll add that to the list,” Zabini says. “I mean, technically ‘we’ll destroy you’ already covers that, but I suppose it does no harm to be specific.”

“You do know you’re having this conversation in public,” Harry says tetchily, pushing his untouched dessert plate away and refusing coffee from the house-elf by his ear. “This top-secret and frankly alarming conversation.”

“Being able to balance being simultaneously top-secret and frankly alarming in public is the key to becoming a proper Slytherin,” Zabini says, and he winks. The fucker *winks*. “Maybe there’s hope for you yet, my child.”

Hermione and Ron are just as sickeningly in love with each other as ever – possibly more so, Harry thinks as he sits in the Gryffindor common room and tries not to mind that all of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw have crowded in to also sit with him. He almost manages it, when Justin, Terry and Neville hold a spirited competition over who can mock-vomit the loudest, and everyone leaps back in horror when Terry appears to be about to vom for real, but manages to hold it in at the last minute.

“Killed it,” Terry says smugly, and Harry laughs, and then a tiny Ravenclaw girl, all eyes behind glasses that are almost bigger than her head, holds out an autograph book to Harry with a pleading expression. She’s so nervous she can’t actually speak, so Harry doesn’t feel able to say no, but it sets everyone else off. He’s been signing for a solid fifteen minutes when a busty Ravenclaw sixth year undoes the top button of her blouse and indicates he should sign her chest.

Harry has his limits, and while he wouldn’t have necessarily said in advance that ‘autographing tits’ was one, it turns out it definitely is. The fact that they’re pretty nice tits – and he can’t stop himself from having a good look before he says no – only makes his resolve firmer.

Ron sees him to the door. “Sorry, mate, I should have thought. I guess we could hang out in our dormitory, next time, but that means Hermione can’t join us.”

“Not your fault,” Harry says, and feels a pang for when they were three friends, rather than a couple and a spare, and then feels like a shit. It’s not Ron’s fault he’s feeling over-sensitive; he’s a good mate. He wraps Ron in a brief, awkward hug, and they bang each other’s backs in a manly, totally not gay fashion.

“You all right?” Ron asks, brow furrowed.

“Yeah, fine,” Harry says, and thinks *No*. “See you at breakfast tomorrow?”

“Sure,” Ron says, brow still furrowed, and Harry can feel him watching him as he walks away.

All Harry wants, when he gets back to his room, is to go to sleep. It’s been an arse of a day, and he’s ready to have some quality nightmares about killing off Malfoy. So, it’s typical that when he gets back to the Slytherin dormitory, his room-mates are hanging about in the corridor outside, looking tense.

All of them, that is, apart from Malfoy.

Harry feels a deep weariness come over him. “What’s up with him *now*?” he asks.

“He locked us out,” Greg says. “Been a lot of shouting.”

“And banging,” Nott adds unhelpfully. “We thought it was safer to stay outside.”

Harry wants to go to *bed*. He rattles the doorknob, to be met with silence. “*Alohomora*,” he says, and the lock unclicks ominously. They all look at each other.

“You first,” Zabini says. “If anyone’s going to be hexed, or alternatively greeted by the sight of a mangled corpse, you’re the man for the job, Potter.”

“Thanks,” Harry mutters, but grasps the doorknob – and his courage – and twists.

The room is a mess. There’s stuff all over the floor, and some of the beds are skew-whiff, as if there’s been a tiny localised whirlwind.

“If you’ve damaged any of my stuff, Malfoy . . .!” Nott says unpleasantly, to Malfoy’s bed. The curtains are drawn tight around it, and there’s a feeling of horribleness in the room that suggests Malfoy himself is behind them.

“Fuck *off*,” Malfoy says, in a small, clear, extremely, extremely upset voice.

“Do – you want to talk?” Harry asks the bed-curtains doubtfully.

The silence is as good an answer as any. “Well, I’m going to bed,” Harry announces, and a few flicks of his wand have the worst of the detritus on the floor sorting itself into small, sad piles. He uses the bathroom, and by the time he’s got back, Zabini and Greg have straightened up the beds and revealed a bit more of the floor, while Nott perches, jaw set, on the end of his own bed, muttering darkly about vandalism.

Harry goes to sleep surprisingly easily, and almost immediately falls into a dream of Malfoy dying. Malfoy – shirtless – rolls over in bed, and cries out in horror as his soulmark starts to writhe. The ornate branches and leaves turn sharp and spiky, tangling off his skin and wrapping him in a shroud of shrubbery. Malfoy reaches out in panic as he’s drowned in flowers. “Harry!” he calls. “*Harry!*”

Harry sits bolt upright in bed, feeling himself drip with sweat, despite the coolness of the room. And thinks, gloomily, that the dream might be trying to tell him something.

There's no antidote to being a git

The dormitory is extremely tidy when Harry wakes up next morning. Or, rather, when he's *woken up* – Zabini, who has bags under his eyes, shakes his shoulder, yawns so widely Harry can see his tonsils, and says, “We’re late for brekkie – better get a move on.”

The others are also stirring, with various groans that suggest everyone else slept about as well as he did. Malfoy’s curtains are drawn wide, and his body is very much absent, so Harry’s not sure if it was him who tidied up, or a fastidious house-elf. The older Harry gets, the more peculiar he finds it that so much of regular wizarding life seems to be powered by an army of tiny professional slaves. He finds it equally odd to remember a time when he laughed at Hermione, for starting SPEW and for caring at all.

Harry’s not sure if he’s more disappointed or relieved when Malfoy is notable by his absence at the Slytherin breakfast table. It’s not that he wants to see him, exactly; the devastation of their room last night presages doom. But on the other hand, not knowing what’s up with Malfoy is making him nervous – and more so with every passing minute. What the fuck was in the letter that Malfoy received last night? Sod's law is that it’s related to the soulmark, Harry thinks. Which means it’s related to him too . . .

Harry remembers his dream – of Malfoy calling his name as the soulmark, made real, ate him alive – and swallows hard. He thinks he’ll sit with Ron and Hermione this morning, and maybe the sight of their love will make him feel a bit better.

So Harry sits, Ron obligingly shuffling up to give him space, and Luna carefully carries over her half-melon stuffed with bacon from the Ravenclaw table to join them. Harry was feeling a tiny bit hungry, but at the sight of the melon/bacon combo, his appetite retreats, to hide behind his spine.

“You often have ham and melon as a combination,” Luna explains, when she sees them all looking. “This is just the warm version. Want some?”

“I’m too full,” Ron says, and casts aside his half-eaten bacon baguette with a regretful sigh. When Luna looks around, at something that isn’t there, he snatches it up, wraps it in a paper napkin, and stuffs it up his sleeve – and only withdraws it ten minutes or so later, when they’re safely in the Potions classroom, with no Luna in sight.

“Are you sure it’s safe to eat in here?” Harry asks as Ron takes a massive bite. There is ketchup all down his shirt-sleeve, Harry notices.

Hermione notices too, and then tries not to; Harry can see that it pains her. He sympathises. Ron can be hard on the constitution, and *he’s* not the one who’s unwisely agreed to marry him.

Ron swallows down the rest of the baguette, a bit like he’s a boa constrictor. “It’s fine,” he says breezily. “It’s not like we brew anything really dangerous in here.”

Happily, Slughorn enters before Hermione can list every single dangerous potion that's ever been brewed at school – she's been going some time already, and she's only up to the letter E. "Today, I'd like you to turn to page seventy-four and brew the love potion antidote," he says, and twinkles at Harry. "I wager at least one of you might need it soon, so best to be on the safe side, ha ha!"

The class all stare at Harry. Not all the stares are friendly.

"Ha ha," Harry says.

"Antidotes are, of course, part of the exam syllabus," Slughorn continues. "So you'll need to perfect your technique to pass. Remember: a poorly brewed potion will likely work, but weakly; but a poorly brewed antidote will, in most cases, simply fail to work at all. So, precision is vital. Depending on the original potion, the antidote can be the difference between life and death – or, worse, between free will and no will at all."

"Bit of an odd thing to say," Ron mutters to Harry. Harry nods, but inside he isn't so sure.

A couple of minutes into the lesson, just as Hermione is ordering Ron to fetch the Wiggentree twigs, and instructing Harry on the amount of castor oil to measure out, Malfoy enters the classroom.

"Godric's – er, hollow," Ron mutters, changing his curse into something blander when he catches Hermione's eye. "Malfoy looks a bit like he's ready to be laid out on a slab and wept over. Is it just me, or does he look even more undead and evil than usual?"

It's not just him. Malfoy's pallor – which Harry, uncomfortably, has often thought of as striking, rather than 'undead' – has shaded into grey. The shadows under his eyes are almost purple. Slughorn, who's looked up crossly from the pile of scrolls he's marking, presumably to reprimand the latecomer, frowns in obvious concern. "Are you feeling all right, Draco?" he enquires. "Perhaps a visit to Madam Pomfrey for one of her invigorating remedies is in order."

"I'm *fine*," Malfoy snaps, dropping his bag on the floor by an empty desk and slamming into a chair as if it had personally offended him. He seems to remember himself for a moment, and adds, albeit still in a tone unsuitable for talking to teachers, "Thank you for asking, sir."

Greg shuffles over with extreme caution, as if he's approaching a pissed off hippogriff, and attempts to put a supportive hand on Malfoy's shoulder. Malfoy shakes him off immediately, and says something low and sharp.

Greg scarpers. As he passes Harry's desk, he mutters, "Best not to talk to Malfoy for the next hundred years, give or take, I'd say. When he's in this kind of mood, he's a right cunt."

Harry can feel Hermione twitch, next to him. "Don't," he breathes. He's heard her lecture on why it's outrageous for a term for female genitalia to be adopted as a slur by men, and while he's sympathetic to the argument, now is really not the time.

Hermione sniffs. “I’m *perfectly* capable of judging the mood of a situation, Harry,” she says freezingly. “And right now . . .” She looks over at Malfoy, and lowers her voice. “I’d say it can’t hurt to brew this antidote as if it were something we needed to use, can it?”

Harry tries not to frown. “That’s not going to work though,” he points out. Whatever they’ve been hit by, it wasn’t a love potion – it was some sort of charm. If just taking an antidote would fix things, then why, in the name of Godric himself, haven’t they already fucking tried it? It occurs to him, again, as a sort of sick sensation, that maybe Malfoy knows exactly how to get rid of the soulmark, and he’s just using it to try to torture Harry. Or . . . or to curry favour, in some peculiar, twisted way, with – what was it he’d said? – the ‘most powerful and influential wizard in Britain’. It doesn’t seem all that likely, but . . . Who knows how Malfoy’s brain might work? Harry certainly has no idea.

Hermione raises her hand with determination writ large across her entire arm and back.

“Yes?” Slughorn asks.

“Can a liquid antidote be used to counter an incanted charm, sir?”

Slughorn frowns a bit. “It would be unusual, but I suppose in certain cases . . . Was there something in particular you were thinking about?”

“No, sir,” Hermione says, and turns to Harry with a triumphant look, as if to say: *See?*

It definitely can’t hurt to brew the antidote, Harry thinks. But it *could* hurt if Malfoy decided that, rather than try out the antidote, he’d rather smash the vial of potion against a desk and use the shards to cut his throat. Looking at Malfoy’s rigid, spiteful back – even his spine looks vicious – Harry doesn’t rate his chances of survival, much less success.

Near the end of a long, stressful morning, the bright-orange potion, simmering gently in Hermione’s highly polished cauldron, releases a hiss of gas, as gentle as a sigh, and turns a pale, shimmering pink.

Hermione extinguishes the flame and quickly decants the steaming potion into a rack of vials, to allow it to cool rather than spoil, popping a bung on the top of each tube. “Perfect,” she pronounces, and Slughorn, who has waddled over, gives a satisfied nod.

“Ten points to Gryffindor for a job well done, Miss Granger. And five to Slytherin,” he adds, inclining his head at Harry, “for able assistance.” He walks back to his desk, passing comment on the other students’ potions as he does so, but gives Malfoy a wide berth. Malfoy, Harry can see, has made an attempt at . . . something. Whether it was meant to be the antidote, though, Harry’s not sure. The resulting potion looks a bit like how Malfoy feels, Harry suspects – a black, greasy potion that roils and belches out a noxious smelling green gas every now and then. It almost makes Harry feel better, to see it. If Malfoy’s feeling that shit, then he can’t be up to something nefarious, centered around the soulmark. Unless . . . unless he’s a really good actor.

Malfoy Vanishes the potion, along with all the equipment, without a word, and picks up his bag, turning to leave.

Hermione digs Harry in the side with her elbow. "Ow!" Harry says, and she rolls her eyes at him, indicating Malfoy with her head. If she thinks she's being subtle, then she's an idiot, Harry thinks. And how the bloody hell is he meant to stop Malfoy from leaving, anyway?

"Did you say you were going to help Malfoy write up his Muggle Studies homework this lunchtime, Harry?" Hermione asks loudly, and palms a vial of the potion as she speaks, slipping it into her pocket.

Malfoy, who is already at the door, flinches.

"Er, yes, that's right," Harry says. "Hang on a moment, Malfoy. We can find a quiet spot to work in together."

"Feel free to use my new study, boys," Slughorn says cheerfully. "Dear Minerva agreed I needed a second study to store my photographic collection in, when she kindly asked me to continue my role as Head of House for another year, so I took over Severus's old one down here too. I'm lunching with a graduate of the Slug Club in Hogsmeade today. Don't expect me back till afternoon classes."

Harry tries not to feel suspicious. Slughorn is just being helpful. Their conversation about 'eligible young men' still looms, embarrassingly, in his mind, though. "Thanks, sir, that would be great," he says.

Malfoy, to Harry's amazement, doesn't dash out of the room like the hounds of hell are after him. Instead, he stamps back over to a desk, sits down and . . . sort of droops. It's a petulant droop, but it's a droop all the same.

Slughorn waves his wand at a door leading off the classroom. "There," he says. "Wards all set. Don't want my favourite student – I mean students – being fried alive, do I?" He waddles past Harry and winks. "It's actually just a standard warding spell," he murmurs. "But it never hurts to inspire a little honest terror, now, does it? Good luck with your homework, and remember what I said before, dear boy." He waves and leaves the room.

"See you later, Harry," Hermione says, and clasps his hand – transferring the vial as she does so.

Harry manages not to drop it, but only just. "Come on then, Malfoy, let's get it over with," he says, and moves towards Slughorn's study, opening the door and not looking back. If he looks back he risks seeing Zabini's face, and he's not strong enough for whatever foul expression or innuendo sits upon it right now.

Inside, Slughorn's study is . . . barely recognisable as Snape's former study, although there's a large portrait – currently empty – hanging on the wall, which Harry suspects occasionally features the former potions master. He hasn't seen Snape's portrait for months, and he can't decide if that's annoying or not. He thinks he might cry, if he talks to Snape; but then again, Snape might try to make *him* cry, by insulting him, so perhaps it's better this way. Snape

would be horrified by the desecration of his study, either way. It's almost offensively cosy, with an enormous, overstuffed sofa dominating the room, and photographs of Slughorn's favourites wave and beam out from the hundreds of frames that cover the walls.

"Wizard photos can't remember anything they see, can they?" Harry asks. He presumes Malfoy's followed him in; at least, he heard the door shut. He supposes Malfoy could have shut it from the other side, and then spelled it so it could never be opened again.

"Of course not," Malfoy says scathingly. "Don't you know anything?"

Harry turns. Malfoy's standing by the door, his whole body rigid, as if he can't bring himself to come in any further.

"Um," Harry says. How should he do this? He should have thought this through. Or at least, *Hermione* should have thought this through, and given him clear, step-by-step instructions. He thinks pouring out some of the potion on to a spoon, and telling Malfoy, *Open wide!*, will not do the trick.

"Well? What's this about?" Malfoy snaps, and folds his arms. "I don't have all day."

There's a fire in Malfoy's eyes that burns and burns. Harry swallows hard, almost scared of him. No, scratch that. He *is* scared of him. What the hell was in that letter to make him so angry? "What the hell was in that letter you got?" he asks, because he can't think of a better, or more pertinent, question.

"I am not in the mood for this," Malfoy says, eyes flashing. "If that's all you're up to – an amateur interrogation – I'm going to go now."

"No, wait," Harry says, fumbling for the vial. "I have this."

Malfoy looks at him like he's a grade-A dunce. "So?"

"You heard what Slughorn said! On rare occasions, a liquid antidote can counter a spell." Harry can see Malfoy's expression twist, and he adds, "It's worth a try, isn't it? What harm can it do?"

Malfoy clenches his fists, and his face does something peculiar. "I don't *want* to," he says, which Harry thinks is a bit strange. *More* than a bit strange.

"It's not going to poison you. *I'm* not going to poison you," Harry says, now a bit hacked off, all of his suspicions rising to the surface once more. "I can't see why you won't just try it! Hermione did most of the brewing," he adds, at Malfoy's pursed expression. "So you can't use my shit performance in Snape's classes as an excuse."

"Can you just drop it?" Malfoy says, his face tense with anger. "I'm not going to drink your fucking potion, and that's an end to it."

"Why the hell not!" Harry says, almost shouting. He hopes the room is adequately soundproofed. "You don't *want* to spend the rest of your life with a name label round your neck, do you?"

“Of course not!” Malfoy says, actually shouting. “You can’t even BEGIN to imagine how shit this is.”

“Then why won’t you try the potion?” Harry roars.

“Because I’ve already fucking tried it!” Malfoy yells.

Harry decides he’d better sit down on the sofa. It’s not that he thinks he’s in danger of imminent collapse, but . . . best to be on the safe side. “Um, what?” he says. “Did you sneak some in the lesson, or something?”

Malfoy, back against the door, slides down it and sits on the floor, the picture of misery. He tilts his head back, to lean against the wooden panel, and closes his eyes. “No,” he says.

“Come on, then,” Harry prompts, when Malfoy doesn’t say anything else, just sits there, all limp. “When did you try it?”

A muscle jumps in Malfoy’s cheek. “Last week,” he admits. He tilts his head forward briefly, to rub at his eyes, and then leans back again, head turned away from Harry. “I pilfered some from Slughorn’s stores. His wards are so weak, a child could break them.”

“Oh,” Harry says. “But—”

“And at the weekend, I tried some from the Malfoy store cupboard,” Malfoy continues, his voice flat. “Along with at least a dozen other antidotes, and cures, and lotions and potions.”

“Oh,” Harry says.

“That’s after a week of intensive research about this fucking spell – you didn’t think I was actually just bunking off class to sulk, did you? Mother Owled me a selection of the more interesting books from the Malfoy library. When those did no good, I went home and read the rest. And before you ask, Potter,” Malfoy says tetchily, turning his head to glare at Harry. “The books in our library are *entirely legal*, and have been checked over by several Aurors, so don’t even think about trying to dob me in for it.”

“I wasn’t going to!” Harry protests, stung.

“And I can borrow what I like from the Hogwarts library too, *thank* you. Although the Restricted Section is about as much use as a chocolate teapot,” Malfoy adds scathingly. “From the sounds of it, Dumbledore stripped it of anything useful over the years. That’s why I left it till last; it only took about ten seconds to see it was full of trash.”

Harry met Malfoy in the library *before* he decided their dormitory had done him wrong and needed beating up, though; if it’s the lack of reading material that’s upset him so much, he’s got a pretty long fuse. “So . . . why were you so upset last night, then?” he asks. It might be an unwise question, but sometimes the unwise questions are the only ones worth asking. And it seems he’s been getting Malfoy all wrong, these past few days. Where he saw plotting, and shittiness, instead there was just . . . research. Solo, frantic research, and solo, frantic panicking.

Malfoy scowls into the middle distance, and for a moment Harry's not sure if he's going to speak or not. "I managed to persuade a former . . . acquaintance of my father's to meet with me, after our delightful Edinburgh trip," he says distantly. "He promised to help me, and I believed him. I paid him a significant sum in advance of results."

Harry can see the end of this story coming a mile off.

"That owl I received last night was from him," Malfoy says, drawing his knees towards his chest and hunching over. His voice is full of bitterness. "I can't believe I was such an idiot. He said he had made initial inquiries, but he regretted very much that he was unable to help. A refund was not forthcoming."

"You should report him to the Aurors for fraud," Harry suggests, like a wally.

"What a good idea," Malfoy says. "I shall report him immediately, and I definitely won't end up in trouble with the Aurors for attempting to purchase some illegal dark magic, now, will I?"

"I could speak on your behalf," Harry says dubiously, more because he feels like a total idiot and wants to prove he's only . . . well, *half* an idiot.

It's probably the top half, where his brain is.

"Great!" Malfoy says brightly. "I'm sure the fact you've publicly been researching and brewing love potion antidotes, combined with the fact I have your name round my neck like a collar, won't count against me at all when I'm hauled up in front of the Wizengamot again."

Harry considers this. "If I sit next to you, will you bite me?" he asks.

Malfoy blinks, and bares his teeth in a shadow of a smile. "I wouldn't bite you even if you were made of cr me caramel, Potter," he says.

"Bet you would," Harry says, and rises from the sofa, tucking the vial of antidote back in his pocket, before sliding down to sit next to Malfoy on the floor. It's not as uncomfortable as he might have expected; Slughorn's carpet is about three-foot thick.

"Look – I don't get why you did all this by yourself and didn't tell me," Harry says, and means it. Without Ron and Hermione's help, he hasn't made any progress on fixing the spell at all, he realises. It barely occurred to him to try to fix it by himself; apart from some lackluster research, he's just been treading water, waiting for Malfoy to agree to work with him. Is that a weakness, or is it just sensible? He's not sure. All he's sure of is: "It's less crap when you do things with friends, trust me."

There's silence for a bit; all Harry can hear is the sound of Malfoy's rapid breathing.

"I . . ." Malfoy starts, then makes a noise of frustration. "If it had happened to *you* – if our situations were reversed – I would be enjoying it," he says, not looking at Harry. "I'd have thought it was *funny*. I suppose I'm finding it hard to believe that you're not secretly laughing at me," he adds fiercely.

“Funny?” Harry repeats, unable to believe what he's hearing. “If you think anything about this is funny, you have a really shit sense of humour.”

“Oh, screw you,” Malfoy mutters.

“What was that?”

“I said, SCREW YOU,” Malfoy repeats, and turns his head to glare at Harry. He looks strained, and unhappy, and a part of Harry wants to give him a sleeping draught and put him to bed.

The other part wants to strangle him.

“Look, Malfoy, I know you think that my main motive in everything I do is to ruin your life, but not everything's about you,” Harry says hotly. “You might think this soulmark business is all my fault, and if you want to believe that, then go right ahead, it's no skin off my nose if you want to be a moron, but don't you *dare* suggest that I might be *enjoying* this. People keep telling me that I should pity you, for being the ‘last Malfoy’, but you know what? In case it's escaped your attention, *I'm* the last fucking Potter, and I don't see anyone shouting out about that, do you? Just because I'm not a pure-blood, it doesn't mean that my family's not important too.”

Harry slouches down further into the ground, hoping the carpet might swallow him up. He hadn't meant to go on such an extended rant, but once he started, the words just seemed to flow out of him, as if he'd already written a speech in his head, ready for this moment.

Malfoy clears his throat. “Hair potions,” he says, bafflingly.

“What?”

“Sleekeazy's hair potions,” Malfoy says arsily. “Your family history. Did you not know that's what the Potter fortune was built on? I read a fascinating article in *Witch Weekly* – my mother subscribes, you know, Potter, mostly because I think she hates herself – all about how Sleekeazy's was a vital ingredient in Weasley and Granger's romance. Did you know that if her hair hadn't been perfect at the Triwizard Tournament ball, then love might not have blossomed?”

“All right, there's no need to be facetious,” Harry mutters.

Malfoy snorts. “I'm sorry,” he says, with bad grace. “Not for the history lesson. For the other stuff.”

“Right,” Harry says, and they sit there for a bit longer, staring at the carpet. It's all right, as carpets go, Harry thinks. Very . . . fibrous. “I meant it. About it being less shit to work together, I mean. I don't know what I would have done without Ron and Hermione.”

“No,” Malfoy says, with an odd tone to his voice. “Which is why you put them in harm's way, over and over, when it was *you* who was at the heart of the prophecy, not them. Very protective of you.”

Harry winces. "I couldn't have stopped them!"

"Did you even try?"

No, he supposes he didn't. The thought of facing that last year alone chills him to his core, though. Those weeks without Ron were bad enough. "I *do* know what I would have done without Ron and Hermione," he says. "I would have failed. I knew it, and they knew it. Stopping them from helping would have been really stupid, Malfoy. And *you'd* be really stupid if you insist on still shutting me out. You're doing so well on your own," he adds, because it's Malfoy and he can't help himself.

Malfoy is silent and still; Harry hopes he's not wracking his brains for the best spell to hex him with. But then he groans, and bangs his head back against the wall with a thud. "When you put it like that . . ." he starts. "I want to impale your head on a spike, more than ever," he continues, because he's Malfoy, and being a wanker is basically in his job description. Draco Malfoy: Bane of Harry's Life, All Scenarios Considered. "Will you work with me on this?" he says, and turns to Harry, clasping his hands and widening his eyes in appeal.

Harry tries not to give in to irritation. "Malfoy," he says, and can hear the edge to his voice.

Malfoy wrinkles his nose. "Yes, all *right*, Potter. Fuck's sake," he says, dropping his hands and slouching back against the wall.

Harry digs the vial of antidote out of his robe pocket, glad he hasn't sat on it. Malfoy looks at it with distaste, though. "I don't see the point," he says, his body tensing.

"And I don't see the point in *not* trying it, since, you know, we've brewed it. Maybe it needs to be me who gives it to you, for it to work," Harry hazards wildly. He doesn't know why it's important for Malfoy to give in and try the antidote. He has no expectation that it will work, either, if he's honest. It just seems important – proof that Malfoy can stop being contrary for half a second and actually cooperate. If Malfoy will never trust him, then what's the point in trying? He might as well just quit while he's ahead, and carry on investigating the spell on his own. Who knows, he might manage to find a cure before he dies of old age.

"What a steaming pile of Erumpent shit," Malfoy says, but leans over and unceremoniously grabs the vial from Harry's hand. He examines it suspiciously for a moment, before uncorking it and giving it a ginger sniff. "Doesn't smell *too* bad," he says, and raises it to his mouth. The thick liquid flows slowly, and he only takes a small sip before pausing.

"Well?" Harry says.

"I still seem to be alive," Malfoy says. "Good job, Potter." He takes another, longer mouthful, and then replaces the bung. "What a waste of time," he adds, passing the vial back to Harry and then folding his arms tightly across his body.

"How do you know?" Harry says, a bit crossly, and doesn't put the vial back in his pocket. "You haven't bloody checked!"

Malfoy shrugs. "I just know. Trust me."

“Why should I?” Harry says.

Malfoy’s back to glaring at him again.

“Seriously, though. Why should I? How do I even know you *have* a soulmark with my name on?” Harry demands. He’s sure Malfoy does, but the whole thing is beyond infuriating. “I haven’t seen it. Maybe the reason you won’t check to see if the antidote worked is because you don’t need it at all!”

Malfoy looks a bit like he’s going to explode. He twists, rising to his knees, and Harry wonders for a moment if he’s going to storm out. But no – he’s looming over Harry, and slinging his robe off his shoulders, unbuttoning his shirt in an extremely threatening manner. Harry hadn’t known until now that someone *could* unbutton their shirt in a threatening manner; today is proving to be an education in more ways than one.

Malfoy stops after four or five buttons, and yanks the fabric wide, exposing an expanse of pale, creamy skin, defined collar bones, and . . .

It’s beautiful. Somehow, despite seeing Ron and Hermione’s delicate, intricate marks, he hadn’t expected Malfoy’s to be beautiful. It spans the whole width of his chest, swirling along his collar bones in tones of silver-grey. As Harry looks, tiny forest animals gambol along Malfoy’s skin, and the silver tones fade in and out, twinkling like stars. Harry’s name written in gorgeous, copperplate script, marks out the forest path, and it curls and twines as miniature butterflies dance above it.

Malfoy pulls the edges of his shirt tightly back together in a jagged move, and Harry feels strangely bereft. When he looks up, Malfoy’s skin is flushing red – his face, his neck, and presumably, beneath the shirt, his chest. “Satisfied?” Malfoy says, in a strange, choked voice, and sits back on his heels. Harry can still see flashes of the tattoo, moving against Malfoy’s skin, as the half-unbuttoned shirt pulls open a fraction with the movement.

Harry can’t stop staring. He wets his lips. Nods.

“Good,” Malfoy says. Is there a wobble in his voice? Harry can’t tell. It might just be the world wobbling, while Malfoy stays still.

Harry looks down at the vial in his hand; it’s still half full. “I suppose drinking the rest of this won’t help,” he says, trying to pull himself together.

“Are you serious?” Malfoy says in disbelief. “How much of the stuff do I need to drink to prove that it doesn’t do anything? A glassful? A litre? A bathtub-full? Shit, I could *swim* in the stuff until my skin turned wrinkly and it still wouldn’t do anything.”

Harry thinks about this. “We don’t *know* that,” he says, mostly to be contrary.

Malfoy fiddles with the neck of his shirt, and goes even redder. “I am not bathing in a bathtub of your foul potion just to prove a point, Potter,” he warns.

Harry tips the vial upside down, and the potion slowly slides down the glass sides; it has the consistency of milkshake. "Could just rub some of it on," he suggests, tipping the vial back upright and not looking at Malfoy. "See if it fades, or something."

"It won't work!" Malfoy snaps.

"But how do you know for sure unless you try?" Harry snaps back.

They glare at each other. Again. It's starting to get a bit old, Harry thinks.

Malfoy breaks first. "Fucking— Oh, give the arsing stuff here then," he says, and snatches the vial back from Harry, tugging at the bung and only managing to send the whole tube flying across the room.

"*Levitare!*" Harry yells, and manages to halt the vial mid-air before it hits the floor.

"There's plenty more left," Malfoy mutters as he stares at the gently-spinning vial. "Don't panic, moron." He holds out his hand, palm upright, as if he expects Harry to just give the sodding thing right back.

"*I'll* do it," Harry says firmly, and sends the vial through the air to land neatly in his own hand. He's already got the top off before he's realised Malfoy hasn't replied, and when he turns Malfoy is just . . . looking at him.

Is it horror in Malfoy's expression? Harry's not sure. It's probably horror. But in taking the bung out of the vial, Harry seems to have committed to his course of action, so he rises to his knees and shuffles closer.

Malfoy doesn't pull his shirt open, which is unhelpful for Harry's morale, but he doesn't hold it closed either, which is also unhelpful for Harry's morale. He just . . . spreads his arms wide either side of him, placing his palms flat against the carpet, as if he's bracing himself against an oncoming storm. The movement pulls and holds the shirt open at the neck. Harry can't see all of the mark by far, but he can see . . . enough of it. He swallows hard. The mark is darkening in colour even as Harry watches, slate grey and spikey, foliage twisting to form a jagged slash under Malfoy's throat. Almost as if the thing is reacting to Malfoy's mood . . .

The bloody thing's reacting to Malfoy's mood, isn't it?

At least, Harry *hopes* it's reacting to Malfoy's mood, rather than something infinitely creeper, like his proximity to Harry himself, or how well he's doing at attracting the attention of his soulmate. Harry tears his gaze away from the mark, face burning, and tips the vial over his right hand, liquid oozing onto his waiting fingers. The potion feels curiously warm, and soft, against his skin, and Harry swallows hard again, dithering, and suddenly of the opinion he'd rather do pretty much anything else right this minute than rub it on Malfoy's skin. Face a Horntail without a wand, for example. Or—

"Bwak bwaaaaaakkk, bwak bwak bwak bwak!" Malfoy says, rather to Harry's surprise. He nearly falls off his own knees, but manages not to either faceplant into the carpet or apply antidote to his robes.

"Um, what?" Harry says, and manages to look Malfoy in the face, although he can see the soulmark shift and dance out of the corner of his eye, demanding his attention.

Malfoy relaxes his stiff stance, to raise his arms in an imitation of wings, flapping them up and down. "I *said* bwak bwaaaaaakkk, bwak bwak bwak bwak," he repeats, and then leans back against the wall, eyeing Harry with a mixture of wariness and bravado. "I'm implying that you're chicken, Potter," he says, when Harry doesn't move. "A coward," he says, warming to his theme. "Lacking in balls. Entirely—"

It's funny how motivating a stream of abuse can be.

"Yes, all *right*," Harry says, and shuffles in closer, until his knees come up against Malfoy's own, and he has no choice but to lean over him. Malfoy's taller, but not when he's sitting on his arse, slouching against a wall. His shirt's fallen closed again, so Harry drops the vial on to the floor and uses his clean hand to tug one side of the shirt to the side, and slicks his potion-damp fingers against what he's trying to think of as a patch of magical tattoo rather than Malfoy's bare chest.

The patch of magical tattoo is warm, and soft, and completely still beneath his touch. Malfoy is, Harry realises, holding his breath.

When Harry reaches back down to pick up the vial again, Malfoy's shirt falls half-closed once more, and out of the corner of his eye he can see Malfoy's chest rapidly rising and falling. "Are we done here?" Malfoy says, in a strange, unkind voice.

Harry shoots another glance at Malfoy; the flashes of tattoo he can see are . . . changing, the angry, thorny foliage twisting into . . . flowerbuds? "Does it usually do that?" he asks dubiously.

Malfoy looks down, pulling at his shirt. He is silent for a moment. "I don't think so," he says eventually. "It's not like I sit in front of a mirror watching the bloody thing, though!" he says. "It might get up to all sorts when I'm not looking."

Harry indicates the vial awkwardly. "Shall I . . .?"

Malfoy shrugs. He's going red again, his ears a burning pink.

Harry unbungs the vial and pours out a bit more liquid, before looking back over to Malfoy. His heart is pounding; he can feel his blood pumping through his body. "It would be easier if you . . . you know," he says, meaning that Malfoy should hold his own fucking shirt open.

Malfoy's jaw goes tight, and he reaches for the next closed button on his shirt, managing to entirely open it in only a few seconds by yanking rather than carefully unbuttoning. He doesn't pull the shirt off his shoulders, but he tugs it wide, exposing acres of skin. He's breathing shallowly, chest rising and falling at a rapid rate. "Get the fuck on with it," he says though gritted teeth, which is not exactly encouraging.

His torso is marked with the slashes of deep scars, faded to almost – but not quite – nothing. Harry feels himself flush miserably, hoping Malfoy won't notice. He suspects he's in for

another Sectumsempra dream tonight, given how his subconscious likes to torture him.

Malfoy notices. “Enjoying your handiwork?” he asks, sounding a bit more like himself – a massive git.

“You were going to Crucio me!” Harry says, because it’s true, and manages to pour out some more of the potion on to his fingers rather than all over his leg. He’s shaking with emotion, though he’d be hard pressed to identify which one it is.

“Crucios don’t last,” Malfoy says dismissively, and then makes a small, breathy noise as Harry leans back in and wipes his slick fingers against his skin, rubbing it in in small concentric circles. “Just the memory of the pain. You, on the other hand, nearly *killed* me.”

“I didn’t mean to, though,” Harry says, trying to work methodically – pour potion, slick it against Malfoy’s warm – hot – skin, massage it in. The mark is large, and seems to be moving under his fingers, as if his touch is making it . . .

Worse. Is it his imagination, or is it actually getting *worse*? It depends on your definition of worse, perhaps – it’s growing steadily more beautiful, with flowers blooming under his fingertips, but if the aim of the exercise is to *remove* the thing . . .

“Oh, it’s fine then, if you didn’t *mean* to nearly kill me,” Malfoy says, sounding a bit choked. “Non-apology accepted.”

“I said sorry! More than once! But you wouldn’t listen.”

“Maybe I didn’t believe you were sincere,” Malfoy says indistinctly. Harry’s been working his way along a particularly long and trailing vine, and when his finger accidentally slides over one of Malfoy’s nipples, Malfoy makes a tiny noise and swallows hard.

Harry is immediately struck by the thought that he’d like Malfoy to make that noise again, which fills him with dread and terror, and he immediately drops his hand. “Er. I don’t think this is doing any good,” he says, lowering his gaze from the mark to – unhelpfully – Malfoy’s toned bare stomach, which he notices – also unhelpfully – is clenched solid.

There is a dangerous silence. Then: “Oh, for the love of Salazar, Potter, what have you done to me?” Malfoy says. Harry supposes he’s looked down at the mark, and irritation is clearly overriding any other immediate awkwardness. “I’m *flowering*, you enormous, hideous tosspot! How the flying fuck is this better than before?”

“Um, sorry?” Harry says, and realises he’s still clutching the open vial. There’s a bit left in the bottom. “I could—”

“If you try to put the rest of that on me, I *will* actually bite you,” Malfoy says firmly, evidently regaining more of his equilibrium by the second. It’s a shame he’s pinching all of Harry’s in the process. “Flowering—!”

“Right,” Harry says, and shoves the bung in with hands that are ninety-nine and a half percent not shaking. By the time he regains the courage to look back at Malfoy, he’s almost

completely done his shirt back up again. The top buttons seem to give him some trouble, once he notices Harry watching, but he manages them eventually, and the soulmark is once again hidden.

Malfoy raises his chin and looks down his nose at Harry. “Great job,” he says, to rub it in a bit more. He’s still very red in the face. “So competent and effective. I’ll remember to turn to you in any crisis in future, just so you can make it even worse.”

“I didn’t promise it would help!” Harry protests. And then adds: “It was Hermione’s idea, anyway,” immediately feeling guilty for shifting the blame. “Though she wouldn’t have suggested it, I bet, if she’d known you’d already tried half a storecupboard full of Merlin knows what!” There was probably a good reason not to do it, after all – antidotes reacting with antidotes or something. Harry bets she would have known immediately, if she’d been told the whole history of the situation. He’s not Hermione though – that sort of information just won’t stick in his brain, no matter how hard he tries.

An obvious thought dawns on him, though, with all the brilliance of the rising sun against the winter sky. *Hermione’s* Hermione; why does he need to try, when he has her as a best friend? “We should ask Hermione what to do next,” he says, knowing in his bones that this is the right thing to do.

“Over my dead body will we ask Granger what to do next!” Malfoy snaps, and folds his arms – before unfolding them straight away. “Ugh, this potion is *sticky*,” he complains, pulling the fabric of his shirt away from his skin.

“What shall we do next then?” Harry asks, entirely reasonably in his opinion.

“I’m going to have a long, hot shower,” Malfoy says, and a hot, angry flush travels up his neck. “Merlin knows what will happen if I try to magic the stuff off my skin – I might start sweating perfume, or kittens might start pouring out of my nose, or something.”

Harry takes a moment to image kittens pouring out of Malfoy’s nose. “I *meant* – what are we going to do next about the soulmark thing?” he repeats.

“I *know* that’s what you meant,” Malfoy snaps. “I was trying to distract you from your insane suggestion that the answer to our problem lies with Hermione fucking Granger.”

“It’s the obvious solution, though,” Harry says. “Do you have any better ideas?”

“Anything’s got to be better than Hermione Granger!” Malfoy spits.

“Why? Because she’s Muggleborn?” Harry says, trying not to lose his temper.

“No, you wanker. Because she’s an insufferable, unbearable know-it all!”

Harry considers this. “Which makes her basically perfect for the job, doesn’t it?” he points out.

“No. No. *No!*” Malfoy says desperately. If he was on his feet, he’d be stamping them.

Harry considers it a bit more. And then decides – sod Malfoy’s opinion. There’s only one possible answer here: “*Yes.*”

Panacea, aka universal cure-all, aka Hermione Jean Granger

If something's worth doing . . . it's worth doing incredibly late in the evening, because a) it takes Harry quite a long time to work up the nerve and b) it's still ridiculously difficult to shake off his ever-present crowd of fans. He's fine, pretty much, whenever he enters the Slytherin dormitory – if any of the Slytherins have a tendency towards hero-worship, they keep it well suppressed – but there's a strong contingent of sixth years who like to line the corridor outside, just in case he tries to sneak out later.

By the time he makes his way to the Astronomy Tower, he's already late. He runs pretty much the whole way, hoping that he was right and there aren't actually any classes tonight, and sprints into the room, panting.

Malfoy materialises out of a dark corner, peeling himself off a stone wall, his arms crossed. "I know you're there, Potter. I can hear you breathing," he says scathingly. "Out of shape, are we?"

Ron and Hermione, who are on the other side of the room, heads close together and muttering to each other – Harry thinks he can hear the words *wanker* and *sod him* – turn as one, at Malfoy's words. "You there, mate?" Ron says.

Harry shrugs off the invisibility cloak and drops it on the floor in a scrunched ball.

"You do know how rare those things are, don't you?" Malfoy says, raising his eyebrows. "I shouldn't have given it back, if that's how you treat a priceless magical artefact."

Harry wants to protest at that, but he's still out of breath, so he just shoves his hands in his robe pockets and scowls.

"What's this about, Harry?" Hermione says, and shivers a bit. It's cold up in the tower, and although Harry can feel a heating charm wafting through the air, the wind whistles through the enormous empty window frames. The view of the night sky is spectacular.

"Take a wild guess," Malfoy mutters.

Hermione ignores him. "I take it the antidote didn't work?"

Harry explains exactly how the antidote didn't work, and tries not to go red again as he does so. The chill air is helpful. As is not looking at Malfoy, whose robe is flapping ominously in the breeze. When he's finished, he adds in a bit more detail about Malfoy's own attempts to break the spell, mostly to fill the silence.

Hermione takes it in. "You're a pair of complete idiots," she says eventually, and Harry is surprised by how cross she sounds. "I didn't expect it of *you* though, Harry," she says witheringly – and ignores Malfoy's enraged splutter. "Ron and I are your best friends! Did you really think we wouldn't help you investigate and break the spell, if you just asked us?"

Harry looks at his feet. His robe is a bit too short, and his shoes need a polish. He should have bought some new things from Madam Malkin's, he supposes, rather than spelling his old things longer. "You seem to kind of like the spell though," he mumbles to his feet. "I didn't want to spoil it for you."

This doesn't seem to placate Hermione. The temperature in the room drops about a million degrees, although the heating charm continues its valiant attempt to take off the chill. "Ron and I don't need some ridiculous spell to tell us that we're meant for each other," she says freezingly, and Ron clears his throat by her side.

"It did help me get up the nerve to ask you to marry m—" Ron says, and stops dead when Hermione turns to glare at him.

"You would have asked me eventually," she says with a sniff. "Or I would have asked you."

"Sorry to interrupt this charming scene," Malfoy says snidely, "but are we done here, then?"

It's a fatal mistake, in Harry's opinion. Hermione whips around to face him. "We certainly are not!" she says. "If we're going to find out the exact spell that was used on us, and counter it, I'm going to need a lot more information about what you've already tried. It sounds like you've made a good start already, today, in making your situation a whole lot worse!"

"In fairness, it was you who suggested we try the antidote—" Harry says, at Malfoy's look of burning outrage, and breaks off when it's turned on him instead, along with Hermione's best judgemental expression.

"*You've* hardly helped things, swanning about the castle clutching books about sex magic to your chest," Hermione says scathingly. She does scathing almost as well as Malfoy does. She Summons a large cushion from elsewhere in the castle and sits down on it, her spine very upright, before sending several more cushions spinning to form a circle in the middle of the tower. "Go on, sit!" she says.

Harry, wounded by the inaccurate accusation that he had swanned around with sex books – he'd *skulked* with sex books, and he hadn't known they were sex books at the time! – sits down with bad grace, and Ron follows his example, shooting suspicious looks at Malfoy as he does so.

For a while, Malfoy just stares at them. "The point of this is . . .?" he says.

"The point," Hermione says, "is that you are going to sit down and tell me in extremely boring detail exactly what magic you've already tried. Then, we will come up with a plan to fix the spell. And finally, we will go to bed, because it's *one in the morning*, and I want to be fresh for Transfigurations tomorrow."

"*We* will come up with a plan?" Malfoy repeats politely. "As in – you, Potter and . . . Weasley?"

"Yes," Hermione says tetchily. "Right, Harry? Ron?"

Harry nods, and Ron looks a bit shifty.

“Ron?” Hermione repeats, with an edge to her voice.

“Yes, all right,” Ron says, and he looks Malfoy full in the face. “Can’t say I like you, and can’t say I’m not overwhelmed by the desire to hex your nose off your face and reattach it to your arse, so you have to smell your own shit for the rest of your life, but all right. I’ll help. For Harry’s sake, not yours,” he adds, a bit pointlessly.

Malfoy’s upper lip curls. “How very—” he starts.

“Fine,” Hermione interrupts, very loudly and firmly. “Now that we’ve established that we’re all happy to work together, let’s get started.”

Harry exchanges a look with Ron, and tries to forget the way Malfoy’s soulmark blossomed under his fingertips just hours earlier. He suspects, though, that only a memory charm will do the job.

An hour later, Malfoy and Hermione are still talking. At first, it was more of an interrogation; Malfoy was monosyllabic and sarcastic, evidently unwilling to talk about the various methods he’d taken to try to remove the spell. But as Hermione probed, he began to open up more, and the conversation quickly grew . . . boring. Harry knows he should be interested, but the finer details of potions brewing and dosage, and the subtle variations that the temperature and location a potion is stored in make to its efficacy just don’t fascinate him in the same way they clearly do Hermione. And Malfoy too, he supposes, watching Malfoy’s face animate as he talks. He was always good at Potions, Harry supposes, though he’d always thought it was Snape’s favouritism that had got Malfoy such good grades, rather than any innate talent.

Ron’s twitching, and he’s clearly just as bored, but Harry thinks it would be frowned upon if they nip down to the kitchen for a snack, or bring out a pack of Exploding Snap cards. He’s too old for Snap, he supposes, but there’s something comforting about the childish game. It reminds him of being young, and of having friends for the first time, and the giddy joy of it.

The conversation seems to be going down the dark and tedious pathways of complex, theoretical Potions lore though, and Harry thinks that gone two in the morning isn’t the time for it. “Tell Hermione what your mother said,” he interrupts, stifling a yawn.

Malfoy shoots him his Death Glare, but Harry’s already getting used to it, and thinks he’s almost immune now. It only chills his blood a small amount, rather than freezing him solid.

“Your mother?” Hermione says, and wrinkles her nose.

Malfoy’s eyes narrow. “If anyone here dares to speak badly of my mother,” he says, very low, “I’ll . . .”

“Cry?” Ron says unkindly.

Harry leaps up and, by nearly squashing Malfoy with his full body weight, manages to stop him jumping up and maiming Ron.

“Get *off*!” Malfoy demands – muffled – somewhere from beneath him.

Harry scrambles off him, and Malfoy rights himself, pulling his robes straight and running his palms flat over his hair to neaten it.

“What was it your mother said, exactly?” Hermione says determinedly, as if nothing just happened.

Malfoy’s expression turns sulky, but he explains about his mother thinking the soulmark a good thing, and wanting to leak it to the press so that . . .

“So that what?” Hermione prompts, when Malfoy doesn’t finish his sentence.

“It doesn’t matter,” Malfoy says fiercely. “She just wants to leak it to the press. Her reasoning isn’t the issue here.” He shoots Harry a look that’s . . . pleading? Threatening? Either way, Harry’s perfectly happy that the suggestion he marry Malfoy remain unvoiced.

Hermione narrows her eyes, and Harry suspects he’s in for an interrogation later. “Fine,” she says, though, after she’s shot a questioning glance in his direction, and he’s nodded in agreement.

“Tell Hermione about your, er, contact letting you down,” Harry suggests, and Malfoy scowls, but relates again the story of how he was conned out of his money. He doesn’t have to spell out what’s obvious: the Malfoy name no longer has sway amongst the seamier side of wizarding society. Even their money, it seems, can no longer overcome the disadvantages of helping a family so publicly disgraced – and, perhaps more to the point, so closely watched by Aurors.

“Poor you,” Ron says, with no sympathy at all. “What a shame.”

Malfoy manages to keep his temper in check this time, but Harry can see him clench his fists.

“So, to summarise,” Hermione says. “The school library and the larger, Malfoy collection haven’t contained anything relevant at all about soulmarks. You’ve tried the vast majority of generic antidotes, Draco, and nothing has helped; the latest trial has potentially made things *worse*. And your –” she sniffs, judgementally – “shady contacts aren’t an option any more.” She shoots Malfoy a thoughtful look. “Just out of interest, what did you ask your contact for help with? Removing an unwanted tattoo?”

Harry thinks this is a bit of an insulting suggestion, even for Hermione. “Malfoy’s not *that* stupid,” he says, at the same time as Malfoy says: “Yes.”

“Um, what?” Harry asks.

Malfoy stares at the floor as if it’s his personal enemy. “I have the Dark Mark, Potter,” he tells the floor sourly. “Or had you forgotten?”

“It was a good idea, Draco,” Hermione says. “No one would be surprised if you wanted to get rid of it, and . . .” She trails off, and adds, an odd tone in her voice, “I suppose one magical tattoo is much like another.”

Harry doesn’t think there’s many similarities between a Dark Mark and a *soul*mark – one evil, the other . . .

It’s pretty evil to have the name of someone you hate scrawled large across your skin, Harry supposes uncomfortably. He still can’t decide if Malfoy’s got it worse, or if he has. The thought that he has to go through life alone – or, worse, date people, knowing each relationship is doomed – is basically . . . torture.

“I seem to be collecting a fine set of tattoos,” Malfoy says, and snorts, looking around him and seeming to see the past, rather than the present. “All I need is a good one of Dumbledore, perhaps shaking his head at me in sorrow rather than anger, somewhere nice and visible – perhaps the back of my hand – and I can die happy.”

“Imagine,” Ron says, in tones of horror, “having Dumbledore judging you from the back of your hand! It would make wanking a bit of a—” He snaps out of whatever strange place he was transported to and turns vermillion.

Hermione sniffs, going a bit pink in the face herself. “Whatever you just said, Ron, I definitely didn’t hear it,” she says.

“Me neither,” Malfoy says, wrinkling his nose. “I didn’t think today could get much worse, but now I have the mental image of Weasley at it, while Dumbledore watches.”

“Oh my god!” Hermione says, rather high pitched. “Shut up!”

Ron snickers, and makes a quiet retching sound. “Better him than . . . Filch,” he mutters to Harry.

“Better Filch than McGonagall,” Malfoy says, a faraway look of horror in his eye.

“You are so right,” Ron says with equally heartfelt horror, and then realises he’s agreed with Malfoy on something, and pulls a face.

“Lovely though it is that the three of you are finding common ground,” Hermione says in her most determined voice, “if you don’t shut up, I’m going to have nightmares for weeks. Starting tonight! So can we wrap things up?”

Malfoy leans closer to Harry. “Granger seems eager to get back to bed for some reason,” he murmurs, eyes alight with cattiness. “Let’s not keep her from her fantasies.”

Hermione’s eyes widen – possibly with rage – but she ignores Malfoy’s jibe with impressive self-control. “Right. So, the first essential thing here is that we need to make sure no one else finds out about the marks, to give us the space and time to investigate further. Agreed?”

Unenthusiastic nods all round. “Surely we can take that as read?” Malfoy adds, raising one fine, judgemental eyebrow. “Is this the level of insight and intuition I can expect from

meetings with Team Potter?”

Hermione raises an eyebrow at him right back. “So you’ve already spoken to your mother again to make her swear not to go to the press, have you?”

Malfoy presses his lips together and doesn’t answer.

“I thought not,” Hermione says, straightening the folds of her robe. “And are you absolutely sure your friends aren’t going to tell anyone else either?”

Colour blooms, high in Malfoy’s cheeks. “They wouldn’t dare!” he says, which is a bit of a non-answer, Harry thinks.

“No? Have they promised?” Hermione probes. And, at Malfoy’s outraged look, adds, “I’m not saying they’d do it because they’re . . . I don’t know, basically untrustworthy, or anything. But they might think similarly to your mother, Draco. All of them came out of the war tainted by it. If Harry first becomes a Slytherin, and then . . . what?” Her eyes narrow. “Becomes ‘best friends’ with the Death Eater who’s fated to love him?” she says delicately. “It can only benefit their own reputations, right along with your own.”

“The Death Eater who’s fated to love him!” Ron repeats, in a low, disgusted – gleeful – voice, and starts to laugh.

Harry, still plagued by endlessly repeating images in his mind of Malfoy’s soulmark flowering under his fingers, and the tiny sounds Malfoy made as Harry touched his skin, can think of funnier things. He rather suspects Ron is about to change status from alive to deceased, in any case – and maybe Hermione will suffer the same fate, too. To his surprise, though, Malfoy manages to keep his temper in check, and the first words out of his mouth aren’t coated in poison.

“I’ll make my mother swear it,” he says tightly, and gets to his feet. “As for the others – you’re wrong, but I take your point.” He strides over to the door of the Tower.

“Hang on a moment,” Hermione calls crossly after him. “We’re nearly done.”

Malfoy doesn’t leave, though – he just opens the door, and calls out, “Come on, then, you fuckers. I know you’re lurking out there, trying to eavesdrop.”

Zabini’s first through the door, and he doesn’t even have the decency to look sheepish. He’s closely followed by the cat, and then the whole motley crew slope in, Greg bringing up the rear and closing the door with a bang that makes Harry wince and hope Filch isn’t in the vicinity.

“Were you *listening*?” Hermione demands, outraged.

Millicent shrugs. “Tried to, but you cast some sort of spell, didn’t you? Probably would have cracked it eventually.”

The cat pads delicately over to sniff Harry’s crotch, and then jump into his lap. Harry swears as the thing starts to knead his leg with its tiny, razor sharp claws.

“Have you stopped flowering yet?” Zabini says, grinning, and makes a move as if to pull open Malfoy’s shirt and check.

Malfoy swerves him, and goes back to sit down in the circle, leaning over to pat the cat. “Fuck off,” he says, without heat. The cat starts to purr under Malfoy’s attention, sending vibrations rumbling through Harry’s body.

Hermione stands up. “We’ve been discussing our . . . situation,” she says delicately.

“You mean Malfoy’s hard-on for Potter,” Millicent clarifies, and the room rings out with sniggers.

Malfoy doesn’t say anything, although his face goes very tight and cross.

“No,” Hermione says tetchily. “I mean the dark spell that hit the four of us, and our plans for removing it. We need to make sure that no one outside this room finds out about the spell, to give us time to investigate it properly. Do we need to swear an Unbreakable, or shall we just promise?”

Pansy gives her a look of pure poison. “Our word not good enough for you or something?”

Hermione raises her chin. “That’s not what I said, and you know it.”

“It’s what you *meant* though,” Pansy snaps back, and her hand is suspiciously close to the wand pocket in her robe. Harry reaches for his own wand, just in case.

“Now, now, children,” Zabini interrupts, and when Pansy turns her wand on him, he raises his hands in mock surrender. “Don’t be daft, Pans. You know full well why Granger doesn’t trust us. Let’s just promise, eh?”

Pansy lowers her wand reluctantly. “I don’t need to promise! The suggestion is insulting.”

“Pansy’s not going to tell anyone,” Harry adds awkwardly. “I believe her.”

Malfoy’s fingers, entwined in the cat’s fur, pause, and he shoots Harry a suspicious glance.

“We, er, had a little chat,” Harry explains, which doesn’t seem to help the situation.

“Pansy! What the fuck did you say to Potter?” Malfoy demands, getting back up to his feet.

Harry gets to his feet too, because he feels a bit of a plonker with everyone towering over him. Ron doesn’t seem to be afflicted by this sensation though; he pulls some of the cushions closer to him, and stretches out, as if he’s going to have a nap.

“I just told Potter a few home truths,” Pansy says, folding her arms. “Didn’t I, Potter?”

“Er, I suppose so, yes,” Harry says. Truths that he’s been trying to block out, and never think of again, with only partial success.

“And in *my* opinion,” Pansy adds, “I think Granger and Weasley are the people in this room who are most likely to tell secrets – they could make a lot of money from selling the sickening story of their fated love. Everyone knows the Weasleys are stony broke.”

Ron shoots to his feet, nearly tangling himself up in his robes as he does so. “What a load of bollocks!”

“It *is* a load of bollocks,” Hermione says, “but . . . I suppose Pansy has a point,” she says, with extreme reluctance. “There are reasons for distrust on either side.”

Malfoy snorts. “No shit.”

“All right – let’s go round everyone and promise not to tell anyone outside this room about the spell.”

Ron turns to her. “Seriously?”

She nods, and he pulls a face. “OK, then. I promise.”

“And so do I,” Hermione says. “I promise.”

They go round the room, and it’s all a bit awkward, but by the time they’ve finished the atmosphere is a tiny bit less unpleasant. It’s still pretty unpleasant, though, to be fair.

“And you’re going to speak to your mother as soon as possible and make her swear not to tell anyone?” Hermione reminds Malfoy, who shrugs and then nods.

“I promise,” he says, imitating her accent.

“Good,” Hermione continues, as if Malfoy hadn’t just been a dick. “Now, before I fall asleep on my feet, we just need to pin down our first plan of action, and I think we should do the obvious. We should have done it right away, really.”

Malfoy half-mouths the words, *Get on with it, you insufferable cowbag*, and Harry tries not to laugh.

“We need to track down that foul reporter, Basil Woodbeard, who cast the spell in the first place,” Hermione continues, only her extremely rigid posture suggesting she heard exactly what Malfoy said, “and extract his memory of the charm he used, so we know exactly what it is we’re dealing with. Only then can we find the correct countercharm. We might be at it for ages, otherwise, and I’m sure you’re all as keen as I am to get this over with.”

“Bit illegal, extracting memories,” Zabini says. “Just saying!” he protests, when Hermione raises her eyebrows at him.

“We’re going to ask his permission first,” she says sniffily.

“How are we going to find him, though?” Pansy asks, tossing her hair. “You said he doesn’t work at *Witch Weekly* any more, and tracking spells are *also* illegal, unless you’re an Auror. You’re not an Auror, are you, Granger?”

“Er,” Zabini says.

“Pansy, I wish you’d call me Hermione,” Hermione snaps, ignoring Zabini entirely. “It makes me feel like I’m in some sort of horrible institution, to have my room-mates continually call me by my surname.”

Pansy blinks, clearly thrown. “All right,” she says, her tone still belligerent. “I have a suggestion then. How about we travel back in time, to when we were in *front* of Woodbead and you and Potter promised to get things sorted, but this time actually, you know, sort things? *Hermione*,” she adds.

This is not exactly helpful.

“Hellooooo?” Zabini says, waving his hands about. “Have you finished yet?”

“Yes!” both Pansy and Hermione snap at once.

“Merlin, keep your hair on,” Zabini says, slipping his hands casually into his pockets. “I was only going to point out that I am extremely hurt that no one seems to have remembered that I have an interview tomorrow with *Witch Weekly* – all about my extreme straightness and availability to witches, remember? So, we could—”

“Use the opportunity to riffle through their records and pinch Woodbead’s address!” Hermione interrupts, with the light of battle in her eyes.

“Again, not entirely legal,” Zabini murmurs.

“Oh, put a sock in it,” Millicent says, rolling her eyes. “Sounds like a good plan to me, Herms.”

Ron emits a snorting noise. “Herms?”

“I’m not asking you to do it, Blaise,” Hermione says, steadfastly ignoring him. “You’ll be busy doing your interview – make it nice and long so I have enough time to find the address. I’ll borrow Harry’s cloak.”

Harry blinks. “You don’t need to borrow my cloak – I’m going to be under it myself. If anyone’s going to do anything illegal, it should be me.”

“Oh God, how sickening the pair of you are,” Malfoy says. “May I come too, or would that offend your sense of justice?”

Hermione frowns, and Pansy, of all people, answers him. “Don’t be a dick, Draco – of course you can’t go. If you get caught putting one foot out of line, you’ll be sent straight to Azkaban.”

“Just for the record, I was about to offer to go instead of Hermione and Harry too,” Ron says, raising his hand as if he’s trying to attract the attention of a teacher. “So if anyone’s sickening, that includes me too!”

“We’ll be sure to remember that,” Millicent says, rolling her eyes. Hermione’s rolling her eyes too, Harry notices.

“So, that’s settled,” Harry says. “Zabini and I will go, and—”

“I’ll go too,” Hermione interrupts. “We might be able to go straight on to speak to Woodhead, and you’ll need someone who’s had practice in complex memory charms.” She raises her chin very high.

Hermione’s parents remember her now, after months of intensive work by Hermione and a memory specialist from St Mungo’s. But . . . it’s not the same. Of course it’s not. There are holes and patches in their memories that can never be recovered, and to try to fix them would only cause them – and Hermione herself – further distress. So Hermione stopped trying.

Sometimes, when Harry looks at Hermione, he can see the pain coming off her in waves.

Sometimes, when he looks at her, he can see that she’s made peace with her situation. And he supposes her relationship with her parents was bound to grow strained as she grew up, either way – the chasm between a normal Muggle life and a witch’s growing wider and harder to cross with every passing day. It’s not really the point, though, is it?

Harry reaches over and squeezes Hermione’s hand. “Thanks,” he says. “That would be great.”

Harry’s not sure if it’s common knowledge about Hermione’s parents – how she protected them, at her own expense. But by the awkward expressions on the faces of the Slytherins around him, he thinks it is, even if no one really talks about it.

Zabini’s face splits in an enormous yawn. “Right, folks, time for beddy-byes,” he says. “I need to look my best for my interview tomorrow afternoon.”

The yawn is contagious, and the group begin to shuffle towards the door and through it. Hermione doesn’t move though; instead, she walks over to Malfoy and whispers something in his ear, her mouth opening and shutting quickly.

Malfoy’s brow creases and he leans in to whisper back – something sharp, by the looks of it – but Hermione’s talking again, and he eventually pulls a face like he’s sucked on a lemon and they walk together towards the far side of the room. Malfoy – still lemon-sucking – allows Hermione to unbutton the first few buttons of his shirt, and she frowns at Malfoy’s skin, her eyes moving rapidly as she scans the tattoo. She nods, and leans in to whisper again in Malfoy’s ear. Malfoy re-buttons his shirt without speaking, and pulls away, striding back across the room and past Harry without a second glance.

By now, Harry, Ron and Hermione are the last left in the room, unless . . . Harry looks around. The invisibility cloak is where he left it, in a crumpled heap on the floor. He picks it up, before he forgets it.

“What were you saying to Malfoy?” Ron asks, and sends the circle of cushions back to where they came from.

Hermione's expression is very thoughtful. "I was just testing a theory," she said.

"What theory?" Harry asks.

Hermione moves towards the door. "Ron's and my soulmarks are fairly stable," she says as they walk. "I was just wondering what Draco's looked like now."

Harry swallows down a sudden flash of blossom, budding on warm, soft skin.

"It was . . . sort of dark grey and jagged," Hermione says. "Harry, I hate to say it, but I'm not sure it was the antidote that had the effect on Draco's mark. It was something else entirely."

Hermione doesn't need to say 'it was YOU, Harry' out loud for her meaning to be entirely clear. They walk down the rest of the stairs in silence, and though Hermione squeezes his arm when they part to go to their dormitories, and Ron slaps him on the back, they head off in different directions without exchanging another word.

The last person Harry is expecting to see, when he and Hermione follow Zabini into *Witch Weekly's* office, just off Diagon Alley, is Basil Woodbead, Esq himself, bowing deeply at the reception desk and ushering Zabini into the 'inner sanctum' of the office. He's dressed just as flamboyantly as last time, if not more so – this time his brocade suit is an almost electric blue, trimmed with hot pink frills, and his shoes are pointed and also pink. A pink hat, with a festival of feathers, perches on top of his head, and his curled moustache is also pink.

Harry starts, glad he's under the invisibility cloak, and clutches Hermione's arm.

"It's him!" she hisses.

Zabini holds his nerve beautifully, beaming at the man as if they've never met before, and Harry can see no glimmer of recognition in Woodbead's face. Which is . . . strange, now he comes to think of it. But perhaps, Harry thinks, Woodbead is just pretending, and soon as he closes the door of the inner sanctum behind him he'll . . .

He'll usher Zabini on to a red velvet sofa at the end of the room – the only area that isn't cluttered with piles and piles of back issues of the magazine – and offer him a cup of tea and a biscuit.

"Thanks," Zabini says, and smiles a lesser version of his hundred-watt smile at Woodbead, who hurries off through a different, smaller door, which he leaves ajar. Through it, they can soon hear the whistle of a tea-kettle.

"Milk? Sugar?" Woodbead calls through the door.

"Please," Zabini calls, and soon Woodbead emerges with the drinks and biscuits on a metal tray. The tray is covered with pictures of soulful-eyed dogs.

Woodbead picks up his teacup, little finger in the air.

“Before you enjoy your drink,” Harry says sternly, shrugging off the cloak and emerging with a pleasing flourish, “perhaps you’d like to tell us a bit more about that love spell you hit me with? Remember?”

Woodbead drops the cup, and only quick work by Hermione – also emerging from under the cloak – saves the carpet.

“Bless my soul!” Woodbead says, eyes wider than the saucers on the tray. “Harry Potter, here in my office! Sit down, sit down, dear boy, and let me talk to you about love, and life, and your plans for the future.” He blinks. “Did you say love spell?” A quill zooms out of nowhere and lands in his hand. “Tell me more! Tell me *all*.”

Hermione strides over, plucks the quill out of Woodbead’s hand and snaps it. “Don’t pretend you don’t remember!”

Woodbead’s forehead creases. “Remember what?” He looks at Harry in appeal. “However I can help, dear boy, I will. Just let me know what I can do!”

“This interview is meant to be about *me*,” Zabini says. “I did my hair and everything.”

“Very nice it looks too,” Woodbead says automatically, not even looking. “Mr Potter?”

It’s a strange tactic to take, Harry thinks, pretending he doesn’t remember anything. But Woodbead’s already proven himself a liar – here he is, in the office of the company he’d sworn blind he’d been sacked from. “We understood you no longer worked for this magazine,” he says, to see what further lies Woodbead will tell.

Woodbead’s expression does something strange – as if there’s a memory there, but he can’t remember it. “No, I don’t think so,” he says, and then frowns. “How peculiar. You’d think I’d know whether I’d been let go or not, ha ha!” he says, attempting jollity, and then frowns again. “Mr Misslethorpe – our proprietor, you know – can be a bit of an odd bird about company secrets, so perhaps he did a bit of the old Obliviate on me.” His brow relaxes. “Still, here I am, ha ha, so it clearly turned out all right in the end! And here you are, Mr Potter, ready to get me a bonus from Mr Misslethorpe – our circulation figures will be boosted no end by an interview from you.” He beams.

“From *Blaise Zabini*, you mean,” Harry reminds him. “About his—”

“Extreme straightness,” Zabini cuts in from the sofa. “And availability to pure-blood witches. If you don’t print the story, my mother will be most upset – and you don’t want to upset my mother, now, do you, Mr Woodbead? I expect she’s the source of eighty per cent of your gossip.”

“Only indirectly,” Woodbead says, “but I take your point. Would you like to speak for a few minutes on your ideal witch? My autoquill will take notes.” Another quill zooms through the air, this time with a piece of parchment, and begins to scribble.

Zabini shoots a grin at Harry and begins to talk in a sickening way about noble spirits and kindness and warm hearts and his longing for a sweet, obedient girl to come home to.

“It’s suspiciously convenient that you don’t remember,” Hermione says to Woodbead.

The blue-clad horror sits down on a wooden chair and swishes his wand; several enormous stacks of manuscript fly through the air, shedding paper as they go, to reveal two further seats. “Sit, sit,” he says. “What is it I don’t remember? A love spell, you said?”

Hermione hesitates, and Harry can understand why – if he genuinely doesn’t remember, it would be pretty stupid to tell him again. But on the other hand . . .

“Harry’s been receiving a *lot* of love spells in the post recently,” Hermione says confidentially. “He might be persuaded to talk about it a little, if you allow me to check your memory of a certain morning from last week.”

Was it only last week? It feels like it’s been years – but then again, also only seconds. Also: what? “No, I won’t,” Harry protests. “I’m not talking to this idiot about getting sent love potions! I’ll end up getting hundreds more of the bloody things.”

Hermione ignores him. “Well? It’s a good deal,” she says to Woodbead. “You have my word I’ll only look for that one specific memory.”

Woodbead hesitates, but only for a fraction of a second. “Done,” he says, and holds out his hand for Hermione to shake. She takes it, and they exchange a limp, unenthusiastic handshake.

“All right,” Hermione says. “Hold still. *Leglimens*,” she whispers, looking Woodbead straight in the eye and waving her wand. They remain locked like that for at least ten minutes, and by the time Hermione drops her wand hand, and releases her grip on Woodbead’s mind, his forehead is sweating profusely and Hermione herself is starting to shake.

“That was most unpleasant, young lady,” Woodbead says with a sniff, and digs into the pocket of his jacket, extracting a gleaming silver hip flask and taking a restorative sip, followed by a restorative swig and a restorative glug. “Did you find the answer to your question?”

“In a sense,” Hermione says, and frowns at Harry when he raises his eyebrows at her. “Later,” she tells him.

“I’m ready for my interview with Harry now,” Woodbead says, and an army of quills swoop down in front of him. He selects one with care, as if he’s choosing his favourite weapon, and then pauses expectantly.

Hermione digs Harry in the side with her elbow, and he takes this as a hint. He talks about receiving love potions, and how much he doesn’t like it, and wishes it would stop, and he’s not ready for love yet, and perhaps people could leave him alone, for longer than he means to, and he only stops when Zabini, in the corner, clears his throat.

“So sad that our love just wasn’t meant to be,” Zabini murmurs, and then sniggers when he catches Harry’s eye.

Outside the office, Harry opens his mouth to ask a million questions, but Hermione hisses, “Not here,” and holds out the Portkey that’s primed to take them back to Hogwarts. It deposits them at the foot of the drive, and Hermione leads them into the Forest – not deep enough to be dangerous, but deep enough that they can be sure no one’s followed them.

“Well?” Harry demands.

“As far as I can see, someone got to Woodbeard before us and cast an extremely neat memory charm on him, cutting out anything to do with the spell he cast on us, but leaving everything else intact. As far as Woodbeard’s concerned, his boss told him to leave after the *Prophet* scooped him on the Zabini story, and he wandered about vaguely for a bit before returning.” Hermione shrugs. “This Mr Misslethorpe seems a bit of a bully, so perhaps it’s not unusual for him to sack and rehire people at the drop of a hat. He doesn’t have many employees, by the looks of things, does he? Though I do think his use of memory charms on them should be reported to the Ministry!”

“Maybe save that for later, though, eh?” Zabini suggests.

“Are you sure the charm was cast on purpose?” Harry asks.

Hermione turns a kindly expression on him that suggests she thinks he needs a nap.

“No – I don’t mean that someone slipped and cast a memory charm by accident,” Harry says. “I’m not an idiot. I mean – the parchment the spell was written on spontaneously combusted when I opened it, didn’t it? Maybe the memory charm was a failsafe written into the spell too. If you’re going round selling illegal dark magic, it would make sense to ensure that if anyone gets their hands on your spells, they all erase themselves entirely.”

“Seems a bit like hard work to me,” Zabini says, but Hermione’s frowning.

“It’s entirely plausible,” she says. “I really hope you’re right, Harry, because if not, there’s someone out there who knows about the spell – and we don’t know who it is, or what their next move will be.”

“Reassuring, Herms. Very reassuring,” Zabini says.

Hermione smiles at him. “If you call me that again, I shall wind your innards around the Whomping Willow.”

Zabini grins. “Fair enough.”

“What are we meant to do next, though?” Harry says, wrapping his fingers around his wand in his pocket. He wants to *do* something, and as soon as possible. “I mean, we can’t just sit around and hope this mysterious memory-eraser pops up and tells us their evil master plan, can we? There might not even be a mysterious memory-eraser!”

“We’re not going to just sit around,” Hermione says crossly. “I’m going to do some research, and then we’ll get together and formulate a new plan of action.”

“Don’t be tetchy, Potter,” Zabini says. “You’re upsetting Hermy.” He sniggers as Hermione raises her wand to his head. “Going to poke me in the eye?”

“You’re incorrigible,” Hermione says, lowering her wand. “No one deserves to be poked in the eye more.” She sighs, and slings an arm around Harry, giving him a squeeze. “Try not to worry – we’ll fix this in the end, I promise. It just might take a bit longer without the original spell to work with.”

If this is meant to buck him up, it’s not doing the job.

“In the meantime, you need to stay calm,” Hermione continues. “And you need to get *Draco* to stay calm too. He’s already attracting attention with his erratic behaviour – skipping classes, scary mood swings. People are getting suspicious he’s up to something.”

“And I’m sure you’re telling them he’s not,” Zabini says sarcastically.

“Oh yes – me telling everyone how lovely and unsuspecting Draco’s suspicious behaviour is will really help,” Hermione says, rolling her eyes. “We’re known to be such good friends. Don’t be an idiot, Zabini – you’re better than that. *You’re* going to have to talk to him, and get him to chill out a bit. Act normal.”

“Normal for Draco does pretty much include scary mood swings though,” Zabini says disloyally. “But yeah, OK, I take your point. Are we done here, or are we hanging out in the Forbidden Forest as darkness falls just for kicks? I always wanted to die young.”

He really does deserve to be poked in the eye, does Zabini, Harry thinks, but he has a good point – hanging out in the Forbidden Forest in the daylight is stupid enough, but at this time of year it’s nightfall by seven, and his stomach tells him that can’t be that far off. The afternoon, with all its disappointments, has gone by surprisingly quickly. But even so . . .

“*You* can tell Malfoy what happened this afternoon,” Harry says to Zabini, thinking this is better punishment than a poke in the eye would ever be.

“Me!” Zabini splutters. “Why?”

“He’ll take it better from you,” Harry says.

“He bloody won’t,” Zabini protests.

“He will,” Harry repeats.

They’re still arguing with each other even as they approach the steps that lead up to the castle, and it’s for that reason that they only see that Malfoy’s standing at the top, leaning nonchalantly against one of the huge oak doors, when they’re nearly at the top.

“Potter—” Malfoy says, peeling away from the door and taking a step towards him.

“Zabini will explain everything,” Harry says, and zooms off without a backwards glance, although he does zig and zag a bit as he half-runs to safety, in case of flying hexes. He’s not sure what Hermione’s doing, but in a situation like this it’s every man for himself. Harry can

hear Zabini saying something cutting – he can tell by the tone of his voice – and Malfoy laughing scornfully, even as he runs.

Harry's not sure who to sit with that night at dinner. It only took about a minute after he'd fled the scene for him to start feeling like an idiot, and a further minute for the words *coward* and *scumbag* to pop into his head and start waving their hands about until he noticed them. He supposes it was his job to break the bad news about the memory charm to Malfoy; it was the act of a git to have left it to Zabini. If Zabini even *did* it, his subconscious tells him; Zabini was well within his rights to tap out and pass the job to Hermione, or to no one at all.

As Harry walks into the Great Hall, he starts moving towards the Slytherin table out of habit, but Millicent, sitting with the usual crew despite her Gryffindor robes, gives him a dirty look and turns her head away, so he swerves at the last minute and goes to sit with Ron and Hermione.

Hermione also gives him a dirty look.

"What?" he protests, and then decides he'd be better off just apologising. "Sorry," he says. "I panicked. Was it awful?"

Hermione purses her lips and looks about; the rest of the table – and the surrounding tables – appear to be hanging on his every word. "It was fine," she says, and busies herself with the bread basket on the table.

Dinner passes slowly; Harry's sitting with his back towards the Slytherin table, so he can't see their faces and he can't decide whether that's better or worse. He's just coming to the conclusion that it's worse, and if they're plotting his destruction he'd rather be able to see it coming, when Hermione takes the opportunity of a distraction at another table to say, under her breath, "It was fine, honestly. Not great – but fine." She takes another bite of her apple. "Not *your* finest hour though," she adds, before turning her head to talk, very firmly, to Neville, on her other side.

If even Hermione thinks he's been a dick, then he really has been a dick, Harry thinks gloomily, and when dinner's over and the tables have mostly cleared – at least, the Slytherin table has cleared, while the others wait to see what The Boy Who Lived will do next – he decides that maybe he'd better say sorry. Even though, if he's honest with himself, he'd rather gnaw off his own leg than do it. He suspects Malfoy and Zabini fall under the category of people who don't take apologies well – but, instead, pretend they've misheard, so you have to repeat yourself, and then gloat insufferably for the next million years.

"Want to hang out with us this evening?" Ron asks as he gets up.

"I'm going to go and say sorry to Malfoy," Harry says gloomily. "And then I think I'm going to need a lie down to recover."

"Good for you," Hermione says, sounding approving. "I'm sure it will be appreciated. See you tomorrow morning at breakfast, then."

“If I don’t show up, please remember to visit my grave,” Harry says, getting to his feet. “Or I’ll haunt you, I swear.”

Hermione laughs, as if he’s made a joke, and walks off with Ron.

Right – he has to do it now he’s made the fatal mistake of telling Hermione. So, he might as well get it over with, he thinks, and makes his way quickly to the Slytherin common room, where he suspects the whole group will be found.

When he enters, he spots them taking up their usual corner of the room, sprawled across several sofas. Malfoy has his head in Pansy’s lap, and she’s stroking his hair as he talks, his face discontented. Everyone stops as soon as they see him, and stare at him – and laugh.

Oh dear.

Harry’s faced Voldemort, though; he’s not going to be put off by a little scathing, blood-curdling laughter. So he carries on walking towards them, and then halts just outside their area, wondering where he should sit. *If* he should sit. No one’s exactly laying out a welcoming mat or hanging bunting to encourage him to join them.

Millicent stares at him – and then, to his surprise, grins. “Don’t worry, Potter, I’ve already taken my terrible revenge on you, so I’m not going to sulk. Come and sit down, if you want.” She shuffles up on the Chesterfield and pats the spot next to her.

Harry’s not sure he likes the sound of a terrible revenge. “Um, what is it?” he asks.

“The revenge? Oh, you’ll find out soon enough,” she says. “Don’t dwell on it. Just let it happen naturally.”

“I’m not staying,” Harry says.

“What a shame,” Pansy murmurs spitefully, still stroking Malfoy’s hair.

Harry tries to ignore her, along with the strange, unwelcome sensation that starts bubbling in his gut as he watches the pair of them together. “I just wanted to say – sorry.”

Malfoy rises to his elbows. “Are you doing that thing again, Potter, where you talk about our private business in public?” he asks, and raises an eyebrow.

“Er, yes,” Harry says, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Zabini’s too, though, I suppose.”

Zabini waves the apology away. “I left it all to Hermey,” he says, and takes a swig of whatever concoction is in his glass – it’s black, and faintly steaming. “No one palms off their dirty work on me, Potter, as you will soon learn.”

“Er, shall we go somewhere more private, then?” Harry asks Malfoy, mainly because Malfoy’s still staring at him, as if he’s a complete idiot, and Harry’s fairly sure he’s only *partially* an idiot, and wants to be clear on that point.

“Must we?” Malfoy says, a little plaintively.

“Go on, take it like a man,” Pansy says unkindly, and gives him a shove that nearly has him falling off the sofa.

Harry and Malfoy walk together in uncomfortable silence to their dormitory, and Harry decides as they walk that if he speaks really quickly, then maybe it'll be over with faster, so he rehearses what he's going to say in his head. As soon as the door is tightly shut behind them, Harry opens his mouth and starts to speak.

“Look, Malfoy, I'm really sorry that I left it to someone else to—” he starts, garbling his words, but Malfoy doesn't appear to be listening.

Instead, Malfoy leans against the end of his bed, against one of the pillars of the four-poster, folds his arms and says, looking a peculiar mixture of smug and disgusted, “Potter, tell me you don't *really* have dreams about me every single night.”

Harry feels himself immediately turn bright red – his face is burning hot. It makes it a bit difficult to deny it.

“Fucking hell,” Malfoy says, his eyes widening. “I didn't think she actually meant it. But – you *do*.”

It's Millicent's revenge, Harry thinks, trying not spontaneously combust. It's a bloody good one. How the hell did she even know though? “They're not dreams,” he says, wanting to make it clear. “They're nightmares.”

“Oh?” Malfoy says, eyebrows vanishing up into his hairline.

“I . . . dream about you dying,” Harry says.

Malfoy's pale grey eyes seem to darken as he stares at Harry. “Some would classify dreams about me dying as a *good* thing,” he points out.

Harry shivers. “I'd classify *them* as idiots then,” he says. “Trust me – if you had the same dreams about me, you'd get sick of them pretty quick too.”

“How do I die?” Malfoy asks, carefully casual.

“All sorts,” Harry says. “I don't really want to talk about it. What I *wanted* to talk about was ___”

“Yes, yes, your guilty conscience for leaving your dirty work to Granger,” Malfoy says, waving his hand dismissively. “Though why you think it's your job specifically to be the harbinger of doom, Merlin knows. All I have to say on the matter is: so much for Hermione Granger being the answer to all our problems. I suppose we'll be relying on Weasley next, and I look forward with interest to seeing how much worse things can get for me.”

“It's not Hermione's fault someone worked a memory charm on Woodbead!” Harry protests.

Malfoy rolls his eyes. “No one worked a memory charm on him apart from the spell itself, covering its creator's tracks. It's a classic jinx. Granger would know that, if she spent more

time in the real world, and less with her nose in a book.”

Is it a classic jinx? Harry’s never heard of it. “Did you at least speak to your mother this afternoon then?” he asks.

“What do you mean ‘at least’?” Malfoy says. “We were talking about *you* being a shithead, thank you – don’t take that tone with me. But, no, actually – I fire-called her from McGonagall’s office before breakfast, and she gave her word she’d keep quiet about the spell, so you need have no concerns on that score.”

“Great!” Harry says, and stomps over to sit on the edge of his bed, hoping Malfoy will take the hint and leave him to go to sleep, at least two hours too early.

Malfoy sees Harry’s hint, and straightens up, taking a few steps towards the door and then . . . turning around and striding over to Harry’s bed, before plonking himself down next to him.

“So, tell me more about your dreams,” Malfoy says, hot and heavy, and very low, in Harry’s ear.

Harry can feel himself explode into redness again, even though he knows that’s Malfoy’s intention – to embarrass him, because he deserves it. “How did Bulstrode even *know* about my dreams?” he demands of the wall opposite his bed. “That’s just creepy.”

“Granger told her,” Malfoy says, sounding amused. “Told her to keep it top secret as well, but . . .” Harry can feel him shrug beside him. “I guess it was too good not to share.”

“I thought Slytherins were meant to be loyal!” Harry protests.

“Loyal to who, though?” Malfoy asks. “Besides, she’s a Gryffindor now.”

Malfoy leans in closer to Harry, and for a heart-stopping moment his face is so near to Harry’s cheek that Harry thinks Malfoy’s going to kiss him. But he doesn’t; instead, he just laughs, breath warm against his skin. “I accept your pitiful apology, Potter. Enjoy your evening of sulking,” he says, and stands up, robe swishing gracefully as he leaves the room without a backward glance.

He may not have looked back at Harry; Harry, on the other hand, found it impossible to look away.

Harry snaps awake in the night, with a sense of complete disorientation, combined with a strong feeling of déjà vu. His face is wet, as if he’s been crying. His wand is already in his hand, and he moves automatically to jam it in his assailant’s face, even as he’s got him by the throat.

As he wakes up a little bit more, he realises that the person gasping for breath beneath him has a certain . . . sarcastic, Malfoyish tone to their gurgles, and he casts Lumos, to see Malfoy, caught beneath him, and a spilt jug of water soaking through the duvet next to them

Harry tugs the gap in the bedcurtains shut, and half-releases Malfoy, but keeps his wand trained firmly on him. “Well?” he asks, when Malfoy doesn’t say anything, just stares at him sulkily.

Malfoy’s pyjamas are splashed with water too and clinging damply to him, Harry realises, and water’s still flowing from the jug, as it continually refills itself from some magical source.

“Well?” Harry demands again.

Malfoy actually looks nervous. “I . . . thought it might be funny,” he says, eyes locked on Harry’s wand.

“What? Pouring water on me?”

Malfoy moistens his lips. “I thought you might dream about me drowning,” he says, and then pulls a face. “Most of us have dreamed about drowning at one time or another,” he adds quickly. “It’s the sound of the water lapping against the windows. Why don’t you put your wand down, Harry?”

Harry’s not sure he’s fully awake; he feels dog-tired, and angry, and damp, and he hasn’t got his glasses on so he can’t sodding see properly, and if he moves to grab his glasses then Malfoy might do something else that’s wanky. “Why would you want me to dream about you drowning?” he asks, and to his ears it comes out sounding bewildered and hurt. “It’s really shit, dreaming about you dying all the time. I wish I could bloody stop it.”

“Yes, I’m sure you do,” Malfoy says carefully. “Just put your wand down and—”

“Why should I?” Harry asks, entirely reasonably in his opinion.

Malfoy swallows. “Well . . . If you do, I’ll . . .”

Harry’s just about to lower his wand and tell Malfoy to fuck right off – as if he’s the sort of person who needs to be bribed not to hex an unarmed opponent! – when Malfoy says, very strained, “I’ll let you have another look at my soulmark. I know you want to. You can’t stop staring. Especially when you think I’m not looking.”

Harry lowers his wand, heart pounding like a drum. “Malfoy,” he says awkwardly. “I didn’t mean—”

“Yes, all right, Potter, whatever,” Malfoy says, not moving. “I’m sure it doesn’t mean anything at all.” His voice sounds . . . twisted.

“Sorry, I . . .” *don’t understand what we’re talking about here*, Harry wants to say, but he’s too tired to think straight, and he’s overwhelmed with how much he wants to pin Malfoy down on the bed and just . . . look at him.

The bed’s soaking now, though, and Malfoy’s turned from damp to properly wet as the duvet, and the sheets, take up the free-flowing water like a sponge. Harry thinks he can deal – possibly – with dry Malfoy, but wet Malfoy is . . .

No. He can't deal with dry Malfoy. He *definitely* can't deal with a Malfoy whose pyjamas are sticking to his skin, and who's trembling as Harry looks at him. Harry doesn't know if it's a good or a bad thing the world is still blurry and out of focus.

Malfoy draws in a ragged breath. "I'm *cold*, Potter," he says, with only a hint of a tremor in his voice. "Offer withdrawn for today. We can do it another time," he adds as he moves to swing his legs off the bed.

"That's not—"

"I *promise*," Malfoy says, with an edge to his voice, and gets up.

Harry gets up too.

"What?" Malfoy asks, turning back and clutching his arms around himself. He really is wet – and so is Harry too, he realises, suddenly shivering.

"You made this mess – you sort it out," Harry says firmly, albeit quietly. "I'll sleep in your bed tonight," he adds, and gets into Malfoy's four-poster before he can lose his nerve, pulling the curtains shut around him to block out Malfoy's pale, blurry face from view.

Harry casts a drying charm on himself, and it's soon had the desired effect, so he slips between sheets that are still warm, and closes his eyes. The pillow smells like Malfoy – a spicy, woody scent. Harry breathes in, and finds he's drowning after all.

When he wakes up, he feels odd and overtired, and he'd have thought the whole unlikely incident was a dream, except for the one fact he can't explain away: he's in Malfoy's bed. Malfoy, on the other hand, is nowhere to be seen.

The Fat Duck

Friday night sees Harry sitting in a Muggle budget chicken restaurant with a group of uncomfortable pure-bloods, who are mostly trying to pretend that they're *absolutely fine* with Muggle budget chicken restaurants, thank you very much for asking.

It's called Nando's, apparently, and it's all Goyle's fault, though he denies it when accused by Pansy. "There was a list," Greg says, turning to Harry and shrugging. "I just put my finger down on one. It's only chicken, though," he adds, turning back to Pansy. "Nothing wrong with chicken. Surely even Muggles can't screw up chicken?"

Harry doesn't know what he's doing, sitting in a Muggle budget chicken restaurant. The only thing he remembers is that the group were about to leave the common room without him, Zabini leading the charge, when Malfoy turned and said the first words he'd said to Harry that day – "Are you coming then, or what?"

He turned away immediately after, of course, and his tone was unpleasant, but . . .

Greg, at the back of the group, had paused, and looked between Malfoy and Harry. "Chicken," he grunted, and by the time Harry had shot to his feet, protesting that he *wasn't* chicken, Greg had grabbed his arm and pulled him out through the corridors, and further out into the castle grounds, and a Portkey had whizzed them all off to . . . Nando's chicken restaurant.

Harry can't work out if Malfoy asked him along to the dinner because he actually wanted him there, or if he just thought that since it was Muggle stuff then Harry should suffer it too – and he's still none the wiser when they've struggled through ordering and paying, and struggled through fetching their own plates and cutlery without the aid of magic, and struggled through eating what Harry thinks was a perfectly acceptable meal, although no one else seems to be of the same opinion.

"Thank Merlin we can tick that one off the list," Malfoy complains as they leave the restaurant, and Harry thinks Malfoy *might* be talking to him, but as Malfoy hasn't looked at him once, it's a bit tricky to tell. "That was possibly the worst meal I've ever eaten."

"It was on the 'low culture' section of the list, to be fair," Millicent says, sucking thoughtfully at her teeth. "Maybe we should have gone for something on the 'high culture' section instead."

"Muggle high culture?" Malfoy replies, and follows it up with a snort which fully explains what he thinks of the concept.

"I'm sure there are some very good Muggle restaurants," Harry says, even though he's not actually sure. The Dursleys never took him anywhere that wasn't McDonald's, and even then he was only allowed to finish up Dudley's leftovers. Dudley wasn't renowned for leaving leftovers.

“I’m not sure there are,” Pansy says, and shudders. “That chicken was tough, and too highly spiced, and the chips were dry and overcooked. Hardly worth the calories.”

Harry, who’d picked at his meal and found it to taste just like food, shrugs. “No one said Muggle food was *better* than wizarding cuisine, though, did they?” he points out. “Nando’s is just normal food for normal people in a hurry.”

“Let’s go for a drink to take the taste away,” Pansy suggests, and they end up in Hogsmeade. It’s an odd experience – none of the other customers want to hang out with the group as a whole, but everyone wants to hang out with *Harry*, and before he’s even sat down he’s bumped, and hugged, and slapped on the back, and offered free drinks until he just wants to go back to school and hide under the bed. The others are on their second round already by the time he manages to press through the crowd and actually join them.

When Harry goes to the bar to buy the next round, it takes him a further half an hour but the drinks are all on the house. When Malfoy goes next, it takes him thirty seconds, the area around him clearing instantly as people shy away.

Harry tries to press the money for the round into Malfoy’s hands, but Malfoy goes an angry red and shoves it back, before almost downing his drink in one. Harry’s not sure what Malfoy’s drinking – whatever it is, it’s tall and colourless. Harry hopes it’s not neat gin, or they’ll be levitating Malfoy back to school, later.

“Sucks to be you, Potter,” Nott says, taking a sip of his drink.

“Free drinks though,” Greg says, and downs his pint of Snakebite in one, before belching hugely. “Could put up with a lot for free drinks.”

Harry thinks he’d rather never have another free drink in his life. He takes a sip of his own pint – the ale is strong and hoppy, and it makes his head spin. Butterbeer is sickly sweet compared to this, and he wonders how he ever felt grown-up drinking it. At least he doesn’t have to worry so much about his drinks being spiked by love potions, though, he thinks. The latest issue of *Witch Weekly* is out, containing his rant about love potions, and he’s had to give Alastair, his secretary, a pay rise, for dealing with the increase in presents he’s receiving in the mail. People seem to be trying to win his heart by bribery, now, rather than trickery. He supposes it’s an improvement, though only just. “So, I take it the chicken trip was this week’s Muggle Studies homework?” he asks.

This question is greeted by a variety of snorts that suggest it was a question of crashing, unbelievable stupidity.

“I still think we should have gone somewhere more high class,” Pansy says, and takes a sip of her green cocktail. It matches her nail varnish. “There were quite a few options on the list. I wanted to be properly scathing about our Muggle restaurant experience in our next lesson, and it’s hard to work up the energy to be properly scathing about chicken and chips.”

“You haven’t missed your chance, love,” Zabini says, swirling his blood-red wine around the large crystal goblet in his hand. “The world of Muggle haute cuisine isn’t closed to you, just because you started with inferior roast chicken.”

Pansy wrinkles her nose. "I'm not going to be tricked into doing extra homework, Blaise, so don't even try it."

"We don't need *all* of us to go to one of the other restaurants on the list, though, do we?" Zabini says. "We can all live vicariously through whichever lucky person visits, for example . . ." He pulls a crumpled list from out of his pocket and scans it quickly. "The Fat Duck."

"Mmm, obese waterfowl," Malfoy says with heavy sarcasm, "my favourite."

"Thank you for volunteering!" Zabini says quickly, and grins at Malfoy's look of complete outrage. "I'm sure you'll enjoy it very much. And to make sure you do, Harry Potter, our favourite Slytherin Muggle lover, will join you for the experience. Won't you, Potter?"

Harry shoots a look at Malfoy, and Malfoy's look of complete outrage . . . falters. And twists, into something that speaks of embarrassment.

Harry's been trying very hard not to think about what happened last night – he's still not entirely certain that it was real, as it seems fairly unlikely that Malfoy, face burning, offered to let Harry . . .

He can't even think it without blushing.

"Don't keep Draco hanging," Zabini says sternly. "That's unkind."

"Oh, er, sure, of course," Harry stammers, and Malfoy manages to pull himself together enough to roll his eyes.

"Great, thanks," Malfoy says. "Did it not occur to you that you could say no, and we could *not* have an awkward evening centred around terrible Muggle food?"

"It might not be terrible," Harry says defensively. "And it might not be awkward!"

Even Nott, who's clearly come out of the war infinitely more broken than he came in, and rarely smiles, laughs at that, so it must be a particularly stupid thing to say, Harry reckons. And he knows it to be a fact when they leave the pub together, swaying gently, and Malfoy shoots Harry a speculative look that makes him trip over his own feet. He'd have fallen in a ridiculous heap on the ground, if Malfoy hadn't reached over and caught him.

Harry can still feel the pressure of Malfoy's fingers on his arm, long after he's been released.

"I hope you booked a table," Malfoy says, over his shoulder, as he opens the door to the restaurant.

Harry's been struck by dread at least once an hour today, but this is possibly the largest dread-strike yet. It hadn't even occurred to him to book – but it's Saturday night, and the Fat Duck is one of the poshest up and coming restaurants in Muggle England, so the chances are they'll be slung out on their ear. It'll be his fault, no doubt, despite the fact coming here definitely wasn't his idea. He'd rather be in Nando's with Ron than accompanying Malfoy, in

his swishiest formal robes, to a Muggle restaurant that he just knows is going to be stuffy, and have too many cutlery options. Malfoy will probably know by posh person osmosis what to do and how to act, leaving Harry worse at being Muggle than a snotty, prejudiced pure-blood.

“Um,” he says, following Malfoy in. “Actually, I—”

“Table for two,” Malfoy says, when the maitre d’ approaches, all smiles. “Name of Malfoy.”

They’re guided to their table almost immediately, and Harry relaxes a bit as he takes in the surroundings. It’s not as awful as he expected. There are only a dozen or so tables, and the inside of the restaurant is reminiscent of a pub – all low wooden beams and cosiness. But, “That wasn’t very nice of you,” he says to Malfoy, who snorts and unbuttons his outer robe, handing it over to the waiter. Underneath, Malfoy could almost pass for an eccentric Muggle. His robe is sleeveless and fashionably cropped, nipped in at the chest like a waistcoat, revealing a flowing white shirt and close-fitting, well-cut trousers.

Harry realises he’s staring, and sits, immediately shoving the menu up in front of his face, looking at it but not seeing.

“Aperitif?” the waiter asks when he returns. “And are you ready to order, or would you like some more time?”

Malfoy scans the menu. “We’ll have the tasting menu, I think,” he says, “and a bottle of whatever you’d recommend. White, for preference – red gives me a headache. Some sparkling water for the table, too.”

“Of course, sir,” the waiter says, taking first Malfoy’s menu, and then Harry’s – giving him nothing to hide behind.

“Have you been here before?” Harry asks suspiciously as Malfoy looks around, drumming long, slim fingers on the tablecloth impatiently.

“Don’t be stupid,” Malfoy says, fingers stilling, then shrugs. “One restaurant is much like another, I presume. I can’t think how Muggle service could differ much, other than being slower and more incompetent. It must be a pain in the arse not being able to use magic.”

The waiter brings over first water, and then the wine in an ice bucket. He uncorks it, and offers it to Malfoy, who waves it in Harry’s direction. The waiter pours about an inch into Harry’s glass, and then waits. Harry presumes he’s being asked to try it, and so does so. It tastes like wine, so he nods, and the waiter pours more out into first his glass, then Malfoy’s.

“Yep, definitely wine,” he says, when the waiter’s gone. “I can tell by the taste.”

Malfoy looks like he’s not sure whether to laugh or not.

“That was a joke, in case you were wondering,” Harry thinks he’d better say, to remove the pitying look from Malfoy’s face.

Malfoy actually smiles at that – it’s not much of a smile, but his lips quirk, and then he looks pained, as if it’s against his religion to smile at something Harry’s said.

“Well, this is, er . . .” Harry says, for something to say, and then regrets it, because he’s not sure how to continue the sentence and Malfoy’s clearly not planning on helping out.

“It’s what?” Malfoy prompts, when Harry dries up completely, and takes a sip from his water glass.

“Awkward,” Harry says, deciding honesty is the best policy.

Malfoy actually looks amused at that. He relaxes back into his chair. “I thought you said it wouldn’t be?”

“That was more of a forlorn hope than a promise,” Harry says. “What was it you ordered for us to eat?”

Malfoy’s eyes crinkle. “Salazar knows,” he says. “Some sort of selection, I think. We’ll find out when it turns up I suppose. It can’t be less edible than that chicken yesterday though.”

“The chicken was fine!” Harry protests.

“Yes, I suppose so, but it amuses me to see you get wound up about it,” Malfoy says, and picks up a fork from the table, examining it before putting it back down, and then fiddling with the napkin on the side of the table, folding and refolding it.

Malfoy’s nervous, Harry realises as he watches him fiddle, and this inspires within him a deep, sympathetic nervousness of his own.

“So, what shall we talk about?” Harry asks, making Malfoy look up from his linen origami, with a look that bodes ill for Harry’s future comfort.

Happily, at this moment a pair of waiters approach the table – one with wide smile, the other with a wide tray, on which rest two tiny pots of . . . something green. They are both steaming, white mist flowing out of them. “For the first of our sixteen courses,” the wide-smiler says, “may I present a dish of nitro-green tea and lime mousse,” and he removes both pots from the tray and slides them delicately in front of first Harry, then Malfoy. “Enjoy.”

“There’s fog coming out of my food,” Malfoy says dubiously, when the waiters have left. “Why is there fog coming out of my food, Potter?”

Harry eats his in three quick bites, and then regrets his haste. The food is both freezing cold and yet melts in the mouth, the green tea flavour bitter, and yet balanced out by the sour zing of the lime juice. “Mmm,” he says, and eyes Malfoy’s untouched pot, reaching out with his spoon, only for Malfoy to rap him on the knuckles with his own spoon.

“We’re not in the zoo, Potter,” Malfoy says. “Ask before you pinch my food, you oaf.” He takes a small spoonful, and then quickly follows it up with another, and another, then scrapes the pot clean. “That was . . . quite acceptable,” he allows as a waiter appears out of nowhere and removes their empty pots.

“It was yummy,” Harry says. “I wonder what’s next?”

What's next is oysters with fruit jelly, and mustard ice cream, and a cold soup made of red cabbage, and porridge blended with snails, and a whole stream of things that sound intensely unappetising, but taste so amazing that Harry decides he might well take up residence in the restaurant and just eat himself to death. He hasn't felt properly hungry for ages, but the tiny portions seem to make him even hungrier, and each small titbit makes him even more excited for the next.

When the waiter deposits a small black square that he claims is salmon poached with liquorice in front of them both, Harry wolfs it down, and looks up to see Malfoy gazing at him, his own food untouched. "What?" he says self-consciously, and wipes his mouth with his napkin. "Have I got food on my face?"

Malfoy looks embarrassed, and shrugs. "No," he says, and turns his attention to his own food, but doesn't eat more than a tiny bite. "I was just thinking that this isn't as horrendously bad as I expected."

"The food?" Harry asks, taking a glug of wine. His glass seems to be going down a lot faster than Malfoy's, although with the constant attention of the wine waiter, it's hard to tell.

Malfoy's shoulders stiffen. "No, that's not what I meant."

"Oh," Harry says, not quite getting it. He can feel the awkwardness returning at full speed, and he wishes Malfoy would hurry up and finish his food, so the waiter will return and break the tension. So far they haven't really had the chance to talk about anything much, and he likes it that way. There's not a lot he can think of that's safe to talk about with Malfoy. They've talked about the food a bit. What else is safe? Clothes, he supposes. Malfoy's made an effort. He could say something about that, to head off any gaps in the conversation where Bad Things could be introduced. "Er, you look good, by the way."

Malfoy freezes, midway through toying with his food.

"The clothes, I mean! Your clothes! Look good! On, er, you," Harry says, and wishes for the floor to swallow him up.

Malfoy sets his fork down with a clunk, but doesn't look up. "What?" he says. Is it derision in his voice? Harry can't decide.

"I'm not going to say it again," Harry says. "I was only being nice!"

"Potter," Malfoy says heavily, and then looks up at him. His gaze is direct, and piercing, and . . . weird. "Don't," he adds, which Harry thinks is bloody peculiar.

"Don't be nice?"

"Don't be *fake*," Malfoy says, and looks away. "It doesn't suit you."

"I, er, do think you look good, though?" Harry says, now more baffled than embarrassed, although it's a close tie between the two. Talking about clothes is just making him think about what's *under* Malfoy's clothes – a gently writhing soulmark, reacting to whatever Malfoy's

thinking, feeling . . . And Malfoy promised him, in the darkness, that he'd let Harry look at it again soon.

OK, he's now officially more embarrassed. He stares at the tablecloth and tries to remember that he hates Malfoy. It's a bit tricky, though, given that he doesn't. He's still not sure he likes him very much, but . . .

"Right, let's change the subject!" Malfoy says brightly. "Let's talk about something *much* less awkward, like you not having a soulmate, or how you nearly killed me, or how you sat in judgement over me and my family and got my father sent to Azkaban!"

Malfoy doesn't mean it, of course, Harry thinks, but . . . "All right. Let's start with the trial," he says, and Malfoy, who's put another morsel of liquorice salmon in his mouth, nearly chokes on it.

When he's washed it down with water, and recovered himself, Harry says, "No, really, let's talk about it."

"Fucking hell, let's not," Malfoy says, and slumps back in his chair. "What is there to say?"

"Well . . . I could say, for example, that I think you hate me more for the trial than for the soulmark stuff," Harry says to the tablecloth. "I can see it in your eyes, almost all the time, how much you hate me for it."

Malfoy snorts. "And to think you accused *me*, only the other day, of being melodramatic, Potter."

Harry shrugs. "It's true though."

The air seems to go out Malfoy in a gush, and he sighs, to expel the last of it. "I'm not sure it's worth the bother of explaining it," he says, waving a hand dismissively and sounding very out of sorts.

"Try it," Harry suggests.

Malfoy holds his tongue as the waiter collects their empty plates, staring into the middle distance. When they're alone again, he pulls a face. "It's all the usual sort of shit, Potter. You, winning. You, sitting over me in judgement and . . ." He wrinkles his nose in disgust. "And being *kind* about it. Ugh. But not kind enough to get my father off the charge! And not kind enough to get me off it either – I'm still a convicted criminal, and if someone came in here right now and tried to kill me, if I defended myself I'd be straight back up in court. It's not much fun, Potter, not being allowed to use anything apart than the most basic of magic spells in public, as if you're a danger to everyone around you."

"You . . . were a Death Eater, though," Harry says uncomfortably. "And so was your father. What was I meant to do? I couldn't opt out of being in the Wizengamot just for your trial – what would I have used as excuse? 'Sorry, everyone, but I don't think Malfoy will like it, so I'm going to sit this one out.'"

“I didn’t say it was *logical*,” Malfoy says wearily. “Feelings rarely are. I just . . . When I look at you, all I can see, most of the time, is my own failure, and my own humiliation. It makes living in the same dormitory as you a bit of a slog, Potter. This whole soulmark business is just a delightful added extra.”

“Right,” Harry says, feeling very small and very awful.

Malfoy looks over at him and rolls his eyes. “Please tell me you’re not going to cry, Potter. Honestly – I spill my guts in a revolting fashion, and once again you’re trying to make it all about you.”

The waiter delivers the smallest pigeon breast ever known to man, drizzled with a white, unidentifiable foam, and withdraws.

“You know, winning’s been less fun than I hoped,” Harry says as he stares at the food. “A bit too full of funerals, and everyone trying to be relentlessly jolly, and did you notice that people are quite keen on following me about a lot?”

“My heart bleeds for you,” Malfoy says politely, and cuts off a bit of pigeon, before examining it closely. “This bird is so rare, it’s practically still alive,” he murmurs, pulling a face, but he chews it on it anyway, and then makes a noise of pleasure. “Yum.”

“Can we just agree that both of us have good and valid reasons to hate each other and leave it at that?” Harry asks, cutting into his own bird.

“Do you hate me, then?” Malfoy asks. He asks it as if he doesn’t care.

“Er, no,” Harry says, and then waits for Malfoy to say that he doesn’t hate Harry either. He doesn’t. “Well?” he prompts, after a bit too much time has passed.

Malfoy swallows his mouthful and contrives to look innocent. “What?”

“And do you hate *me*?” Harry asks, aware that, unlike Malfoy, *he* sounds like he cares, a whole fucking lot.

Malfoy’s expression is inscrutable. “Potter, if you can’t tell the answer to that, you’re an absolute idiot.”

Harry is just deciding whether it would be impolite to jab his fork into the back of Malfoy’s hand when the first of the seven puddings arrives, and he loses himself in tiny morsels of sweet, delicious bliss.

The awkwardness rears its head again when the bill arrives, and Harry nearly falls off his chair when he sees how much it’s for.

“Hand it over,” Malfoy says, palm outstretched.

“No, it’s fine,” Harry says, and Malfoy’s eyes flash.

“But darling, I just want to treat you on our first date,” Malfoy says, in a cooing baby voice, and laughs derisively when Harry nearly falls off his chair again, taking the opportunity to tug the bill towards him and beckon over the waiter.

Malfoy peels off notes from an enormous wad of Muggle cash he brings out of his pocket, brow wrinkled in concentration, and then sighs with satisfaction when the transaction is over. “This Muggle thing is a piece of piss,” he says, when the waiter’s moved away. “I can’t think why I was ever nervous about it.”

Harry clears his throat, still stuck on the word ‘date’.

“It’ll only be awkward if you let it be awkward,” Malfoy says, again sweetly, and stands up, allowing the waiter who instantly shoots up to them to help him into his outer robe.

They walk out together into the fresh, cold air. It’s dark outside, and the waiter helps them into a taxi before they can say they don’t need one, and once they’re inside it, Malfoy sits a bit too close and Harry can almost feel him laughing at him. It’s not fucking fair.

The taxi driver lets them out at the station, only a few minutes later, and Malfoy again pays the Muggle with his massive pile of notes, tipping generously.

“Let’s hold hands, Potter,” Malfoy says facetiously, and then sniggers at the look on Harry’s face, before grabbing his hand – to Side-Along him back to school, in a series of sickening jumps.

“You all right?” Malfoy asks, dropping his hand like a stone, when they’re back at the foot of the drive to the castle.

“Apparating makes me feel queasy,” Harry explains, swallowing hard and shutting his eyes.

“It’s more likely to be the wine,” Malfoy says unhelpfully. “You drank the best part of a bottle.”

“You don’t actually hate me, though, do you?” Harry asks, eyes still shut and the world still spinning.

“Oh God – really, Potter?” Malfoy asks, with an edge of desperation to his voice. “No, you idiot, of course I don’t.” He pauses. “Well, maybe a tiny bit, sometimes. I hate myself *more*. I’m only telling you this, mind, because you’re drunk and I’m not, so it’s unlikely to stick. On the off-chance it does, can we never ever talk about this again, please?”

“Sure,” Harry says, eyes still shut. It’s more peaceful that way. “Sorry.”

“Fuck’s sake. Note to self: don’t let Potter Apparate when drunk. He gets queasy and maudlin,” Malfoy says, the eye-roll visible in his voice. “Come on then, Potty. Let’s get you back to school and roll you into bed.”

Harry opens his eyes – he’s a bit tipsy, maybe, but he’s not *that* drunk, and the fresh air is taking the edge off the travel sickness. Malfoy’s already heading off without him, so he trots

after him, and they walk down the drive together in semi-companionable, semi-horrendously-awkward silence.

When they're back in their dormitory, the others are all either asleep, or pretending to be asleep.

"Slytherins really know how to party on a Saturday night," Malfoy says quietly with a snort, pulling off his over-robe and sitting on the edge of his bed to toe off his boots.

Harry laughs, and heads off to the bathroom with his washbag. He only realises he's forgotten to lock the door when he has a mouthful of toothpaste and he hears the door click open, and then shut again, behind him. He spits into the sink, and turns to see Malfoy, who's still mostly dressed, but barefoot, padding towards him.

"Er, did you want something?" he asks, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Malfoy's undoing the buttons of his formal robe as he walks, and rather than stopping next to Harry, he diverts, and sits down on the bench seat beneath the window. Once he's finished undoing the buttons of his robe he shrugs it off his shoulders, and makes a start on the buttons of his shirt.

Harry turns and rinses out his mouth in the sink. "What are you doing?" he asks his reflection, which stares back at him, a bit red faced.

Mirror Malfoy, only just visible at the edge of the glass, shrugs. "Keeping a promise," he says, and then pauses. "If you want." There's a challenge in his voice, and Harry's never been one to turn away from a challenge.

"I, er, suppose it's one of the awkward topics we didn't talk about at dinner," Harry says, not moving.

"I don't really want to talk about it now, either," Malfoy says, with a hard tone in his voice. "Are you going to come over here or not?"

"Since you ask so nicely," Harry mutters, and makes himself turn and walk over to Malfoy, and sit next to him on the bench. He nearly jumps out of his skin when Malfoy puts a hand on his leg.

"Christ sake, I'm not trying to feel you up," Malfoy says, and tugs at his knee, indicating Harry should twist to face him.

Harry does. Malfoy's already finished unbuttoning his shirt, and he pulls it off his shoulders, letting it rest against his forearms and billow out behind him. The mark is . . . mesmerising. Even though Harry's seen it before, he can't stop staring. This time, there's no sharpness to it; the colours fade from bright silver to sparkling darkness, and the vines undulate like waves across Malfoy's skin, dancing to a beat that Harry can't hear, but which vibrates through him like a drum.

Malfoy shifts, slightly, and it breaks the spell – but he doesn't move to cover himself back up. Instead, he gnaws on his bottom lip, hesitates, and . . . reaches over to take one of Harry's hands in his own, drawing it up and placing it against his skin.

Malfoy's skin is cool under Harry's overheated fingers, and he draws a finger gently along one of the lines of the mark. As before, the foliage starts to unfurl, and tiny flowers blossom under his fingers. Wherever he touches Malfoy, stars are born and flowers explode.

Harry's not sure how long they sit there like that. Seconds . . . minutes . . . millennia. The feel of Malfoy's skin, heating under him . . . The kaleidoscope richness of the mark . . . It's mesmerising. Overwhelming. *Terrifying*.

Eventually, Malfoy clears his throat, the noise sounding ragged in the still air. “*This* is why I don't want to talk about the mark, Potter,” he says, his throat sounding raw. “You seem a bit slow on the uptake with some stuff, so I thought it was probably worth pointing out, using pictures as well as words. Do you understand?”

Harry removes his hand from Malfoy's skin, understanding all too well. It's hard to remember – to believe – that the spell is complete bollocks, when he can see Malfoy coming into bud, whenever his supposed soulmate touches him.

Malfoy gets up, and starts to do his shirt back up, walking towards the door.

“Was . . . was tonight a date?” Harry finds himself asking, even though it will do him no good at all to find out the answer, either way. The idea is completely mad. He *knows* it wasn't an arsing date, and so does Malfoy. But . . .

Malfoy snorts. “Really, Potter? You tell me,” he says, opening the door and stepping through it. “You tell me.”

It takes Harry about fifteen minutes to pluck up the courage to leave the bathroom and potentially face Malfoy again, though, of course, when he finally re-enters the bedroom, Malfoy's curtains are firmly drawn around his bed and all is dark and quiet. As he lies in bed though, curtains drawn, Lumos twinkling under his pillow to protect him from the ominous darkness, Harry can still feel his heart pounding with . . .

Fear, possibly. That the spell might be true, and he's doomed to be alone forever. But it's more than that.

Harry casts Nox and lies there for a while in the darkness, terror fighting with other, just as primal, desires. He can feel the weight of Malfoy's presence, in the bed opposite, like a pressure on his skin, even though the curtains are firmly closed.

Eventually, wide awake now, he gives in. He slides his hand into his pyjama bottoms, and wraps it around his cock, shuddering with the relief of it. He's already slick with pre-come, and his hand slides smoothly, squelching quietly as he wanks. He tries to slow down, and can't find the strength. He doesn't even try to stop himself from picturing Malfoy's chest, and the glittering soulmark, as he curls his toes in pleasure.

He comes, though, to the memory of Malfoy gnawing on his lip and reaching over, to place Harry's hand on his own skin.

It's glorious, and he shakes with it, aftershock following aftershock, for several minutes, hand wrapped loosely round his still-hard dick. It's glorious. But, in other ways, it's also terrible.

Usually, after an orgasm, Harry falls asleep almost straight away. But it's ages before he manages to drift off, to dream of trying to wake Malfoy from a deep, deep sleep, to find him stiff and cold. For the first time he remember, after a dream about offing Malfoy, he wakes up with tears in his eyes. And thinks: I'm completely, totally fucked.

I'm gonna wash that man right out of my hair. Possibly.

“Usually, I like to applaud, and give marks out of ten for sound effects, but I thought it might be kinder to ease you in gently, as you’re still pretty new to our dormitory,” Zabini says, as soon as Harry opens the curtains of his bed the next morning. “Fair warning for next time, Potter.”

“You haven’t given me a ten for ages,” Greg says. “Don’t you love me any more?”

“Just trying to give you something to aim for,” Zabini says, sniggering. “Good to have a goal in life.”

Harry’s not feeling strong enough for this. He already feels weird – and stupid – enough for having a wank over thoughts of Malfoy, of all people, without Zabini implying . . . what? That he was listening? And not only that, but next time, he’s going to *score him*? This is peculiar behaviour, even for Zabini.

Harry hopes that this is one of the frequent mornings when Malfoy’s got up early and already left. So, of course, it *isn’t* one of the frequent mornings when Malfoy’s got up early and already left. Instead, he’s sitting up in bed, knees raised under the covers, his hair a complete mess. He looks like he hasn’t slept a wink.

And if he hasn’t slept a wink, that means he was awake when Harry was . . .

Harry lies back down and pulls the covers over his head.

By the time Sunday rolls over to Monday, Harry’s . . . definitely not over the fact that what sounds like everyone in his dormitory lay awake on Saturday night, listening to him wanking. He thinks, in fact, he’ll never be over it. So, it’s good to have a distraction, even if it’s a fairly shitty one. Quidditch team try-outs are on Monday afternoon, and none of the returning eighth years are allowed to take part.

Harry hasn’t flown for a long time now, for a variety of reasons, some of which are wrapped up in memories of soaring over the clutching, burning Fiendfyre, Malfoy screaming in his ear as they try not to die. But when he finds out he’s not *allowed* to fly for his house, it suddenly seems all the more important that he does.

McGonagall, when he storms into her office, seems sympathetic – but firm. “I’m sorry, Harry, but it’s for the best,” she tells him, her face creasing. “You can help coach and encourage your team, if you want to, but I think it’s best if you let the others take their turn. Besides,” she adds, “who would your loyalty lie with, in a game against Gryffindor?”

Harry’s still mulling this over later that evening. He supposes he can see her point – he doesn’t feel enthused by the idea of Slytherin winning the cup, even if he *is* now, technically a Slytherin. And a tiny seed of doubt about whether he’d actually be chosen as Seeker also

plants itself in his mind. Malfoy bought his way into the team, there's no doubt about that; but then there was no doubt, either, that he was *good*. Harry's not sure he's ready to lose to Malfoy.

Tuesday is Hermione's birthday, and Harry feels glad he remembered to buy and pack her present before he left for school, as it's only when Ron presents her with an enormous cake at breakfast time, and an elaborately wrapped gift, that he actually remembers it's today. Hermione unwraps her necklace from Ron all smiles; the pendant is a tiny fawn, reminiscent of the woodland creature from her soulmark. Ron helps her with the clasp, and they smile at each other as if they're the only people in the room.

Harry looks over at the Slytherin table to see Malfoy watching, although he quickly turns away. Malfoy's been ignoring him again, ever since their awkward encounter on Saturday night. But . . . he's watching him, too. Harry can feel eyes burning into the back of his neck, pretty much all the time. Sometimes, it's just paranoia; but often, when he turns, it's to see Malfoy's head snap away, to stare at something on the other side of the room.

Not that Harry's much better himself. He feels like trying to avoid looking at Malfoy is becoming his full-time hobby. Whenever he sees him, all he can think about is . . .

Harry wants to say it's the soulmark that he can't stop thinking about, and to a certain extent, it is. Every time he blinks, he can see it, imprinted on the backs of his eyelids. But it's not the soulmark so much as . . . the way the soulmark changes, whenever he touches Malfoy. He wants to trail his fingers over Malfoy's skin, and watch the mark shift, telling him things about Malfoy that Malfoy would never, ever say out loud.

And he can't stop thinking about the wanking thing, too, to be fair.

It's almost a relief when on Wednesday afternoon, Hermione opens up a folded-piece of parchment and tells him, "We could brew this today, I thought. I've been researching ancient spells that have fallen out of fashion, and this is reputed to be something medieval witches used when they knew they'd been cursed, but they weren't certain which spell was used."

It's probably fallen out of fashion because it doesn't work, Harry thinks, but he's bored of being pessimistic, and he's definitely bored of tying himself up in knots over Draco Malfoy. So he nods, and they spend the next couple of hours infusing vervain, rose petals, hyssop and agrimony in a copper-cauldron of gently simmering water, before adding salt, and lemon, and ending up with a thick, white paste that smells more like a perfume than a potion.

Harry has trouble keeping his optimism at the forefront of his mind as, later that evening, Hermione infiltrates the Slytherin common room, and then the dormitory, in order to explain to Malfoy what he needs to do with the paste. Allegedly, no outsider has ever entered the Slytherin common room in over seven centuries, Harry has been told, but this year the students seem to be operating on a 'don't look, don't see' policy, and they gaze through Hermione as if she's invisible.

“I’m sorry, Granger,” Malfoy says, “but did you just imply that the way to freeing myself from this spell is to *wash my hair*?”

Hermione doesn’t look up from her bag. She withdraws the pot containing the paste and places it on Harry’s bed, before also pulling out a large pile of what looks like white fabric, and topping it with a large white towel. “If you want to put it that way, then yes, though there’s a little bit more to it.”

Which is how Harry ends up back in the bathroom with Malfoy, Malfoy glowering at him wholeheartedly as Harry shoves the paste and white towel on to the bench at the side of the room. It’s a purification ritual of sorts, so everything Malfoy touches afterwards needs to be white – white towel, white pyjamas, white bedding. Harry decides that if Malfoy tries to make him change his sheets, he’ll hex his nose off.

“We need to stop meeting like this, Potter,” Malfoy says, folding his arms.

“This is all on you,” Harry says hotly. “I can’t see why you can’t wash your own bloody hair, and say your own bloody spell. What am I, your own personal house elf?”

“Granger said it would be better if you did it, and we all know how Granger’s always right,” Malfoy says sweetly.

She bloody well did, and all. Harry’s not sure he can ever forgive her. Particularly when Malfoy strides over to the door and swishes his wand to lock them in together.

“What? I’m not having Blaise bursting in every five seconds, to see if he can catch us shagging,” Malfoy says with a sneer, and unbelts the long bathrobe he’s wearing over his white pyjamas.

He’s not wearing pyjamas. At least – he’s wearing pyjama bottoms, but instead of his usual long-sleeved, high-necked pyjama top, he’s just wearing a thin, short-sleeved white T-shirt.

“Surprise!” Malfoy says sourly. “You get to look at my second-favourite tattoo today. I have no faith you won’t pour water all down my neck, and *someone* helped me discover that my normal winter nightwear sucks up water like a sponge.” He slouches over to the bench and sits down, arms resting on his knees, making no attempt to hide his Dark Mark.

Harry doesn’t want to make a big deal out of it, really, he doesn’t. It’s just, after several years of wondering if Malfoy had the mark or not, followed by months of wondering why the hell he’d agreed to it, he can’t *not* make a big deal out of it. Especially when Malfoy clearly wants to be asked. Doesn’t he?

Harry clamps his lips together and picks up the parchment with the spell written on it, and the pot of paste. Hermione’s instructions were to cast the spell, then rub the paste into Malfoy’s hair until the white paste turns black. Indicating, presumably, that the evil spell has been – what? Massaged out of Malfoy’s skull? It seems ridiculous, now he comes to think of it, but it’s too late to raise objections now. He hands the pot to Malfoy, then reads out the spell, swishing his wand in a figure of eight.

Malfoy wrinkles his nose. “Feels tingly,” he says. Harry’s quite impressed he didn’t flinch. He thinks *he’d* flinch if Malfoy cast an untested spell at his head, without warning.

Harry takes back the pot from Malfoy’s hand and opens the lid, scraping out some of the paste and dumping it on top of Malfoy’s head. It feels cold against Harry’s skin, but Malfoy doesn’t complain, just sits there as Harry spreads it through his hair, and then goes back to the pot for more, working his way methodically across Malfoy’s scalp until his whole head is lightly covered.

“Aren’t you going to ask me about it, then?” Malfoy says belligerently, as Harry wonders what, exactly, qualifies as ‘rubbing’, and how long he’s going to have to massage Malfoy’s head before the spell works.

“Ask you what?” Harry says, managing to tangle his fingers in Malfoy’s hair, and extracting himself with difficulty.

“Ow, don’t pull my hair out!” Malfoy protests. “And you know what I’m talking about,” he adds, in an undertone. “Don’t pretend to be more of an idiot than you actually are.”

Harry concentrates on rubbing his fingers through Malfoy’s hair in small, gentle circles. Each movement sends fragrance curling through the air. Malfoy had refused to talk about the Mark, pretty much, at his trial. It hadn’t helped his case. If Harry hadn’t spoken up for him – if Harry hadn’t been *allowed* to speak up for him, which was unusual, given his position as a member of the Wizengamot – Malfoy would probably be in Azkaban with his father, right now. Does Malfoy even realise that? Harry’s not sure. It would do no good, either way, to point it out.

Instead, Harry clears his throat and asks, “Why did you say yes?” It’s the question that eats away at him. How could Malfoy have agreed to it? Have wanted it? It’s inconceivable, as far as Harry’s concerned.

“Why did I say *yes*?” Malfoy repeats, his head jolting under Harry’s fingers. His tone is scathing. But then he takes in a big breath, and lets it out, repeating the action several times. Harry realises he’s trying to keep his temper, to not storm out. “You . . . you don’t understand, Potter. For most of us – for nearly all of us – it was never a choice, taking the Mark. It was the reward that no one, other than Aunt Bella, actually wanted.”

Harry keeps massaging, tiny circle after tiny circle. It’s soothing to his nerves, and gives him something to do. Something that’s not blurting out: *Well, why didn't you fucking say so at your trial, then?* He cares more about hearing Malfoy speak than he cares about being right.

“I think you think the Mark was some sort of . . . badge of honour, or something,” Malfoy continues, very low. “But it was his way of controlling us, of ensuring our loyalty to the cause.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asks. He’s not sure he buys this. The Mark *was* a badge of honour. Loyal Death Eaters, bound together by magic and by blood.

“Come on, don’t be dim,” Malfoy says, speaking a bit louder now. “Once Voldemort was dead, it took you, what, five minutes to track us all down and lock us up? You can’t talk away the Dark Mark. There’s no use in bloody trying. He *knew* that. It was always glory or death. If he failed, then he sure as hell was going to make sure we all failed alongside him.”

“It didn’t work that way after the first wizarding war,” Harry points out. “I still don’t see why you wanted it.”

Malfoy closes his eyes in frustration, and then opens them to glare at Harry, pulling his head out of Harry’s hands. “Are you some sort of idiot?” he says. “I never asked for it! Voldemort called me in front of him, and his merry bunch of evil morons, and told my father that he was rewarding his loyalty by making his son a full member of the cause. And we all know what *that* meant. It was punishment, pure and simple, for Father being a disappointment to him. And then he made me kneel, and forced me to swear loyalty, and then—” He stops, going pale.

“Then what?” Harry breathes.

“You can’t believe how much it hurt,” Malfoy says, tilting his head forward and staring at the floor.

Harry sits down next to him, but doesn’t speak.

“A million times worse than Crucio. I’d rather die than go through that again. Honestly, I would.”

“Turn around a bit,” Harry says.

“What? Oh,” Malfoy says, and swivels round so that his back is towards Harry, who reaches up and resumes working the paste through his hair. It’s not quite so comfortable as before; he has to reach up a bit, as Malfoy’s a couple of inches taller.

“We’re going to run out of awkward conversations soon if we go on at this rate,” Harry says, when the silence becomes uncomfortable.

“Oh, I think there’s a few more things to cover, don’t worry,” Malfoy says. “And there’s always my new personal favourite – my fated love for you, and your fated love for yourself – if we get stuck. I think that will take more than one session to exhaust.”

“Yes, all right,” Harry says. “There’s no need to be quite such a git. I was only making conversation.”

“Perhaps don’t?” Malfoy suggests.

This leaves sitting in silence as Harry massages Malfoy’s head and tries not to find it at all personal, or intimate, or . . . anything else. He’s never washed any else’s hair before, and although the shampoo is not the right texture, and it doesn’t lather under his fingers, it’s still, basically, hair washing. He’s still, basically, groping Malfoy’s head.

He had a wank while thinking about Malfoy, only the other day. And Malfoy . . . heard him wanking. Possibly.

Harry stares at the back of Malfoy's neck, and tries to think pure thoughts. The back of Malfoy's neck is red, and Malfoy shifts uncomfortably, and . . . leans into Harry's touch, arching his back, and bringing one hand up to brace himself against the wall.

"Are you shagging yet?" Zabini's voice booms, hollowly, through the keyhole, and Malfoy jerks his head out of Harry's hands, muttering something extremely rude, before leaning back into Harry's touch.

"He doesn't actually mean it, Potter," Malfoy says, sounding embarrassed. "He just thinks it's funny to wind me up, and this is the easiest way at the moment." He snorts. "It *would* be funny if it was happening to someone who wasn't me. How's the paste thing going? Any progress?"

"I think it's a bit darker," Harry says, squinting at it. "Sort of grimy, rather than purest white."

"How lovely! Well, keep rubbing then, Potter," Malfoy says, in a falsely bright voice. "Either the paste will turn black, or I'll eventually come in my pants, so either way I'm on to a winner."

Harry bites down on his lip. Hard. With great strength of will he manages to keep rubbing gentle circles against Malfoy's scalp, rather than run panicking from the room. Malfoy's definitely joking. He's one hundred percent joking.

Besides, Harry realises, cheeks overheating, he's no longer in any fit state to run anywhere. He's got the unwanted stiffy from hell.

Malfoy laughs. "Good job, Potter. We'll get you immune to Zabini's jokes yet. Mind you," he adds, his voice tinged with embarrassment, "it does feel pretty nice. If you're ever invalidated out of the Auror office, you have a fine career ahead of you as a professional . . ." He pauses. "Does anyone rub heads for a living? I suppose not."

About five torturous minutes later, the paste suddenly begins to darken, and Harry runs his palms flat over Malfoy's head, slicking back his hair with paste that's first grey, and then a dirty charcoal, and finally, with a last long swipe, jet black. Malfoy looks incredibly peculiar with black hair, even from behind, Harry thinks, and hopes Malfoy doesn't turn around. For more than one reason.

"Looks done to me," Harry says, though, rubbing his hands together to crumble off the worst of the paste, and tries not to panic.

"Right, Potter," Malfoy says, not turning. Thank Godric. "Evil though I am, I think I can manage to wash this gunk out of my hair without your heroic assistance, so unless you want me to turn around so you can admire my impressive hard-on, perhaps you'd like to shove off and leave me to it?"

It's a joke. It's definitely a joke. But given that right now Harry would rather face Death than let Malfoy see the bulge in his trousers, it's the opening he needs to leave the room with his dignity intact. "Ha ha," he says, and flees.

Of course, leaving the room with his dignity intact was the easy part, he realises when he's closed the door behind him and is confronted by Zabini's grinning face. Zabini's grinning face grins even more widely when his gaze drops to Harry's crotch. He doesn't even say anything, the fucker. He just . . . winks.

Harry knows, by now, where the other Slytherin bathrooms are, so he speed-limps to the next one along with unshakeable dignity, feeling Zabini's eyes burning into his back. It's empty, thank fuck. Harry locks the door behind him, and blocks up the keyhole, and casts Muffliato. And then, despite him knowing that Zabini will know exactly what he's up to, he yanks his trousers down to mid-thigh, pulls his cock out of his boxers, and, back against the door, strokes himself hard and fast.

It occurs to him when he's come, and he looks down to see that both his clothes and his cock are lightly smeared with black, that maybe he should have washed his hands before he tossed off, but the remnants of the paste had felt smooth and soft against his skin. And on the plus side, if anyone had cast an evil spell on his cock, then he's probably just removed it, hasn't he?

Malfoy's cast an evil spell on his cock, Harry thinks, closing his eyes and trying not to groan out loud. What is he doing? What is *Malfoy* doing to him, if he's even doing it on purpose? Harry doesn't know. All he knows for certain is that something seems to have flicked a switch in him somewhere, and all at once he's gone completely mad. Because if fancying Malfoy – who's a grade A tosser, and who delights in making his life as unpleasant and embarrassing as possible, and who is basically the worst person Harry could have decided to fancy in the history of forever – doesn't qualify him for a professional position as a gibbering loony, then what the hell does?

A wank is a wish your heart makes

The potion doesn't work. At least, it doesn't seem to work. Harry considers the fact that Malfoy could well be riddled with dark spells, so how would the purity spell know which to target first, and decides he won't say that out loud. He might end up massaging Malfoy's head for the rest of his life if he's not careful. On the plus side, though, whatever minor evil he extracted from Malfoy doesn't seem to have transferred itself to Harry, after his unwise post-spell actions. It doesn't make Harry's cock come out in boils, or become spontaneously erect whenever he sees, e.g., Greg Goyle either. But that's about all the positives Harry can glean from the situation.

He doesn't want to fancy Malfoy. And he definitely doesn't want *Zabini* to know he fancies Malfoy. The only thing worse than Zabini knowing he fancies Malfoy, is if *Malfoy* finds out he fancies, er, Malfoy.

Zabini knows he fancies Malfoy. Harry knows it's only a matter of time before Zabini tells him. He's just going to toy with Harry for a while first, Harry thinks, to extract maximum pleasure from the situation, before he does so. Harry doesn't think it's personal, exactly – Zabini seems to be like this with everyone in Slytherin – but that doesn't make it any better.

Malfoy's back to ignoring Harry again, which Harry supposes is a good thing, although it's also a fucking annoying thing. Malfoy needs to work on his ignoring skills, Harry thinks in his Transfiguration class on Thursday as he tries to concentrate on his work while Malfoy's eyes bore holes in his back. Ignoring should be, well, ignoring. Not constant staring, when you think the other person isn't looking. Is this how it's going to be for the rest of forever? Harry wonders. They try out a fix for the spell, and it's awkward and embarrassing, and it fails, and it's even more awkward and embarrassing. Rinse and repeat. Except now the cycle comes with surreptitious wanking.

And that's not even mentioning the awkward conversations they keep having. Malfoy's words about the Dark Mark keep going round and round in Harry's head, interrupted sporadically by flashes of Malfoy's back, and the curve of his neck, as he asks if Harry wants to admire his 'impressive hard-on' in a way that Harry's still not entirely certain was a joke.

Harry tries not to slam his head down the desktop in frustration. This year was meant to be about studying, and passing his exams, and finally getting to become an Auror, properly. It wasn't meant to be about tangling himself up in knots over Malfoy again, in new and novel ways, until he can barely concentrate on anything else at all.

Harry finds he *can* concentrate on other things, though, the next day. He can concentrate on Blaise Zabini, and how much the fucker deserves all flavour of bad and terrible and revolting things to rain down upon his head.

He knows *something's* happened during today's Muggle Studies class, as soon as he sees the others in the Great Hall during lunch. He's sitting with Ron and Hermione, after a hard

morning's Defence class. Auror Robards had them practicing practical defence – but he banned them from using the obvious spells, to encourage them to improvise when caught in a tight spot. It's the first time Harry's ever defended himself with a flurry of quills transfigured into teapots, followed up by a quick spell to turn the ground under Robards' feet to custard, and he thinks he did a reasonable job, all things considered. The morning's almost given him an appetite, but he stops chewing, mouth full of cheese baguette, when Pansy and Millicent stride in, eyes rolling so hard that it's a wonder they're still in their heads.

Greg follows, looking pleased with himself, and Zabini slaps him on the back, cackling. Harry looks away when Malfoy enters, just behind them, his head close to Nott's as they mutter something Harry can't hear to each other. He's not trying to ignore Malfoy, but then he doesn't need to try; his body seems determined to do it for him. Harry can't bring himself to go over, so it's only later, after dinner, that he finds out what Greg did – and how it seems to have turned Zabini into a psychopath.

Pansy seems the most outraged of them; she's so outraged about it, in fact, that as soon as Harry enters the common room, she calls him over. "*Potter* 'll agree with me that it was a disgusting thing to do, Blaise," she says, wrinkling her squat nose. "Greg has all the morals of an alley-cat, and you're not a whole lot better. Potter might be a Muggle-lover, but at least he doesn't look at pictures of them naked, in public."

"No, probably not in public," Zabini says mildly, crossing his legs and slouching back into his seat. "In private, though, I bet he's quite the deviant."

"Er, what?" Harry says, and Pansy is so outraged that she seems to forget she loathes Harry, moving up on the sofa to give him space to sit down.

"We were learning about the odd things Muggles do to get over their lack of magic," Pansy says as he sits down. "They have some sort of . . . box, it was, that you can question, and it produces pictures and information. We visited a café full of them. Moderately clever, I suppose. Only—"

"I used it to look up a naked bird with fantastic tits," Greg says, cracking his knuckles and smirking. "Pansy's just sore she's not got as good a rack as a Muggle."

The silence that follows is dangerous. "You've got lovely tits, Pans," Zabini says quickly. "Don't listen to Greg." And he casts a speedy *Protego* as Pansy shoots a curse at his head which, if it hit, would have had him coughing up frogs.

"Not sure Prof Smith was impressed by the bird's boobs, though," Greg adds. "We got chucked out of the caff for looking up smut, and he told me if I did it again, he'd throw me out of his class completely." He shrugs, still smirking. "Got other options, though. The world of tits isn't closed to me, just cos some Muggle wanker says so."

"Ugh! Too vile!" Pansy splutters. "Come on, Bullers, let's leave these perverts to their fantasies. They'll never get to see a *real* woman naked, unless they buck their ideas up a bit though!" she adds as a parting shot, tossing her hair as she strides off.

Greg shakes his head. “Bad tits. Good legs, though,” he adds approvingly when she’s left, and Nott, sitting darkly next to him, snorts.

Zabini grins, leaning forward in his seat and resting his elbows on his knees. “Ever used the internet, Potter?” he asks. “Took a fucking age for the image to show properly – thought it was going to stop loading at her shoulders, and that would have been a terrible disappointment. I wonder that Muggles bother. Your knob would have dropped off from boredom, before you got to the good bits.”

Harry *hasn’t* used the internet. He’s aware of it, vaguely, but it’s been too long since he’s lived permanently in the Muggle world. Dudley had a computer, but then Dudley had a lot of things that Harry wasn’t allowed to touch. He thinks, uncomfortably, that he probably knows more about the internet than he knows about dirty photos, though – either Muggle or wizarding. Do wizards even have that sort of thing? He supposes that’s a stupid question; if he can think it, it exists. One thing he knows for definite, though, is that Malfoy is sitting hunched up in the corner, as if the conversation is causing him physical pain, and—

“Do we *have* to talk about this any more?” Malfoy drawls, his lip curling. “You’re being boring, Blaise.”

Zabini doesn’t seem offended by that; he just grins, fiddling with a slim gold bracelet round his wrist. “So sorry, Draco. I know naked women aren’t your area of expertise.”

Harry blinks – did Zabini just say that out loud? In *public*? Malfoy doesn’t seem overly concerned, though; he rolls his eyes, almost as well as Pansy had earlier. “I have respect for women,” he says freezingly.

“Is that what they call it these days?” Zabini says airily, and seems unaffected by Malfoy’s glare. He waves a hand in a sort of shrug. “Anyway, I thought it might make a fun project.”

“What would?” Harry asks, and Malfoy groans.

“Don’t encourage him, Potter,” Malfoy says, forgetting to ignore him. “Haven’t you learned that by now?”

“Muggle porn,” Zabini says, in what seems like a non-sequitur, and Harry blinks, trying not to squirm.

“We have to write an essay on something Muggle,” Nott explains. “I chose weapons,” he adds. Harry thinks this is a bit disturbing, but no one else seems concerned. Perhaps he’s planning on using the weapons on Zabini, Harry thinks, and cheers up a bit.

“We haven’t had a proper boys’ night in for yonks,” Zabini says, raising his arms behind his head and stretching. “You’ll enjoy it,” he adds, addressing Harry.

Malfoy groans again. “Can you do me a favour, Potter?” he asks pleadingly, and doesn’t wait for an answer. “Can you drop dead? Just a little. I’d be ever so grateful.”

“No!” Harry says. The conversation so far has been a headache; a disjointed, inexplicable headache. What is Zabini banging on about?

“Great, that’s decided, then,” Zabini says. “I’m so pleased you both want to come to my Muggle porn extravaganza. Make sure you keep tomorrow night free.”

The jigsaw puzzle pieces slot together, to form . . . a photo of a naked woman, with huge boobs.

Malfoy slouches to his feet. “Do excuse me,” he says witheringly. “I’m just off to slit my wrists in our room, to prepare myself. I’ll do my best not to make a mess,” he adds, and strides off, hands jammed into his pockets, muttering under his breath as he goes.

Zabini watches him leave with mild interest. “Up for a trip tomorrow afternoon to lay in the stock, Greg?” he asks.

Greg grunts assent.

“I’m sorry, but – you are making a joke, aren’t you?” Harry asks. “Just checking.”

Zabini raises a hand to his chest, and widens his eyes. “I’m wounded that you would think that, Potter,” he says. “Wounded.”

Harry wracks his brain for an excuse to miss the evening, and with a lurch of relief he lands on one. “It’s Hermione’s birthday party tomorrow evening,” he says. “Sorry to miss your, er, event.”

Zabini grins lazily. “It’s a night *in*, Potter, so we’ll be, well, in. We’ll wait for you before we start, don’t worry.”

Don’t worry? Harry makes a vow to himself that he’ll stay out all night on Saturday if he has to, what with the prospect of Blaise Zabini waiting at home for him, ready and willing to brandish a selection of Muggle naked women in his direction, while real-life Malfoy glowers at him from his bed, and Memory-Malfoy says ‘*impressive hard-on*’ over and over in his mind.

Hermione’s birthday party turns out to be a birthday meal, which starts at half past six. By nine, they’ve already finished their food, and have moved on to coffee, and Ron’s already starting to yawn ostentatiously and suggest that Hermione might like to walk back to the castle with him. He’s clearly gearing up to . . .

Harry doesn’t want to think about what he’s gearing up to. He loves Ron, he really does, but the thought of him naked, making sweet, sweet love to Hermione, makes him want to throw up in his mouth a little. Still, the thought is almost more appealing than the idea of attending Zabini’s ‘Muggle porn extravaganza’, so he attempts to keep the conversation going, until Ron scowls at him – Ron! Scowling! – and Harry gives in with bad grace, wishing the pair of them good night.

Of course, just because Ron and Hermione have left, doesn't mean *he* has to. Luna and Neville are still there, and he enjoys their company, and . . .

"Shall we go back to the castle together, Harry?" Luna asks, linking her arm into his. "I know it's not that late, but it's been a long week. Neville? You too?"

Neville nods, and before Harry can protest – he wants to stay out all night! Honest! – they've got up, paid the bill, extracted themselves from Harry's ever-present crowd of admirers, and are taking the short walk from Hogsmeade back to the castle.

Being back at the castle doesn't mean he has to go to the dormitory, though, does it? Harry tells himself. OK, so Luna might be a washout, but Neville's bound to invite him up to the Gryffindor common room for a drink.

"I'm off to bed early," Neville says earnestly, as soon as they're in the Entrance Hall. "I know it's Saturday night, but I'm getting up at dawn tomorrow to harvest some rare plants with Pomona, and I want to be fresh for it."

Harry looks beseechingly at Luna, in case she's changed her mind, but she just smiles at him in a dreamy, thoughtful manner. "You look eager to get back to your new room-mates," she says. "I'll wish you good night, Harry."

All right, Harry tells himself. Just because he's billy no-mates, it still doesn't mean he has to go back to the Slytherin dormitory. He could . . . sleep in the Astronomy Tower, for instance. Or hang out in the Entrance Hall for the rest of his life.

"What are you doing skulking about in the Entrance Hall?" Pansy asks. She's wearing a very flouncy robe and is clearly on her way out; Millicent's right behind her, also alarmingly flouncy. "Got no friends?"

The pair are quickly followed by an enormous gaggle of girls, clearly also going out. "Join us!" one of them says, giggling, after being nudged by her friends.

"Er, sorry, I already have plans," Harry says. And to his deep dismay, the girls don't seem to believe him, and the only way he can shake them off is to walk down the stairs, as if he's going back to his common room, and then actually go *into* his common room, because it turns out they've followed him down the stairs and he can't just lean against the wall ignoring them for the rest of his life. He has his dignity to consider.

It's too much to ask that Zabini isn't inside, waiting for him. "Potter!" he says. "We've been waiting for you!" And he takes Harry gently – but unrelentingly – by the arm, drawing him down the inner corridor and pushing him inside their dormitory.

The door clicks shut behind him with a fatal kind of finality. On the plus side, as soon as he's in, Nott – who looks about as pleased with the situation as Harry himself is – shoves a stiff drink in his hand. On the negative side – well, there's everything else.

Everything else starts with Malfoy, who's lying sprawled on his bed with an air of great suffering, propped up on his elbows, his shirt undone a couple of buttons at the neck and his

sleeves rolled up. He shoots Harry a look when he enters, and moves as if to shove his sleeves down again to cover the black stain of the Dark Mark, but stops himself, before turning his head to stare at the wall with great interest.

Everything else also ends with Malfoy, to be fair. But in the middle, there's Zabini, who . . . Who seems determined to destroy Harry's sanity.

"I picked up a jazz mag for poofers, just for you, Draco," Zabini says, chucking it over to Malfoy, who catches it – probably because it's better to catch a flying jazz mag than have it hit you in the face. "Are you grateful?" He doesn't wait for a reply; he's too busy rummaging in a carrier bag and dishing out magazines. Nott takes his and, to Harry's discomfort but to no one else's obvious surprise, vanishes behind his bed-curtains.

When Harry manages to tear his gaze away from first Zabini, and then the curtains, it's to see Malfoy idly *flicking through the magazine*. He pauses, pursing his lips, at a page that seems to be, from what Harry can see, mostly erect cock. "Bit low on intellectual content," Malfoy says, and turns the page to another erect cock, this time in a different shade. "Not much to write about for your project, Blaise. I think you're going to fail." His tone is bored, but Harry thinks there's an edge to it. Although, it's hard to tell if there's an edge, when Harry's ears are buzzing, and his heart thrumming. He takes a swig of his drink, and manages to only spill about half of it down his chin.

"I thought you might say that," Zabini says, very self-satisfied. He's rummaging in his plastic bag again. He doesn't look up as he says, very firmly, "If you're going to toss off, Greg, then do it in the corner. Last time, I got a better look at your cock than I ever wanted, and I still wake up screaming, sometimes. I don't want you to put me off sex forever."

Greg laughs, but his face is going red as he flicks through his own magazine. "Uh . . ." he says, and then shrugs. "Gonna go have a wank somewhere else, then, arsewipe." And he holds the magazine low, in front of his crotch, and sidles out of the room, presumably towards the bathroom.

"Bet it's not nearly as classy as this in the Gryffindor dormitory," Malfoy says, back to flicking through the mag in front of him with distaste. "Hmm, Potter?"

Harry doesn't know what to do with himself. He sits on the end of his bed and takes another long swallow of his drink. Maybe if he gets pissed enough, he can perform some kind of self-obliviation. It doesn't need to be total memory loss; just enough to erase the sight of Malfoy's judgemental expression as his eyes flick over an enormous, cut penis, and find it in some way lacking.

"This is pretty poor for an extravaganza," Malfoy says, closing the magazine and tossing it back over to Zabini, who passes it over to Harry. Harry takes it automatically, and then doesn't know what to do with it. He's pretty sure if he examines it more closely he won't give himself a hard-on – just a complex.

If he has to look at Malfoy any longer, though, the hard-on issue will not be a problem. Despite his bored expression, Malfoy's flushing pink around the edges in ways that are doing serious damage to Harry's peace of mind.

“Muggle porn seems pretty shit,” Zabini says, sitting on the edge of Malfoy’s bed. “Budge over.” Malfoy budes, and Zabini swings his legs up, to sit cross-legged next to him, putting the paperback book he’s holding down on the duvet.

“Not like *your* collection is anything to be proud of though,” Malfoy says, wrinkling his nose. “A disgusting envelope of tired old pics you practically have to disinfect yourself before touching?” He shudders. “Unless you’re counting your ludicrous pensieve, too, I suppose.”

“The wank bank is *not* ludicrous,” Zabini says.

Harry tries to breathe his drink, and finds it difficult.

“What was that?” Malfoy asks politely.

“Oh, just choking to death. Don’t mind me,” Harry manages, once he’s got enough air back into his lungs to displace the whiskey.

“If you’re a good boy, I’ll let you use it,” Zabini says, addressing Harry, to Harry’s deep distress. “There’s a great one of that barmaid at the Broomsticks bending over. You can see right up her . . .” He trails off, lost in thought, and then his lips quirk into a grin. “Not that you’ll be interested in that, I suppose. I haven’t got any memories of Draco bending over. I try to erase those from my mind.”

Malfoy moves with surprising swiftness; one firm shove and Zabini falls off the bed, landing heavily on his arse.

“Ow!” Zabini complains.

“Deserved,” Malfoy says, shrugging. “Blaise’s ‘wank bank’,” he says to Harry, resting his chin on his folded arms, “is just a pathetic collection of memories of him and the others perving over unfortunate women they happen to have met in public.”

“It’s not pathetic – it’s noble,” Zabini says from the floor. “I could be ravishing these beauties. Instead, I am merely admiring.”

Malfoy just snorts. “Anyway, what’s this?” he says, picking up the book on the bed next to him.

Nott’s sound-muffling spell fails, with a pop, and the room resounds with pants and groans, and the *boing* of springs as he shakes the bed.

“Faster! Louder! Harder!” Zabini calls encouragingly. “Woop woop.”

“Fuck—” Nott says, his words cut off as the spell snaps back into place.

Harry can feel himself going redder and redder.

“Pinched it off Pans, who pinched it off Bullers,” Zabini says to Malfoy, as if he hadn’t just encouraged Theodore Nott to wank faster/louder/harder. “You know she’s been reading Muggle fiction for a while now, as background research, or something?” He sounds a bit as if

he's telling a Healer, with infinite sadness, that his grandmother is now wearing a cat as a bonnet and singing a song about fish, so perhaps the services of the Janus Thickkey ward might be required. "She's graduated from romantic crap to erotic fiction, apparently. Pansy purloined it when she saw steam coming out of Bullers' ears, she said, and thought of me. *I* thought you could read us a bedtime story."

Harry wishes he could appreciate the fact that Millicent Bulstrode is reading Muggle fiction out of choice – it seems unlikely – but he's too busy trying not to spontaneously combust at the thought that Malfoy is potentially going to *read erotic fiction out loud*. He's not sure his heart can take it. Death looms, sexily, on the horizon.

Malfoy flicks through the book, eyes skimming over the passages. "No nice young lady would read this muck," he says with a snort. "Listen to this: *She slid down on to her knees, nuzzling his crotch with her cheek. Even through her jeans, she could feel his enormous erection, and her mouth started to water. She quickly unzipped his fly, and found he wasn't wearing any underpants. His huge cock sprang free, and she took it into her mouth immediately, sucking and sucking. He tasted of manliness, and he groaned, hardening even further as her tongue—*"

"You all right, Potter?" Zabini interrupts, sniggering. "You look like you need some air."

"Fine!" Harry says, and to his horror it comes out high-pitched. "Fine," he repeats, and this time it's too low. He might as well just kill himself now, he thinks. If he has to listen to Malfoy reading erotica out loud for much longer he's going to have a heart attack anyway, and least if he expires now he'll die with marginally more dignity.

"Glad to hear it," Zabini says bracingly, and sniggers again. "Let's lower the lights then, and you can read us a bit more, Draco, to lull us to sleep."

What follows is possibly the most excruciating ten minutes of Harry's life. He gets to lie in bed, wide awake, with the room in semi-darkness, as Malfoy, in the bed opposite, reads the longest description of a blow-job ever known to man. The heroine of the piece brings the hero close to release over and over, and Harry begins to feel genuine pain and sympathy for the poor sod as his own cock twitches and leaks and throbs, untouched beneath the covers.

Malfoy stops reading just before the unfortunate hero is – presumably – at last allowed to come. And then, what follows is possibly the most excruciating *five* minutes of Harry's life. Because Zabini, who's back in his own bed by now, casts Nox, and then proceeds to . . . have a chat with Malfoy, about the literary merits of the erotica, while . . .

Not to put too fine a point on it, while tossing off. Enthusiastically.

Malfoy doesn't sound all that bothered that he's having a conversation with someone wanking, although when Zabini comes, with an enthusiastic noise reminiscent of a cow mooing, Malfoy breaks off and mutters, "Fuck's *sake*."

"Mm. Night, folks," Zabini says, sounding both amused and relaxed, and soon Harry can hear him snoring.

Harry lies awake, not wanking, for a very long time. He thinks he's going to die.

And across the room from him, he can hear Malfoy breathing – the fast, uneven breath of someone who is lying wide awake, not wanking, too.

It occurs to Harry, just as he's falling asleep, that he's barely thought about Malfoy's soulmark all day. His dreams are restless, and when he wakes with a start, much too early for it to be properly morning, he knows he's had a nightmare about Malfoy, but for the first time in forever, he can't remember what about.

At some point Harry must have fallen back to sleep, because he wakes again when it's fully light – or, at least, as light as it ever gets in a room under water. It still creeps him out a bit to think about it. But right now he's not worrying about the whole under the lake thing; he's too busy wondering why his cheek is resting on something . . . crinkly. He Accios his glasses, and turns his head to see . . .

“Argh!” Harry says, shooting up in bed. His bed curtains are wide open, and he appears to have been using a double-page spread of an entirely naked, slim blonde man with an absolutely enormous dong as a pillow.

Malfoy, who is sitting on the edge of his bed and leaning forward to do up his heavy dragonhide boots, looks up, raises a pale, snide eyebrow, and looks away again. “Nothing to do with me,” he says. “In case you were wondering.”

Harry is filled with a deep, all-encompassing outrage, and only Malfoy's currently there to express it to. It's worth a go. “Zabini's a . . . a . . .”

“Festering wankstain?” Malfoy suggests, still fiddling with a boot.

Harry grins. “Seriously, though, how have you put up with him for so long? I had no idea what he was really like.” Zabini's casual almost-sharing of Malfoy's secrets from the night before rises in his mind, and he asks, before he's engaged his brain, “Don't you worry he'll out you accidentally?”

Malfoy freezes. “*What?*”

“Er – or does everyone in Slytherin already know you're gay, then?” Harry expands, feeling a bit like he's accidentally digging his own grave. There's an ominous quality to Malfoy's stillness that suggests an explosion is imminent – one which will take out the whole castle.

Malfoy straightens up. “So, I'm gay, am I?” he asks. His tone is derisive. “How do you know that, exactly?”

“Oh! Well, er . . .” Harry says, stricken by confusion. “Pansy told me?” This doesn't seem to prove it to Malfoy, so Harry tries again. “And, er, Zabini seems pretty certain? There's the whole gay porn thing. And – well – the, um, soulmark . . .” He trails off, wincing. The soulmark isn't evidence of anything other than the sheer unkindness of the universe because

it's not fucking *true*. He needs to stop thinking it might be even the slightest bit true, or he'll go properly off his rocker. "Pansy told me!" he repeats again, this time firmly. "Don't be a dickhead, Malfoy."

"Me?" Malfoy asks, and snorts, bending back down to finish doing up his right boot. "Listen, Potter, because I'm only going to say this once. Yes, I *am* gay, thank you, but . . . there's only one person in Slytherin who I've actually told. I mean . . . actually said it out loud to. The others are just presuming."

They're presuming pretty damn hard, Harry thinks, and Malfoy glances over at him.

"When Blaise senses a weak spot, he likes to get right in there and jam his elbow into it," Malfoy says bitterly. "Best not to rise to the bait. Mostly, though, my friends are simply too polite to raise something which is clearly so fucking *inconvenient* for me. And to be honest, Potter, this is absolutely not something I feel comfortable talking about, so why I'm talking to *you* about it, I don't have a fucking clue. I clearly didn't get enough sleep."

"So, er, it was Pansy you told, then?" Harry says, trying to take this in.

Malfoy stands up, tugging his robe to get it to fall evenly. His hair has fallen in front of his eyes, and he shoves it back impatiently. "Can't you count, Potter?" he says, on his way to the door. "I've told *one* person. *One*." When he gets to the door, he turns. "And don't you fucking *dare* tell anyone else, OK?"

He's got his hand on the doorknob, and Harry just *knows* the sod is about to leave the room, in a swish of robes, without waiting for an answer. Fuck that. "Malfoy?" he says, before Malfoy can make his dramatic exit.

Malfoy leans forward and clonks his forehead on the door. "What?" he asks, a bit muffled.

"Are you going to ignore me again now?"

Malfoy straightens up a bit. "I was pretty much planning on doing that, yes," he says, addressing the door. "Problem?"

"Er, no. I just thought it might be useful to know in advance," Harry says.

Malfoy laughs. It's about thirty per cent groan, but it's still a laugh. He half-turns, his expression wry. "I'm off to Edinburgh with Greg to do our *actual* Muggle Studies homework. I'm not sure last night counted. Have a good day, Potter," he says, and leaves the room with just a *small* swish of robes, pulling the door firmly shut behind him.

I show only your heart's desire

Harry doesn't manage to sleep much on Sunday night. Nor on Monday. Nor Tuesday. By Wednesday he's beginning to feel a bit like the walking dead – and look it, too, by the concerned way Hermione keeps glancing at him in Potions. Even Malfoy and Zabini seem worried. At least, they seem to have a game going where they throw biscuits at his face and score points for getting them close to his mouth, and he thinks it might be motivated fifty-one per cent by concern, even if the other forty-nine is pure fuckwittery.

"I'm so sorry, Harry," Hermione says later, when he drags her into a quiet corner after lunch and asks if she can please, *please* give him some good news about a fix to the spell. Like, *now*. "I've been making a list of possible things to try, but it's all too tenuous. I only want to share it when I've got something more constructive. Are you going to be OK till then?"

"I'll be fine, don't worry!" Harry says, hoping he sounds optimistic rather than hysterical, and tries to persuade her into believing him. He thinks he might be fine if he gets some sleep, but he just can't seem to get his brain to turn off for long enough to manage it. It's not even the whole porn thing that's properly fucking him up, not really. It would be almost better, Harry thinks, if it *was* that. Instead, it's something infinitely more complicated, and difficult, and impossible to pin down. It's . . . Harry doesn't know what it is, not really. He just thinks that Malfoy talking to him like a normal person – as if they're halfway to becoming almost friends – might have broken something within him.

He feels like he's been in an odd dream for the past few weeks, coasting along on the expectation that it will all be over soon, and now he's woken up to reality. And the reality is: they might not be able to fix this.

If they can't fix it though – and he hasn't given up hope, he's just feeling . . . pessimistic, and wound-up so tight he's in danger of snapping – then he has to at least know it's *real*. Or isn't real. He no longer knows exactly what he wants – he wants to touch Malfoy. The realisation is overwhelming, and stupid, and simultaneously something he embraces and rejects. And at the same time, he wants to touch Malfoy all right: to punch him in the head, and tell him that he's a spoiled, awful, sarcastic brat, and could he please just *stop* it? Because somewhere under that unpredictable, infuriating exterior is someone Harry could actually like. Probably. Possibly.

It's all this that's stopping him from sleeping. Emotions and anxieties and fears running and running through his mind, tangling up with the constant battling questions: what if Malfoy's soulmark is real? And what the fuck does it mean for Malfoy – for them both, maybe – that Harry doesn't have one at all?

It's all this that means that when the perfect way to find out the truth dawns on Harry, in the middle of the night, he doesn't stop to think that maybe he should discuss it with someone, rationally, in the morning. Instead, he slides out of bed, shoves on his slippers, and shuffles over to Malfoy's bed.

Malfoy hasn't shut his curtains, and despite the darkness, his hair gleams pallidly on his pillow.

Harry reaches over to shake Malfoy's shoulder gently, and Malfoy appears to snap awake almost immediately, with almost terrifying alertness. He doesn't attack; he stills into frozen readiness, only relaxing when Harry whispers, "Shh, don't worry, it's just me."

Malfoy sits up, scrubbing a hand through his hair, and looks wary. "What?" he whispers back.

Harry presses a finger to his lips, and indicates Malfoy should follow him out of their dormitory. He tiptoes towards the door, and feels faintly surprised when he looks back to see Malfoy swinging his legs over the side of his bed, putting on his slippers, and padding softly after him.

"This had better be good," Malfoy says, on a yawn, as they walk through the common room and Harry gingerly opens the door to the dungeons outside, peering through it to check no one's out there. "Why have you lured me from my bed to pace the corridors in my jim-jams, exactly, if that's not too obvious a question?"

Malfoy looks dishevelled, and he yawns again, tugging at the neck of his pyjamas as if he feels vulnerable. He probably does, a bit, Harry thinks, feeling bad; Malfoy's pyjama top isn't quite high enough to cover the edge of the soulmark. Every time he moves, Harry can see it glint, at the base of his throat.

"I had an idea," Harry says, leading the way to the stairs.

"Wonders never cease," Malfoy mutters behind him.

"It might not be there, but . . ." Harry trails off. How likely *is* it that the Mirror of Erised lies where he left it, all those years ago? He straightens his shoulders and hopes for the best.

At least the trapdoor is still there, when they reach the right spot in the third floor corridor. It's good start. Harry tugs it open, and Malfoy raises his eyebrows.

"I'm sorry, but – what the fuck?"

Harry shrugs, incants a Cushioning Charm, and drops down into the darkness. It smells faintly of decaying plantlife, when he hits the bottom with a bounce and an uncomfortable thud, but to his relief the Devil's Snare is all but dead, although some strands clasp sadly at his ankles, only releasing him when he stamps on them hard.

A few seconds later, Malfoy bounces down too, crashing into him, a hard, heavy weight. "Oof," he says. "What am I doing here, Potter? I must be mad."

"Come on," Harry says, leading the way through the underground chambers. It's creepy, to revisit his past like this, each chamber an eerie, abandoned reminder of childhood bravery. How did he do it? How did *they* do it? Just being here now is making him want to run away, and there's no danger at all, just the echo of evil, long past. The massive chess pieces lie

there, inanimate, and the potions chamber, with its trickery and poisons, is silent and still, the flames extinguished and the contents of the bottles long evaporated.

He's convinced himself the mirror won't be there by the time they enter the final chamber together, Malfoy uncharacteristically quiet by his side, but it's there, an ominous dark object on the far side of the room. From here, he can't see his reflection, just the mirror's smooth, waiting surface, flat and cool, like open water.

"Well, *that* doesn't look at all evil," Malfoy says sarcastically beside him, which breaks the tension a bit. And sneezes. The room is dusty, Harry realises, as if no one has come in since . . . well, since he protected the Philosopher's Stone from Voldemort, when he was eleven. Maybe he should have waited till daylight to resurrect these old, dusty ghosts, but it's too late now.

"It's called the Mirror of Erised," Harry explains, shuffling his feet a bit. The dust rises in a cloud, making him cough.

"Fuck a duck," Malfoy swears. "And you think looking in that monstrosity is a good idea why, exactly?"

"How do you know what it is?" Harry asks. He didn't know the mirror's existence was common knowledge. Looking at it now, in its gloomy, dusty tomb, it doesn't seem likely.

Besides, Harry thinks wildly, if Zabini knew about it, say, he'd have already whipped it off to their dormitory, to use in some kind of sordid sex game, or at least to watch himself in. Harry suspects Blaise Zabini's heart's desire is Blaise Zabini.

"My father was the Dark Lord's right-hand man, pretty much," Malfoy says. "You think I wouldn't know how you fucked up his return in first year?" He shrugs, voice souring. "Mind you, he didn't tell me till much later, but he told me all the same. He grew quite loose-tongued with me as his grip on power slipped." As he speaks, he's staring at the mirror. He can't seem to look away.

"You don't have to," Harry says, his heart pounding as he takes a small step closer. "I just . . . I have to know, OK?"

Malfoy grabs him by the back of his T-shirt. "What if it's the wrong answer though, you idiot?"

Harry stops, and twists round. "Don't you want to know for sure?"

Malfoy's expression is very tight. "I already know for sure, Potter. I used my brain, and it told me the right answer. I don't need a magic mirror to read my mind – I can read it all by myself."

Harry thinks this is bravado, and he's impressed, but . . . "Well, bully for you. I feel like I'm going nuts, personally. I just want an answer. Not sure there *is* a wrong one – they're all bloody wrong."

Malfoy's expression is getting more and more disagreeable by the second. "If it'll stop you whinging, then come on, then. Let's get it the fuck over with, shall we?" he says, and he takes Harry by the arm, so tight it hurts, and pulls him towards the mirror.

Harry doesn't want to look, but he does. He doesn't; he does. He . . . he looks, almost by mistake, and sees . . . For a moment, he thinks he just sees their reflections, his and Malfoy's, exactly as they are. Maybe the magic has failed, he thinks, filled with disappointment, and relief, all mixed together. But then . . . he squints, trying to compare the reality to the reflection. In reality, Malfoy's fingers around his arm are digging in; in the mirror, it's more of a casual, friendly touch. They're arm in arm, as if they're properly friends. And . . . Malfoy's still wearing his pyjamas in the reflection, and his sleeves are rolled up.

Harry frowns at his reflection. His heart's desire is that Malfoy . . . not hold his arm so tightly? And not have hot forearms? It's certainly stuffy in the room, the air close, as if it's been sitting there for the past hundred years. He tears his gaze away with difficulty; even though it's a pretty boring vision, all things considered, the mirror still has an odd, compelling quality.

The mirror seems to have rather more of a compelling quality for Malfoy, though. His eyes are enormous, and he's swaying slightly, staring and staring and staring at something Harry can't see. Harry can't get him to stop looking, and in the end he has to shove his hands over Malfoy's face to cover his eyes, and keep them there as he struggles, eventually managing to twist him away from the mirror.

Malfoy jerks, and tries to look back, but Harry grabs and holds him tight, pulling his head into the crook of his neck. He can feel Malfoy's heart hammering through his skin. It's disconcerting. Malfoy struggles weakly against him for a moment, hands tangled into Harry's top to steady himself, but then stills. He's doesn't relax, but he doesn't pull away, either; he just stands there.

"What did you see?" Harry asks, when it gets uncomfortable. He is, basically, hugging Malfoy, even if it's just to stop him staring into the abyss.

"Can we go back to bed now?" Malfoy says into Harry's hair. "Thanks for the thought, Potter, but it's amazingly horrible down here."

"Malfoy—" Harry starts.

"No," Malfoy says. "I saw what I knew I would. I don't want to share."

Malfoy doesn't sound very well, Harry thinks. And they're still locked together in their awkward almost-embrace, so he obviously *can't* be feeling very well. "Er, *I* saw Zabini with his cock out," he says, attempting humour. "It was surprisingly small," he adds.

Malfoy finally extracts himself from Harry's arms and fiddles with his sleeves, moving on to picking invisible fluff off the bottom of his pyjama top. "Your heart's desire is Zabini rogering you with his small cock?" he asks, trying to smirk. "Weak, Potter."

“Yeah, well,” Harry says, and then can’t think of how to continue that, so he just shrugs. “Come on, let’s go, then. I’m, er, sorry if you saw something shit.”

Malfoy sighs – a sharp exhalation of breath. “I saw the impossible, that’s all. And anyway, isn’t that the point of that horrible thing? To show you something you can’t have, and drive you mad with wanting it?” He snorts. “I can drive myself mad perfectly adequately by myself, without any extra help.”

They walk in silence back through the chambers, and Harry feels very glad there are a couple of brooms still lying abandoned in the chamber that used to house the flying keys, because otherwise it would be a bit tricky to get back out again. The trap-door entrance is on the third floor, and the length of the drop suggested they plummeted at least four. It’s the first time he’s flown for ages, and Malfoy’s anxious, grim expression suggests the same is true for him, but they manage it without embarrassment, and are soon back on the third floor, sneaking through quiet corridors to bed.

They’re nearly back when Malfoy, going red around the edges, folds his arms very tight across his chest and snaps, “Tell me just one thing: was it that bitch, Ginny Weasley?”

Was *what* Ginny Weasley?

“In the mirror, you fucking imbecile,” Malfoy explains politely.

Oh. Oh! *Oh*. “Er, no,” Harry says. “I saw—”

“I don’t want to know what you saw,” Malfoy says petulantly. “I don’t care. Now shut up about it.” He opens the door to their dormitory and slips in, Harry close behind him.

All is quiet, and everyone is asleep. Apparently. Harry glares at Zabini’s closed curtains and raises his middle finger. By the time he’s turned back to Malfoy, he’s already in bed, the covers pulled up to his nose and his back to Harry.

Harry’s not sure what he would have asked anyway. *Excuse me, Malfoy, but did you just admit to being jealous of Ginny?* Even if that question wouldn’t get him hexed to kingdom come, he’s not sure he wants to know the answer. Because if Malfoy’s jealous of Ginny, that means . . .

On Harry’s bedside table is a mild sleeping potion, which Hermione slipped into his hand earlier that evening, with another of her looks of concern. He doesn’t want to sleep, to dream of Malfoy. But he wants to lie awake endlessly, and draw obvious conclusions from the facts, even less. So he leans over, picks up the vial, and downs it in one. He’s asleep even before he’s finished it all, the vial falling out of his limp hand as he slumps back on to the bed, fast asleep and snoring.

Thursday’s transfiguration lesson is all about precision, McGonagall tells them. “All successful transfiguration needs to be precise, of course,” she reminds them, “but the more accurate and intricate your spellwork, the better your outcome will be. Remember –

conjunction will be the first part of your final exam. If your conjured object doesn't last at *least* twenty-four hours before vanishing again, I will have to fail you."

She demonstrates what she wants them to do today. In front of her, and in front of every student, is a medium-sized intricately carved wooden box. McGonagall transfigures it into . . . exactly the same box, except half the size. She then vanishes it, before conjuring something identical to the original box on to the desk in front of her. It looks simple, but . . .

Fifteen minutes later, Harry takes a final look at the textbook on the desk between himself and Hermione, and the mathematical formula that McGonagall's been trying to drum into them since first year, with varying degrees of success. He thinks he's got it – he's had enough practice that he can simultaneously hold the formula in his mind, along with his intention. He focuses on the key variables – *bodyweight*, *viciousness*, *wand power* – and channels his intention down his arm, through his hand, and into his wand, which he moves with purpose and firmness. Hermione, beside him, is nodding in approval.

Unfortunately, one of the key variables is also *concentration*. At the vital moment, Harry sees a flash of white out of the corner of his eye, as Malfoy makes his own attempt on the spell, and his concentration slips.

"Harry, *quick!*" Hermione hisses, and Harry vanishes his work with style and panache. And panic. He doesn't *think* anyone else had time to notice that his box's intricate carvings had twisted into the words *Draco Malfoy*, in a repeating pattern, snaking around the box in a highly-decorated font. But he glances around, all the same, to see . . . his classmates mostly concentrating on their own work, as if they're in class to actually learn something.

"Harry—" Hermione starts, a questioning tone in her voice.

"Right – conjuring next, isn't it?" Harry interrupts. He's not entirely convinced he wants to try it. The way things are going, he'll probably conjure an enormous wooden sculpture of a penis, with a nameplate reading 'Suck it, Potter – Love, Malfoy'. But he doesn't want to have a personal conversation in class, even behind a Muffliato. He's not in the mood.

Hermione gives in with good grace. "Remember to *concentrate*," she says, the know-it-all in her rising to the surface. "Hold the original box in your mind – its shape, its size, its texture. The *box*, Harry. Not . . . something else," she adds, unhelpfully.

"I know that!"

"I know you know," Hermione says. "But do *you* know you know?"

Harry thinks he might be still slightly asleep, after taking that sleeping potion. "Probably," he hedges, and turns to the textbook to remind himself of the steps. He waves his wand, thinking, determinedly, that he must think of the box, rather than Malfoy, and . . . It looks all right, as far as Harry can see. The pattern is a little fuzzy, and the box is a little larger than it's meant to be, but when he picks it up, it feels solid, and somehow friendly, as if it's made of real wood, that once grew and breathed in some distant forest.

The professor comes over, and smiles at him. “Not bad, Harry,” she says, taking the box from him and examining it. She opens it up, and raises her eyebrows, before shutting it again. “One of the dangers of conjuration is producing something that looks fine from the outside, but is something else at its heart,” she says. “The spell needs to be solid all the way through, or you could find yourself in a pickle.”

When she’s moved on to the next pair of students, Hermione raises her eyebrows at him, and goes to open the box. It’s probably penises, Harry thinks gloomily. He’s just produced a box full of penises, to show to the headmistress.

“Oh, *Harry*,” Hermione says, and hands it over, so he can see. The whole inside of the box is covered in carvings. In Harry’s own handwriting, he can read, over and over, *Don’t think about Malfoy don’t think about Malfoy don’t think about Malfoy*. He thinks, as he shuts it with a clonk, that on balance he’d rather have produced the penises.

After class, Hermione pulls Harry into the library, and leads him through the winding, twisting stacks to a study desk surrounded by shelves. She casts Muffliato as she sits down, pulling out a colour coordinated timetable, which she pushes across the table towards him. “I thought you might like a copy of my revision timetable,” she says as he sits. “It might help you concentrate a bit, on something that’s not . . .” She trails off, and sighs, resting her elbows on the table. “I’m not surprised that this has thrown you off balance, Harry, but . . .” She doesn’t seem to be able to find the right words, her forehead wrinkling as she thinks. “Do you like Draco now?” she asks tentatively.

“No!” Harry protests, and then squirms in his seat as she narrows her eyes. “I don’t know,” he says gloomily, slumping down and resting his arms on the desk, and his chin on his arms.

“I didn’t necessarily mean in a . . . a . . . romantic way,” Hermione says, but even that makes Harry colour up, the blood rushing to his cheeks to wave at her and confirm any suspicions she might have. “I just meant – I mean, take me. I never, ever thought I’d have anything to say to Pansy and Millicent, given everything, but it’s weird. Sometimes, I forget who they are, if you see what I mean? I thought you might be feeling the same, given that you’re living in the same dormitory with Draco. It’s no wonder it’s mixing you up a bit, given the . . . situation.”

Could that be it? Harry wonders. Their physical proximity, in combination with the emotional turmoil of the soulmarks, making him susceptible to . . . To what, though? Hermione’s talking about him thinking about Malfoy a lot. It’s quite a jump from that to wanting to. . . Harry can feel himself getting even hotter. But then, there’s the evidence of the mirror to take into account, he supposes. The Malfoy he saw reflected in the mirror seemed well disposed towards him, yes, but he was hardly licking his lips and giving him the come-on, now, was he? Harry expresses some of this out loud, and it’s only when Hermione’s eyebrows practically hit the ceiling that he remembers she doesn’t know he took Malfoy to peer into the Mirror of Erised in the middle of the night.

“Do you not think,” Hermione says, her tone a bit Malfoy-ish in its scathingness, “that putting your faith into an almost certainly illegal dark mirror that *apparently* reflects your heart’s desire is about as sensible as trusting an illegal dark spell that apparently reveals your soulmate?”

Harry feels like an idiot when she puts it like that. He sits bolt upright and protests, “Well, you haven’t been much help recently, have you!” He knows it’s unfair, and unkind, but the dig hits home, because Hermione colours up and her jaw wobbles. “I’m sorry,” he says quickly. “I didn’t mean it.” He did, though, a bit, and he thinks Hermione can tell that. “I didn’t see anything useful, anyway,” he says, and tells her what he saw: himself arm in arm with Malfoy, who had his sleeves rolled up. He still can’t think what the tiny alterations to reality might mean.

Hermione blinks, and frowns again. “With his sleeves rolled up? You mean – showing off his Dark Mark?”

It’s a bit odd, Harry supposes. In the mirror, as in life, he’d been able to see hints of Malfoy’s soulmark, curling over the neck of his pyjama top. But the Dark Mark had been hidden. He wracks his brain, but it doesn’t make any sense. His heart’s desire is . . . Malfoy showing off his Dark Mark a bit more? Unless Harry’s subconscious has gone completely nuts, he doesn’t think that’s at all likely. But . . . could it be some sort of clue? To get rid of the soulmark spell, first Harry must help Malfoy remove the Dark Mark. A glimmer of hope rises in his mind, and he grabs at it with both hands.

When he expresses his conclusions, though, Hermione doesn’t look impressed. “I think it’s a bit more obvious than that,” she says. “I think it just means that deep down you’re OK with Malfoy having a Dark Mark. That you’ve forgiven him, maybe.”

If it means that, though, it logically follows that Harry’s OK with Malfoy having the fucking soulmark too. Because there it was, glittering at him in the mirror. Harry can feel a massive headache surging behind his eyeballs, trying to force his brain out of his skull. “Have you made any progress on those ideas to counter the spell?” he asks, shutting his eyes. Malfoy’s there behind his eyelids, just looking at him, quiet and somehow hopeless.

Hermione reaches across the table and squeezes his hand. When he opens his eyes again, she’s trying to smile. This is not reassuring. “I have loads of ideas about things you – we – could try,” she says. “But they’re all so risky! I don’t want to suggest something that might make things worse.”

“Like what?” Harry demands, hearing frustration thick in his voice. Can things *get* any worse?

Hermione hesitates. “Well, like . . . I wondered if the Ever-Locked Room in the Ministry might hold an answer. It’s where they investigate love, remember? But you’d have to break in, and Merlin knows what you’d find in there! Or . . . I wondered if using Amortentia might trigger something – bring out your own soulmark, perhaps, by force. Or there’s some research been done that if you bring a wizard to the brink of death, any curses placed upon them are broken just before they pass over. I mean, really, Harry – as if I’m going to suggest you try that!” she says, her tone sharp. “There’s lots of other things – blood magic, and so on – where if they go wrong, you might actually *die*. I know I promised not to tell anyone about what happened, and I won’t, but if you even *think* about trying something that might kill you, then I’ll break that promise in a heartbeat, and go straight to Professor McGonagall.”

Harry frowns at the desktop.

“Seriously, Harry,” Hermione says, her tone a mixture of friendship and annoyance. “I know you’re unhappy, even though you won’t talk to me about it much, but a few stupid tattoos are not worth dying over.”

It’s true, Harry supposes. But the fact that she’s right doesn’t make it any less annoying – or his own mind less clouded with doubts and swirling uncertainties.

The Adequate and Almost Acceptable House of Slytherin

To Harry's relief, if any of his room-mates noticed either that he went on a late-night adventure with Malfoy on Wednesday night, or made Malfoy-related wood art in Transfigurations on Thursday morning, they don't say it out loud. It probably means they didn't, he thinks; he's learning that Zabini can't have a thought without needing to express it, pretty much, even if he saves it up for his Slytherin room-mates' ears only. Malfoy himself seems to be varying his normal 'ignore Harry at all costs' routine, in favour of just ignoring what happened in the mirror room.

Harry can't decide whether that's better, or worse. It's better, in a sense, because he's not so on edge, constantly wondering, and worrying, about when he'll next see Malfoy, and how he'll react. But when the Slytherins leave the castle for their Muggle Studies class on Friday morning, he finds himself filled with relief. It's *exhausting*, not being ignored by Malfoy. Harry can't relax at all when he's there, tying himself up in knots over what he should and shouldn't say, or do, or how he should, or shouldn't, act around him. It's like having a constant itch which he can't scratch, niggling away at him, until he wants to . . .

He doesn't know what he wants to do, and that's the problem. Well, part of the problem. The whacking great soulmark under Malfoy's shirt, and Harry's whacking great absence of one, are still the biggest part of the issue. It doesn't seem fair, he thinks gloomily, that such a simple problem – a Dark spell, which needs correcting – should be turning him into such an emotional wreck.

So, he's pleased to be able to put aside his problems for a couple of hours, to concentrate on things that are much simpler all round: following Auror Robards' instructions as he learns a bit more about the practical art of defending himself, and others, from Dark magic. At least you know where you are with Dark magic, Harry thinks as the class work together to plan a mock mission to infiltrate and take down a werewolf pack. It's obvious who the good guys are and who are the bad. It's not all . . . muddled up in his head, like it is with Malfoy.

The relief doesn't last very long, though. The gang are back in the late afternoon, weighed down by large plastic bags, and Pansy actually looks happy, for once.

"Shopping!" she says, when she sees Harry, sitting in the common room with his books, trying to do some homework. "We had to do *clothes shopping* for homework. I mean, the shops were full of Muggle strangeness," she adds, wrinkling her nose, "but even so. Some of things I bought were almost acceptable. Imagine that!"

"Prof Smith said we should buy some *normal outfits* so we'd fit in better in the Muggle world," Millicent says, plonking herself down on the sofa next to Harry. "I'm not sure what you chose was exactly normal, Pansy."

"Who knows what counts for normal when it comes to Muggles?" Pansy replies, shrugging and sitting down too.

Harry feels a morbid curiosity about what they've all bought. He's never struggled with wizarding clothing – it's just old-fashioned Muggle stuff with robes on top, as far as he can see. So it baffles him that wizards seem to find dressing as Muggles so difficult. He half-suspects it's an affectation – kind of a, *look at me, I'm so pure-blooded I don't know that Muggles don't wear their knickers on their heads* type of thing.

"Blaise and Draco had some kind of bet during class," Millicent says, and sniggers. "Draco lost, so Blaise picked his clothes for him."

"He looks *amazing* in them," Zabini says, throwing himself down on the sofa opposite.

"I always look amazing," Malfoy says sourly, perching on the edge of the sofa next to him. "Apart from when I'm wearing Muggle clothing."

"Muggle clothes are just clothes," Harry says.

Malfoy turns to look at him. "You haven't seen me in *these* clothes though, have you, hmm?" he asks, and twitches, his gaze sliding away.

Harry knows what's coming. For fuck's sake.

"You will do soon though!" Zabini says with infinite glee. "Thought we might all go out tonight – clubbing, or something."

"I am *not*—" Malfoy begins.

"Somewhere Muggle, of course," Zabini says, as if he hasn't been interrupted. "Because we're all fully reformed characters and now officially love Muggles, right, guys?"

It's not entirely silent; there's some nervous coughing.

"Glad to hear it!" Zabini says. "Invite Ganger and Weasley, if you like," he says to Harry, which makes Malfoy splutter. "Just them, though, otherwise Draco'll have to wear something else and that would be deeply tragic."

Draco will have to . . . wear something else? "Um," Harry starts.

"Don't question it, Potter," Zabini says, waving a casual hand. "Just let it be a lovely surprise. Meet on the steps outside at eight?"

"Yes, OK, love," Pansy says, surprisingly cheerfully. "I'll go and find Hermione and let her know." She stands up again, picking up her bags, and heading back, presumably, to her own dormitory. As she leaves, Millicent's enormous, hideous cat enters, making a beeline for Harry, who winces, in expectation of its claws. Does Millicent sharpen them, or something, just for fun?

"Come on then, men, let's go and put our new clothes away," Zabini says, standing up again and beckoning to Malfoy, Nott and Goyle. "I'll look after yours, Draco," he adds sweetly. "I wouldn't like something bad to happen to them."

Malfoy's expression is sulky, but he doesn't protest, and they all follow behind Zabini as he leads the way through to the dormitories, like rats following the pied piper to their doom. Harry finds himself alone with Millicent. Well, apart from the cat, who's now on his lap, and purring, as if it's friendly, rather than a hell beast. He thinks that of the whole group, Millicent's the most straightforward, so he finds himself asking something he wouldn't ask anyone else: "Why does Malfoy put up with Zabini being such a cock all the time?"

Millicent considers this in silence for a moment, then looks around to see if anyone else is within hearing distance. They aren't; the common room is empty, apart from the pair of them. "Potter, we all like Draco, but—" She pauses, screwing up her face thoughtfully. "How shall I put this?" She shrugs, relaxing. "I don't need to beat about the bush. Before the war, we'd have been nuts not to like him. His father's influence . . . His connections to the Dark Lord . . . None of us would have dared to cross him. Pansy was hot for him, just because of all that. I guess it was different for Greg and Vince, because their fathers were pretty high up too, but . . . I'm not even a pure-blood, you know?" She turns her head to stare at Harry. "Not saying we wouldn't have liked Draco without that, but . . . now we don't *have* to. It makes a difference. We can take the piss out of him without worrying that he'll cry to daddy and the Dark Lord will rain down shit on our parents' heads." She shrugs again.

It occurs to Harry that he never really thought of Malfoy that way – as someone with power. He always thought him a bit pathetic, with his henchmen and his tantrums. Now, though, he wonders, uncomfortably, what it must feel like to have grown up expecting your life to be a charmed one, and then to have to watch as everything crumbles around you.

"He's a good sport," Millicent says, leaning down to pick up her own bag of clothes. "Not everyone would take it so well. I think he knows he was a shit to us, though, and in a small way this is his way of . . . proving he can be a friend, now he has no excuse to look down his nose at us. I like him a lot better now than I did back then," she adds.

"Still not very nice, though," Harry says, because it's true. If someone's a shit to you, it doesn't mean you get to be a shit to them right back, to cancel it all out. What sort of logic is that?

Millicent snorts. "If you think our Draco would put up with something he wasn't happy with, then you don't know him very well yet," she says. "Blaise doesn't simply take the piss. Draco *lets* him. There's a big difference, Potter."

Millicent stands up, and Harry half-moves, but the cat clearly doesn't want him to; it digs its claws deep into his leg and makes a growl of protest. "Ow!" he says.

Millicent grins. "Stop that, Voldie," she says, shifting her bags in her hands but making no attempt to rescue Harry from his spiky doom.

"Why did you call your cat . . . that?" Harry asks. It's been a question in his mind for ages. Not a big one, to be fair – but a question all the same.

Millicent gives him a very level look, heavy with meaning, and then shrugs. As usual. "Don't have to be scared of the Dark Lord any more," she says. "Seemed appropriate to give his name to my cat. See you later, yeah?"

“Uh, yeah,” Harry says, and watches as she leaves the room. He can understand it, he thinks. The only way to vanquish a Boggart is to laugh at it; Millicent’s just applying the same theory to her cat.

Harry waits a while, but no one emerges out of their dormitory, so he tries his best to carry on with his homework. He’s too distracted, though, his brain turning over his conversation with Millicent and her revelations about Malfoy’s odd relationship with his friendship group. And . . . Millicent had said, clear as day, that Harry didn’t know Draco very well yet. *Yet*. As if she thought it an inevitability that one day he would.

When Harry re-reads what he’s written of his essay so far, about an hour later, he finds it’s full of spelling mistakes, and instead of writing ‘Muggle’, in several places he’s written ‘Malfoy’.

Harry sits with Ron and Hermione at dinner, and Ron leans over halfway through pudding and whispers in his ear, “Are we *really* doing that thing, er, Hermione told about this evening? Because – mate. Clubbing? With *that* lot?”

“Yes,” Harry says, and shares a look of dread and horror with Ron, before Hermione interrupts and tells them how much fun it’s going to be. She has a determined look in her eye though, and her chin is raised, so Harry thinks her own private thoughts on the matter probably mirror his own.

When Harry gets back to his dormitory to get changed, only Nott is there, shoving on Muggle smart trousers and a smart shirt with a look of distaste that Harry thinks is ridiculous. All he needs to add is a robe and he’d be wearing informal wizarding clothing.

“The others said they’ll meet you outside,” Nott says, giving Harry a flat, bored look. “I think they went somewhere else to get changed.”

“Right,” Harry says, and rummages in his trunk for something suitable to wear. He’s never been that interested in clothes, and although it’s been a while since he’s had to suffer Dudley’s oversized hand-me-downs, his wardrobe is still tiny. He finally pulls out a wrinkled pair of black jeans, a T-shirt with some sort of logo on it, and a beaten-up hoody. He almost has to wear his school shoes, as he can only find one of his black trainers, but after a bit more rummaging he finally finds the other one, although he has to scrub the mud off before it’s wearable.

He gives himself a quick once over in the mirror, and grimaces at his reflection. His hair is still a bit too long, and standing on end in that one spot that always stands on end. He looks a mess, but a sort of friendly mess, he thinks. But there’s not much he can do about it now, he thinks. And besides – why does he care about getting dressed up for that bunch of tossers?

His stomach does something peculiar as he allows himself to wonder what, exactly, Malfoy will be wearing, before he tries to suppress it again. He feels nervous, which is ridiculous, and he doesn’t want to feel – or, more pertinently, *look* – nervous in front of Ron and Hermione. When he checks the clock on the wall, he’s running late, so he dashes from the

room, only to almost knock over Pansy, who's waiting outside. Apparently, for him. She's wearing a very short black dress that sparkles when she moves, and she looks surprisingly nice.

"Uh, you look nice," Harry says, because it's true, and because he's trying to be a better person. He supposes, if he reaches for it, that Pansy's a better person than he gives her credit for – she certainly seems to be a good friend to Malfoy.

Pansy blinks, clearly thrown by this. "Are you really wearing that?" she asks, and looks him up and down with her eyebrows raised.

"Yes," Harry says. "I am."

"Well, fine, it's too late now," Pansy says. "If you want to look like you have no money and no class, then that's your right, I suppose."

Harry feels the urge to retract his compliment, but she's already wrapped her fingers around his arm and is propelling him out of the common room and up the stairs. They run into Ron and Hermione in the Entrance Hall, and Ron immediately clocks that he's arm in arm with Pansy, and gives him a look that suggests he's ready and waiting to cast *Incarcerous* and drag off the imposter Harry to Azkaban.

"Salazar, you look almost as scruffy as Potter, Weasley," Pansy says, wrinkling her nose. "At least *you've* made the effort, Hermione." She doesn't stop for an answer, but drags Harry past them and out of the doors, into the wind. Harry wishes he'd worn a coat.

"A gentleman would cast a Heating Charm," Pansy says, and casts her own, filling the air with warmth.

Harry doesn't need a heating charm to be filled with warmth, though. He's seen Malfoy.

Malfoy's wearing possibly the tightest pair of black jeans Harry has ever seen, black leather boots, and a skin-tight, almost transparent white T-shirt, with a wide, low V-neck. He's got some kind of light, pale scarf billowing around his neck, which mostly covers up the soulmark, although Harry can see it glinting in the gaps as Malfoy shifts, uncomfortably, and tries to jam his hands in his pockets. His trousers are almost too tight for him to manage it.

"Crikey, Malfoy," Ron says. "Trying out to be in the circus, are you?"

Malfoy colours, and his eyes narrow, but he doesn't move to wreak his terrible revenge. "Giving the impoverished disgrace to wizarding society look a go, are you, Ronald?" he says, instead. "Oh no – that's your usual appearance. My mistake."

Ron opens his mouth, but Hermione elbows him. "Ow! What was that for?"

"Leave it, Ron," Hermione says, running her hands over her hair; the wind is already disheveling it. "You started it, remember."

Ron sighs, but gives in with good grace. "Shall we get a move on then?"

They get a move on. The Muggle club, when they arrive, is posh enough to make Harry feel uncomfortable. They're escorted by a very well-dressed woman, holding a clipboard, to a private seating area just off the cavernous dance floor. It's all low brown-leather sofas, and shiny chrome tables, and the walls are patterned glass and mirror, which makes it hard to see how big the place actually is, reflection bouncing off reflection.

They order a round of cocktails, and then another, and by the fourth round Pansy's dragging Malfoy and Millicent up to the dance floor, where they vanish into a crowd of bodies, occasionally spotlighted by flashing lights.

Nott and Zabini are having a quiet conversation in one corner, which leaves Harry, Ron, Hermione and . . . Gregory Goyle.

"Er, are you having a good time?" Harry asks Greg. He has to talk loudly over the pounding dance music.

"What?" Greg shouts.

Harry tries again. "Are. You. Having. A. Good. Time?"

Greg shrugs. "OK, I s'pose," he says, although Harry lip reads it more than hears it.

Hermione's shifting in her chair, and she tips back her glass and downs the rest of her drink. "Dance?" she says, and doesn't wait for an answer, just tugs at Harry's hand, so he has no real choice but to follow. Well, he does have a choice – he could sit and stare at Greg, while Zabini and Nott whisper in a corner. It's Hobson's choice, but out of those options he'll take the dancing, he decides.

Harry's never danced before, other than at the various Hogwarts balls, and he wasn't so great at that. He thinks, as he attempts to copy the movements of the people around him, that he might be even less good at this kind of freestyle dancing. He feels like a wally. Looking over to Ron, who's shuffling from side to side out of time to the beat, he feels a warmth and kindred spirit overwhelm him. He might be shit at dancing, but his best friend is shit at dancing too.

Unhappily, though, Harry looks around, and just at that moment the crowd clears, to show him . . . Malfoy. And Malfoy, Harry decides, is *not* shit at dancing.

Malfoy moves as if he's alone in the club. As if his body is made of water – fluid and undulating, and unselfconscious, even though he's lost the scarf at some point and his soulmark sparkles under the lights, almost entirely on view. It's a bloody good job they're in a Muggle venue, Harry thinks, and realises why Zabini said that only Ron and Hermione were allowed to join them on the night out.

Harry can't stop staring, even when he can feel Hermione stop dancing, to stare at him, staring at Malfoy.

Hermione tugs at his arm, and for a moment he's tempted to point out that it's noisy in the club, and he's half-cut, and he doesn't really want to have a heart to heart about his feelings

right now, thanks, but then he realises she's not pulling him to the side of the dance floor. She's pulling him towards *Malfoy*. She stops when they're part of the group – Harry had barely noticed Pansy and Millicent at Malfoy's side, although they're both giving him speculative, knowing looks, which he thinks should worry him more than they are. He'll probably remember to worry about them tomorrow, he thinks, still watching Malfoy, who . . .

Well. Malfoy's still dancing, but he's lost some of his poise, and he slows to a halt. His hair is slicked back, darkening at the temples with sweat, and his skin glistens. He's looking at Harry too, but not directly, his gaze skittering from chest, to shoulder, to the side of his face. But then he half-turns and locks eyes with him.

Harry is filled with . . . Merlin knows. Fear, and excitement, and hot and cold racing up and down his body and turning his legs to jelly. Malfoy's expression is so *intense*, and somehow calculating, and . . . and Harry realises he's more embarrassed to look Malfoy in the face than he is pretty much anything else right now, and he has to break eye contact before he melts into the floor.

Pansy leans in close to whisper something in Malfoy's ear, and he shrugs, and they vanish into the crowd together, returning shortly, each carrying several shot glasses of clear liquid. Malfoy passes one of his to Millicent, and then turns to press one into Harry's hands. "You're meant to down it in one," Malfoy says into Harry's ear, his voice low but audible against the beat. His body is much too close, his hand on Harry's arm, and Harry is disconcerted enough to do it. It's neat alcohol of some kind, without much taste, but it burns his throat on its way down, and when Malfoy hands him a second, he knocks that one back too, the room spinning.

Malfoy vanishes with the empty glasses, and returns brandishing a business card, which he hands to Pansy, raising an eyebrow. She laughs, and it's handed round the circle. When it gets to Harry, he can see, when the lights flash bright enough for him to read it, that it's for some sort of Muggle modelling agency. Harry grits his teeth and hands it back to Malfoy, who's smirking. Is Malfoy *really* that attractive? OK, he's the right shape – tall, and slim, but without being weedy, but he's so . . . pointy. His features are just that bit too sharp, and his skin and hair too pale, and, yes, all right, maybe that makes him striking, but still. It's *Malfoy*. And just because, OK, he's maybe moderately handsome now he's an adult, it doesn't mean it's acceptable for people to point it out to him; it'll only make him more annoying.

Harry, who can't stop staring, although he tries to make it look as if he's staring *past* Malfoy, rather than at him, wonders what the Muggles make of Malfoy's tattoo; it's still shifting on his skin, although the strobing lights give it a kind of mystical quality. Perhaps they're all too drunk, or too high, to believe the evidence of their own eyes, Harry thinks, and remembers the spontaneous magic he cast when he was a child, which the adults all managed to explain away, no matter how ludicrous the story they had to weave to convince themselves it was reality, not magic, that was at work. He managed to explain it away to himself too, though, he thinks, and wonders how he could have been so blind.

Pansy and Millicent head off through the crowd again, returning with more drinks, and the night takes on a blurry, dizzy quality. Time passes, but Harry's not sure how much, and he's not sure he cares; he just drinks, and tries not to look at Malfoy. He's practically the only who

isn't. Strange women – and men – keep trying to talk to him, and offering him drinks, and he doesn't seem to know whether to be amused or offended by the attention.

It's gone one in the morning, Harry discovers, when Hermione shouts in his ear that she and Ron are going to head back, and does he want to come with them? Harry thinks that yes, he does, but then again, no, he doesn't, and Hermione shoots him a strange look and yells that OK, she'll see him tomorrow, and maybe he should stop drinking now, though?

Harry thinks she might be right, but Zabini pops up, followed by Nott, with glasses of something citrus and icy, and Harry's not even sure it's alcoholic although he knows it tastes pretty sweet, and he's thirsty, so he drinks it too fast. And Malfoy's dancing again, this time with Pansy, their bodies a bit too close, and Harry doesn't feel all that well, actually, and he needs some air, and—

Apparating always makes him feel sick. It's definitely the Apparating. Harry rests his cheek against cold, clean porcelain, back in their dormitory bathroom, and then does a bit more vomiting into the loo. Someone's patting his back as he chucks up, he realises. Not with any great warmth, but he doesn't think any of his room-mates are the sort to pat backs in comfort, so he can't work out who it might be.

“Urgh,” he says, and the back-patter passes him a glass of a blue, fizzing potion.

“Urgh indeed,” Malfoy says, without any sympathy. “Drink up. It'll make you feel even worse, I warn you, but it doesn't last long.”

Harry, wincing, drinks. Malfoy, he soon discovers, was telling the truth. He's heartily sick again, and then he just *feels* sick – he can't move his head without gasping in pain. And finally, in a flash, he feels better. Better, but extremely stupid.

“Hangover cure,” Malfoy says. “Doesn't remove the effects, just speeds it up so you get it over with all at once.”

Harry reaches, gingerly, for his wand, but can't find it. He panics, but then:

“You dropped it in the club,” Malfoy says, with an overwhelming air of judgement. “Don't worry. I picked it up. It's on your bed. Turn around.”

Harry turns, although he really doesn't want to. Malfoy's still in his Muggle clothes, and the effect is somehow even more overwhelming in the normal surroundings of the castle than it was in the surreal, poorly-lit club. His expression is . . . not what Harry was expecting. It's almost sympathetic. Malfoy casts a cleaning charm at Harry's head, and his mouth floods with freshness, his skin feeling tight and tingling, as if he's been scrubbed with soap. Even his clothes feel clean on. “Sorry if I overdid it,” Malfoy says with a shrug. “I don't make a habit of casting personal spells on other people.”

“Right,” Harry says. “Um . . . Sorry.”

Malfoy blinks at that, clearly taken aback. “Do you need a hand getting up, or are you going to grovel by the toilet for the rest of the night?” he asks. “I'm bloody tired, and if we don't

get a move on then Greg will have got back already and eaten all the snacks.”

Harry scrambles to his feet. “Right! Er, sorry.”

Malfoy rolls his eyes. “Much though I adore to hear you apologise to *me*, for a change, Potter, you don’t need to say sorry for being a drunken idiot.”

“Er, was I that much of an idiot?” Harry asks, as Malfoy opens the door.

“Most drunkards are,” Malfoy says, with a snort, going through to their bedroom, and looking around. “Greg not back yet? Fuck’s sake. I’ll go and find him; he’s probably terrorising the house-elves again. Hand me your jumper, Potter.” He holds out his hand, and Harry, still feeling a bit dazed, pulls off his hoodie and passes it over.

Malfoy shoves it on and zips it right up to the neck. “Stylish,” he says, wrinkling his nose as he looks down at himself.

As soon as Malfoy shuts the door, Harry says, a bit annoyed, “He’s pretty smug about me drinking too much, isn’t he? He didn’t seem all that sober himself.”

Zabini, who’s halfway into his pyjamas, laughs. “Really, Potter?” he says, continuing to get dressed. “Draco barely drinks. I don’t think he had anything at all tonight. Whatever you saw tonight, it was just his sparkling personality.” Zabini says it like an insult. A pleasant insult, but an insult all the same.

Harry pulls off his T-shirt, shoving on a fresh one for sleeping in, and quickly changing into baggy jogging bottoms. “Are you sure?” he asks. Now he comes to think of it, he can’t remember actually seeing Malfoy drinking anything other than water. Even when they were at The Fat Duck together, he didn’t seem to drink much wine; Harry’s not sure he actually touched it, other than an initial sip. “Does he not like to drink?”

Nott gets into bed and shuts the curtains without saying goodnight.

Zabini frowns for a moment at Nott’s curtains, then turns to Harry. He gives him a very sharp look. “I reckon he likes to drink just fine. He just doesn’t like to lose control. Think about it, Potter.”

Malfoy swans back into the room, closely followed by Greg who’s holding a couple of massive bowls of chips, fresh from the kitchen. The smell is divine, and Harry actually feels hungry. Malfoy shoots a suspicious look at Zabini, who smiles back, all innocence, and takes a handful of chips from one of the bowls.

“Budge up, Potter,” Malfoy says, toeing off his boots in the middle of the room, and then striding over to sit next to Harry on his bed. “Oi, Greg. Service, please!”

Greg grunts, but brings one of the bowls over, and Malfoy takes it with a grin, offering it to Harry. Harry takes one; it’s hot, and greasy, and hits the spot in a way that nothing else would. After he’s eaten a few though, he feels self-conscious. “Stop watching me eat,” he says. “It’s putting me off.”

Malfoy colours, and takes a chip himself, and for a while they eat in comfortable silence. When they hit the bottom of the bowl though, it's uncomfortable again. Harry's no longer eating chips with Malfoy. Instead, he's just sitting next to Malfoy on his bed, while Malfoy wears some of his clothes.

"Mm," Malfoy says, sucking his fingers clean in a way that does terrible damage to Harry's grip on sanity, which is already pretty tenuous. "Right – time for bed, I suppose."

"It was time for bed *ages* ago," Zabini says, yawning, and lies down in his bed, pulling the covers almost over his head. "Night, all."

"Well, good night," Harry says awkwardly, but Malfoy doesn't get off his bed. Instead, he stretches, widely, and unzips Harry's hoodie, pulling it off.

Great, Harry thinks. Now he's not sitting awkwardly next to Malfoy on his bed, with Malfoy wearing his clothes. He's moved up a level of awkwardness, to underdressed Malfoy, with his soulmark half on show. His soulmark is, Harry notices, a very warm silvery colour, as if . . .

Harry tries to breathe evenly. Malfoy's very close, and . . . Acting on impulse, Harry reaches over and takes hold of Malfoy's left wrist, turning it so that he can see the Dark Mark. It stands out against Malfoy's pale skin, a smear of black and green, like a fading bruise. Malfoy doesn't stop him, but he doesn't seem very happy either, freezing into stillness by Harry's side. He takes in a hissing breath when Harry presses a finger against it.

"Sorry," Harry says, awkward. "It doesn't hurt, does it?"

Malfoy shakes his head. "No," he says, voice low. "But . . . when the Dark Lord was alive, you could use it to summon him by pressing it. It still makes me nervous. Stupid, I suppose." He lets out a breath. "I wish I could fucking get rid of it."

"More than this . . .?" Harry asks, reaching up to run a finger gently across the soulmark that stains Malfoy's collarbones with silver. He supposes the question isn't fair, but then nothing's fair at the moment.

Malfoy's breathing's gone very uneven. "I don't know," he says, even lower. "It would be different if you had—" He breaks off. "It really is bedtime, Potter," he says, tugging his arm out of Harry's grip. "Hang on a sec." He reaches for his wand, and casts another cleaning spell across them both. This one's gentler, but Harry feels just as clean and fresh. Malfoy slides off the bed, crossing the room and already undoing and pulling down his jeans as he moves.

Harry looks away, heart thudding, and then peers through half-shut eyelids to see Malfoy climbing into bed in just his boxers, all long, lean muscle and pale, endless skin. Malfoy waves, ironically, and Harry squeezes his eyes tight shut, just as Malfoy casts Nox and the room darkens.

Harry's too tired to stay awake – his lack of sleep over the last week is finally catching up with him, dragging him under. But as he falls, he's turning Malfoy's words over and over in

his mind. What had he been going to say, about his soulmark? *It would be different if you had*, he'd said, and had stopped, as if it would hurt him to go on.

It would be different if you had . . . what?

Harry falls to sleep as Malfoy, in his mind's eye, turns to him, eyes wide and mouth trembling, to say, "It would be different, Harry, if you had a soulmark with my name on too."

Harry feels weird when he wakes up the next morning, so early that the others are still asleep. In the gloom, Harry can see Malfoy lying with the covers half off, limbs tangled in his duvet, hair a mess, and he looks away. It feels too intimate to watch someone else sleep.

Flashes of last night come back to him, and he feels embarrassed, without being entirely sure what he's embarrassed about. He supposes being sick in front of Malfoy was pretty embarrassing, but then Malfoy hadn't seemed that fussed about it. Had, in fact, sat with him, and gave him a potion to make him feel better, rather than mocking, or laughing, or leaving him to suffer.

He supposes, too, that it was pretty embarrassing to grip Malfoy's arm and stroke his Dark Mark, out of the blue, but then he's had so many awkwardly embarrassing conversations with Malfoy recently that one more along those lines is hardly anything to worry about.

The thing that gives him most pause for thought, though, and makes him sit up in bed, frowning into the middle distance, is what Zabini told him – that Malfoy doesn't drink, and why. Was he right? That Malfoy's so uptight that he doesn't like to relax, and potentially make a fool of himself, like Harry had last night? Harry can feel his frown deepen. No, he doesn't think that's right. Malfoy doesn't strike him as uptight, especially. He's surprisingly open about his emotions. Harry had always thought of him as a bit childish, losing his temper with regularity, and spitting out insults at any opportunity. He supposes he and Ron gave as good as they got; looking back, none of them covered themselves in glory. But now he thinks about it, it's less that Malfoy's got a temper, and more that he just can't keep his emotions in check. They pour out of him, in a flood.

Maybe, Harry thinks, Malfoy's not amazingly keen on wearing his heart on his sleeve and would prefer to be able to control himself a bit better. Harry supposes Malfoy's not had much control of his own destiny over the years – first his father ruling his life, and then the Dark Lord, via his father. Harry can sympathise with not feeling your life's your own, given the whole Dumbledore thing, and the prophecy, and all that.

Harry gets out of bed and quietly grabs his clothes, making his way to the bathroom to shower and clean his teeth, the old-fashioned way. He feels better afterwards – less agitated – but more awake, and he wonders what he should do next. He doesn't want to go back to bed, so he folds his pyjamas neatly and leaves them on the bench in the bathroom, and makes his way to the common room. A house elf pops up, as if he'd called for her, and brings him a mug of strong, milky coffee, thick with sugar, and that helps too.

His brain is still whirring though. Is he reading too much into Malfoy's sobriety? Probably, he thinks. But even so . . . he suspects he's not far off the mark, to think that Malfoy must be sick to death of feeling out of control of his own destiny. And now . . . Malfoy must feel like he's, once again, not in control of his own destiny. A mark on his skin pointing at Harry and saying: All roads lead here, so suck it up. You can't have him, but he's going to ruin your life, either way.

Harry puts the coffee mug down on the floor and puts his head in his hands. He almost wishes he *had* a soulmark, so someone else would be in control of his destiny, once again, even if it was shit. He knows it would be shit. Because . . . now that he has control of his own destiny, his own life, and he's free from prophecy, and Dumbledore's control, and from other peoples' expectations that he'd settle down and marry Ginny and pop out the requisite three children . . . what is he meant to do with his life, exactly? What can he do, other than what he's learnt to do? Be a good little boy, and a good soldier, and do what he's told.

He wants to be an Auror. He wants to be *Head* Auror. But how can he be sure he really wants that – that he's making his own choices, rather than taking the next logical step on a path that's been set out for him from the moment he was born?

Looking around the green, ornate, ridiculous Slytherin common room, he wonders, for perhaps the first time, what it would have been like – what things could have been different – if he hadn't fought the Sorting Hat, and had allowed it to place him in Slytherin. And before he's finished the thought, practically, he's on his feet and out of the door, making his way through the castle and towards the Headmistress's office.

Once he's outside, he knocks, politely, in case she's awake too early, like him, but it's silent, so he gives the password and the gargoyle steps aside, revealing the winding stone staircase that leads to the circular office. The Sorting Hat is where he expects it to be, on the shelf behind the desk, and he reaches over and picks it up. It's heavy in his hands; heavier than a hat should be. He sits down at McGonagall's desk and slips the hat on his head, the world going black and fuzzy, and full of judgemental, elderly voices all speaking at once.

"Yes, Harry Potter? What can we do for you?"

"I wanted to know . . . Should I have been in Slytherin all along?" he asks. It's not quite the question he wants to ask, but it will do.

The hat chuckles. "You would have done well in Slytherin," it says, which is no answer at all.

"I'm in it now!" Harry protests.

"Well, then," the hat says. "Gryffindor and Slytherin. Just as we discussed, all those years ago."

"You didn't *sort* me into Slytherin though," Harry says, frustrated, even though he knows there's no use getting frustrated with a hat. You can hardly threaten it with anything other than cutting it up, and suspects it's more magical than he is. It would probably cut him up first. "McGonagall did!"

“Harry, Harry,” the hat says, a bit too patronisingly for a hat. “You need to learn to make peace with your Slytherin side.”

“But—”

“Think about it, boy,” the hat continues. “If being in Slytherin made a wizard turn out evil, do you think the headmasters of this school would have allowed the house to continue, for all these years? Slytherins may, on the whole, be a little more self-interested than Gryffindors, but not everything is about the greater good. There is no harm, Harry, in being selfish on occasion, and finding out what it is *you* want, in preference to what the world wants.”

Harry thinks about that. “But—”

“And though it pains me to say it,” the hat continues, “given that my task in life is to sort children into houses . . . Slytherin? Gryffindor? They are both just school houses, Harry. Nothing more, nothing less. The system exists to group children with similar values together, to help them transition to a new, sometimes scary world with people who understand them. To help them make friends. It is not meant to be a guide to life. If it ever was – if the four founders ever had that in their minds – that age has long passed.”

Harry takes the hat off, feeling a bit numb, and puts it back on the shelf. For so long he’s considered Gryffindor a vital part of his identity, binding him together with his friends, and giving him the courage to play the part he knew he had to play. It’s strange to consider it from a different perspective – that rather than Gryffindor making him the man he is, he is just the man he would have been all along, whichever house he’d ended up in. He wonders if that’s true, and comes to the conclusion that it’s not; but that it’s Ron and Hermione who made the difference, not the colour of his school tie.

He makes his way back to his dormitory, still deep in thought, and when he’s back, everyone else is starting to wake up. Malfoy colours a bit when he sees him, but doesn’t scowl or turn away, just says, “Morning, Potter,” and sits up in bed, Accio-ing a round-necked T-shirt, which he pulls over his head, leaving his hair a mess.

“Breakfast?” Harry asks.

Zabini flings a pillow at his head. “Too early. Fuck off,” he says.

“Yes, all right,” Malfoy says, and Greg grunts and nods, swinging his legs over the side of his bed and emerging in another full-length pastel-coloured nightshirt.

“Present from my mother,” Greg says, following Harry’s gaze. “Her way of telling me she wishes I’d been a girl,” he says, and quirks a wonky grin.

Harry, who’s not sure he can remember Greg ever smiling before, or making a joke, looks on in amazement.

“Stop drooling over Greg, Potter. It’s making me lose my appetite,” Malfoy says, shoving on a robe and running a comb through his hair.

Greg narrows his eyes. “I keep telling you that you ain’t my type, Potter. But I dunno – why don’t you try transfiguring yourself a massive pair of boobs, and I could give it a go.”

Zabini flings a pillow at Greg, and scores a direct hit. “Take a hint! Sod off!” Zabini says. “And take your vile talk of Potter’s breasts with you, you scumbags.”

Malfoy grins at Greg, and then turns to grin at Harry too. It’s so overwhelming, and unexpected, that he has to look away, and Malfoy stops smiling, but in a slightly puzzled manner, eyebrow pulling together in thought, rather than anything more pissed off.

They go down to breakfast together, and Harry realises, as they walk, Malfoy and Greg bickering the whole way, that despite the awfulness of everything that’s happened so far this year, at least one good thing has come out of it: this. He’s almost starting to think of some of his new room-mates as friends, rather than a curse to be suffered.

Amortentia, also known as ‘a really bad idea’

When Harry wakes up on Monday, he realises it's October already, and he's been back to school a whole month. It's a strange thought. He's barely been able to concentrate on his studies, and yet he doesn't *appear* to be falling behind. The majority of their schoolwork has been practical so far, and while he felt, before he'd returned to school, that the last couple of years had surely been enough to prepare him for pretty much anything, he hadn't actually expected that to be true. Something seems to have clicked for him, though. Even Potions isn't the seeming insurmountable challenge it used to be. If he concentrates, and does exactly what it says in the book, then his potions seem to work out OK. Snape would be proud of him, he thinks. Well, maybe not proud, exactly, but possibly a bit less scathing.

It's been nearly a month, too, since he was hit by the soulmate spell. Somehow that's even harder to believe. The intensity of the shock of it has worn off, and now it's just an ever-present niggle in his mind. Sometimes, he even manages to think of other things. Things that aren't Malfoy. He thinks that if Malfoy hadn't been hit too, he might even have forgotten it all by now.

No. There's no way he would have forgotten it. But he could have . . . suppressed it, maybe. After all, he still doesn't know for sure what his lack of a mark means. Not for definite. It could, he thinks, mean that he's doomed to be alone, sure. But it could also mean that he doesn't have a single soulmate . . . He's free to make his own choices. Pick a woman, or a man, because he *wants* to, not because their magical DNA is extra compatible with his own, or however the spell works. Or maybe he just hasn't met his own soulmate yet, and the spell can't show what the heart doesn't already know. For some reason, Harry shrinks away from that one. But . . . he'd be happy to be blank if it meant choices. He yearns for choices, even as he fears them.

So . . . yes. He could make his peace with the whole business. If it wasn't, that was, for Malfoy.

Malfoy doesn't complain to Harry, and he doesn't nag Hermione, and he doesn't *seem* to be acting on his own to find a counterspell, as he was before. He just . . . suffers. And sure, he seems determined to make Harry suffer too, a bit, but it's not with as much determination as *Zabini* has for making Malfoy suffer. But it's not until the next day, Tuesday, that Harry thinks that maybe they should give one of Hermione's wilder ideas a try, because if they don't, it's entirely possible Malfoy will go to Azkaban, for the murder of Blaise Zabini.

Zabini's been surprisingly reticent about his famed 'wank bank', but as the boys are all hanging out in their dormitory on Tuesday evening, he announces, with a wicked grin, that he has a new memory to share. Perhaps Draco would like to go first? He'll enjoy it most. Malfoy would clearly rather eat shit than go first, but he pulls a face and dips down into Zabini's miniature pensieve with bad grace, to watch whatever foul thing it is that Zabini's put in there.

It's obviously pretty appalling. Malfoy jerks out of the memory after only thirty seconds or so, and he's pale, and then red, and then pale again. He clenches his fists, and opens his mouth to say something, before shutting it again and pressing his lips tightly shut. He gets up and leaves the room, slamming the door shut behind him.

Zabini has the grace to look embarrassed. "I didn't mean to piss him off *that* much," he says. "Whoops." He looks towards the door, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand.

"Aren't you going to go after him?" Harry asks. "Or shall I—"

"Er, no, I don't think you should," Zabini says, and he sounds awkward, which Harry thinks is extremely suspicious. Zabini is never awkward. "I'll go," he says, and shoots out of the room.

Nott's retreated behind his bed-curtains again, and Harry and Greg just look at each other. "Do you know what the memory is?" Harry asks.

Greg shrugs, and then walks over to shove his head into the pensieve. He comes up again after a matter of seconds. "It's you. Sleeping," he says, and shakes his head. "Zabini's such a ballbag, sometimes."

Harry blinks. It's *him*? It seems both unlikely and stupid. He has to see for himself, though, so he walks over to the pensieve and Greg moves away to give him space. He slips into the memory with an uneasy shiver. Someone – Zabini, presumably – is, indeed, watching him sleep. It's peculiar to see himself from someone else's perspective. He doesn't think he likes it much. He's never thought of himself as vulnerable, but it's pretty creepy, truth to be told, to see himself like that, and then— He feels himself go red. In the memory, he rolls over, half kicking off the covers, and revealing the bulge of a hard-on stretching out his pyjama bottoms. In the intimacy of the pensieve, it all seems very . . . close. And personal.

Harry pulls himself out of the memory, and isn't quite sure what to do with himself. When he stops being embarrassed, though, he finds he's angry with himself. For not being a better friend to Malfoy, who's suffering.

"We could jinx his pyjama bottoms," Greg suggests. "Blaise's, I mean."

They jinx Blaise's pyjama bottoms, and it makes Harry feel a bit better, particularly when the curse takes effect, and Malfoy almost smiles at the sight of Zabini hopping around the bedroom, cursing, his lower region transformed into that of a kangaroo. He's still apologising to Malfoy, Harry notices, between the swears. It's almost impressive. But Harry decides that tomorrow, they need to do something to try to fix the spell. He can't let another week slide by in inertia, while he gets more and more mixed up over Malfoy, and Malfoy gets more and more . . . unhappy and resigned to it all, Harry thinks. It's no good at all.

Harry's not in the mood to try to break curses by nearly killing himself, and he thinks if they attempt to break into the Ministry they'll just end up getting locked up. Security's too tight

these days. Which just leaves, from what he can remember of Hermione's short list, the unattractive sounding option of Amortentia.

Malfoy sounds a bit like he'd rather try one of the more lethal options when Harry tells him, firmly, that Amortentia's the plan. Malfoy's going to brew it, Harry tells him, and then Harry himself will take it. Maybe, he explains, trying to convince himself too, the application of *fake* love will trigger some sort of rejection by the spell, and cause Malfoy's soulmark to wither away, in the face of trickery. Or it might force his own soulmark to reveal itself, Harry continues, as Malfoy stares at him as if he's gone completely off his head. "It's got to be worth a try!" he says, getting tetchy by now, as Malfoy continues to stare. "Or do you just want to suffer Zabini's jokes forever?"

"It would be easier just to kill Blaise," Malfoy points out. "And there's more chance of success. This idea is *stupid*, Potter."

But Harry's not up for murder, even if the man in question almost deserves it. And yes, OK, the idea is pretty stupid, but he can't see Malfoy offering up a useful alternative. So he squares his shoulders, raises his chin, and says, trying to sound confident, "Well, I think it's worth trying. And the potion'll only last twenty-four hours, max, so it's not like anything bad'll happen if it doesn't work, is it? Do you want to do it, or not?"

Malfoy says, "Yes," but clearly means *No*. And adds, sourly, just in case Harry hadn't got the point, "But I'm only agreeing to this in the face of 'no other ideas ever'. I'll save up my 'I told you so' for later, though, Potter. I'll enjoy it more then."

They begin to brew the potion that afternoon, with Slughorn overseeing it, frowning at Harry every time he thinks Harry's not looking. Harry supposes that to Slughorn he must seem curiously obsessed by love potions, but it's still annoying. Still, he can't protest and risk offending Slughorn, as the potion's a pain in the arse to brew. It needs stirring, in a specific manner, for the next seven days, so each afternoon they have to pop into Slughorn's office to tend to it. The week drags, but at least Zabini seems to still be feeling bad for his pensieve prank, because he's relatively quiet, and barely makes any rude jokes about bumming at all.

At their next Potions lesson they put it back on the heat and add the Ashwinder eggs, cooking them over a slow, gentle flame, before taking the cauldron back off the heat and covering it. It has to mature for three days before it's ready for the final ingredient: blood.

On Saturday morning, Harry and Draco enter Slughorn's office to finish the potion. Malfoy's stiff and unhappy, but Harry just wants the thing over with. Malfoy appears to read his mood, and instead of arguing, just pricks his finger with a needle, letting a single pearl of red blood drip into the potion. As they watch the liquid shimmers, turning pearlescent and emitting clouds of perfume. It smells delicious, and somehow . . . natural. He can't even tell where the smell is coming from, exactly. It seems to surround him. He breathes in, and it's next to him, and in front of him, both at the same time.

Malfoy uses his wand to siphon some of the potion into a vial without comment, pressing a bung in place to stop it spilling. He holds the liquid up in front of him, looking both at and through it, and then shudders, pulling a face. "I still think this is a fucking stupid idea, Potter.

Do you really *want* to be completely obsessed by me? I doubt you're going to enjoy the experience."

When he puts it like it, it sounds like . . . Well. It sounds a bit like Harry's life at the moment anyway. "It'll just be for twenty-four hours," he says firmly. "And that's only if we've brewed it right; it might be weaker. Then it'll wear off. We both know it's not real."

Malfoy's cross expression seems to get crosser for a moment, before he smooths his face into something more unreadable. "We don't have to do it now, I suppose."

"No, but if we don't do it today, we'll have to wait another week," Harry points out. And he feels nervous, if he's honest with himself. "Let's get it over with." He takes the vial from Malfoy's hand and twists out the cork, tipping it back to his mouth and swallowing.

"Not here, you lunatic," Malfoy says in panic, eyes widening. "Somewhere more private. Oh, bloody, bugging bollocks," he adds, when his advice is clearly too late.

It tastes . . . absolutely delicious. And yet, at the same time, there's an undertone that gives Harry pause for thought. It's just a tiny pause though, because it soon vanishes, to be replaced by the strangest, most overwhelming sensation Harry's ever felt. It's like Legilimency, only worse – as if something has blanketed his head, and his senses, and pressed down on all his reason, and said . . . YOU LOVE DRACO MALFOY. NOTHING ELSE MATTERS EXCEPT DRACO MALFOY. DRACO MALFOY. DRACO MALFOY. DRACODRACO DRACODRACODRACODRACODRACODRACODRACODRACODRACODRACODRACODRACO DRAACOOOOOOOOO.

Harry reaches for his wand, but it's not there. He's stuck in a room with Narcissa Malfoy, and she looks angry enough to Avada him, and *he doesn't have his wand*. He panics, and tries to pull away – she has her hands on his head, and she's clearly been rummaging around his mind, although everything is blurred and twisted and he can't remember what he's been doing or how he got here.

"Keep *still*, Potter," she hisses, "or your brain might leak out from your ears."

He takes this as a threat – has he been kidnapped or something? – and he's just trying to look around to see what he can use to hit her with, so he can escape, when he sees . . .

He sees Malfoy. Malfoy's sitting on a chaise longue behind them, pale with rage, and just like that, Harry remembers. Not everything, but enough to know that he's made an unspeakable idiot of himself. Though how that's brought him to Malfoy Manor – he knows in his bones that's where he is – with Narcissa rummaging through his mind, he has no idea. Yet. He's pretty sure Malfoy is itching to fill him in on all the awful detail.

"I, er, presume it didn't work?" Harry asks Malfoy, who twitches and scowls so violently that Harry thinks he might do himself an injury.

“I think you can let him go, Mother,” Malfoy says. “He seems to be himself again. I can tell because of the stupidity of the question.”

“I shall go and fetch a glass of water,” Narcissa says, in a tone that suggests she’s going to add poison to it too, while she’s up.

She leaves the room, and Harry and Malfoy stare at each for a while. Malfoy keeps moving, as if he’s going to speak, and then . . . not. Harry keeps getting hit by memories he presumes are memories, rather than nightmares. He thinks he might have been a bit . . . enthusiastic, under the influence of the Amortentia. He might go so far as to say . . . overenthusiastic. He gets hit by a memory of himself sinking to his knees and wrapping his arms around Malfoy’s legs, so he couldn’t leave the room, and feels himself blush.

More memories hit – of passionate, ranting declarations. Of trying to kiss Malfoy – he winces – and being rebuffed. Of threatening to kill himself, out of passion. Of . . . of mostly staying in one, unfamiliar room, as he begged, and pined, and faded away with longing, with Malfoy constantly by his side. And nothing at all of Blaise Zabini gawping, or Hermione telling them both off, or Nott staring his blank, disconcerting stare, or even McGonagall calling in Slughorn with an antidote.

It feels like he’s been in Malfoy Manor, in the unfamiliar room that he presumes is Malfoy’s bedroom, for an eternity. For . . . “How long have I been here?” he asks. “Feels like it’s been more than twenty-four hours.”

Malfoy’s strange, incredulous expression doesn’t change. “It’s Tuesday,” he says. “So . . . yes, a bit longer than twenty-four hours.”

Malfoy’s mother returns, just as Harry’s taking that in, and gives him a glass of water, which he drinks, because it would be impolite to accuse his host of trying to poison him, particularly when she’s just freed him from a love potion, by the looks of it.

“There’s a Portkey in my study you can use to get back to school,” Narcissa says. “Go and fetch it, Draco.”

Malfoy leaves the room as if he’s half-asleep, leaving Harry alone with his mother.

“Er, thank you,” Harry begins, and trails off at the look of poisonous rage on her face.

“If you make my son unhappy, I swear that whatever it takes, I will make you pay for it,” she says, and stands up and sweeps out of the room.

Harry can already hear Malfoy’s footsteps echoing as he returns, and then Narcissa saying, low but still audible, “You will *not* do anything so stupid again, do you hear me? Can you *imagine* what the press would say if it came out that you’d drugged *Harry Potter* into falling in love with you? It would destroy what’s left of our reputation, and we barely have anything left at all, you *stupid* child. What would your father say?”

Malfoy murmurs something sharp in reply, which Harry can’t make out.

“This can only be good for our family if it’s *carefully managed*, as I suggested, but *you* had other ideas, Draco. No, I won’t break my promise, but you must promise in return to speak to me before you try out anything so rash again.”

There’s some more muttering – Malfoy sounding tense, and his mother incandescent with rage. Eventually, though, Malfoy says, audibly, “All right, all right, I promise. Stop going on about it.”

He storms back into the room and grabs Harry roughly by the arm. “Come on then,” he says, and activates the Portkey.

They land, as usual, just outside the school gates, but Malfoy doesn’t storm off in a huff. Instead, he just stands there, looking at Harry, with the strangest expression – there’s hurt in there, Harry thinks uncomfortably, along with anger, and a tangle of other, less easily identified emotions.

Eventually, Malfoy says, “I genuinely don’t know what to say, Potter. If I never have to go through that again, it will be too soon.”

Harry’s still not entirely sure what ‘that’ was – he suspects he’s not remembering the half of it – but, equally, he’s not sure why *Malfoy’s* so pissed off. It seems to him that all the embarrassing behaviour was entirely on his side, and his side alone. All Malfoy had to do was fend him off, and . . . take him home to his mother? What was that about?

Malfoy seems to know what Harry’s thinking without being asked. “I didn’t think you’d appreciate being on display in your condition,” he says, folding his arms across his body. “I could hardly take you back to the dormitory, what with you being so . . . unpredictable,” he adds tightly. “So I took you home. And it was a good job I did,” he adds, “given that the horrible stuff *didn’t* wear off after twenty-four hours, like you promised. I gave you gallons of the antidote, but it didn’t seem to do any good. In the end, Mother used a mix of Legilimency and Imperius on you to try to snap you out of it.”

Harry can’t stop himself from grimacing. The thought of Malfoy’s mother rooting around in his brain is a horrible one. He wonders what she saw, and then thinks that it’s best *not* to wonder.

“I was never very good at casting Legilimens, or I’d have done it myself,” Malfoy says, his voice still tight. “So don’t go thinking it was some sort of plot hatched by my mother to get at your secrets. She only did it because I asked her to. She wasn’t at all pleased. She could get in serious trouble with the Ministry if it all comes out, I hope you realise.”

Harry considers that instead of Narcissa digging through his thoughts and memories, he could have had Malfoy instead, and feels like he’s had a lucky escape. But he also thinks he’d be wise not to tell Malfoy that. It dawns on him, too, that if Malfoy had cast the spell, he’d have broken the terms of his parole. Has Malfoy even realised what he’d have risked? The thought gives him chills.

“What did you tell the others, though? About why we both weren’t at school?” Harry asks, feeling numb and stupid.

“I told them we’d gone away on a romantic break,” Malfoy sneers, and then shakes himself. “Sorry. It’s all been a bit much. I just left a note for the Headmistress to say that we’d gone to spend some time together to try to get over our shared past.” He shrugs. “Stupid, I suppose, but it seemed plausible, and I was a bit distracted at the time by the way you were trying to hump my leg.”

Harry blushes at his feet and doesn’t answer.

If he didn’t regret taking the Amortentia, despite Malfoy’s obvious reservations, he regrets it all right when he gets back to school, and people are practically queuing up to first interrogate, then castigate him. The Headmistress goes first, and soon as she realises that Harry’s not going to share more than Malfoy said in his note, she waxes sarcastic for quite some time about ‘skipping out on commitments’ and ‘needing to prove he’s taking his studies seriously’ and finishes up with the dread words ‘detention’. He’s too old for detention, he thinks, but McGonagall fixes him with her dread eye, and he decides he won’t express that thought out loud.

Next up are Hermione and Ron, who tackle him together. Hermione’s practically in tears, which makes him feel like a scumbag, and Ron’s uncharacteristically sullen, which doesn’t help. He tells them a little bit of what happened, which also doesn’t help, because Hermione’s outraged he went ahead without her advice and support, and Ron can’t seem to get over the fact that Harry purposely took a potion that would make him fall in love with Malfoy. “I don’t *mind* Malfoy all that much,” Harry finds himself protesting, as Ron shakes his head.

Hermione mutters, “*Don’t mind Malfoy* indeed,” under her breath, and Harry thinks it’s wisest to ignore her.

Later, he gets a third round, with Pansy and Zabini producing a kind of tag-team attack. To Harry’s surprise, they don’t seem to know anything about the Amortentia, so he doesn’t fill them in. It’s difficult, because they combine deep suspicion with incredible nosiness, but he manages to keep it vague. “Ask Malfoy!” he says, crossly when they won’t drop it. “If he wants to tell you, he will.”

“*He* said to ask you,” Zabini says, hacked off. “Oh well. I’ll get it out of one of you eventually. I always do. Gossip’s in my blood, Potter.” And on that ominous note, he leaves.

None of the others seem to want to kill him, although Greg scowls at Harry a bit as they get ready for bed, until Malfoy mutters, “For Merlin’s sake, give it a rest, Greg,” and he stops, turning away with a shrug.

Harry experiences the most regret though when, a bit later that night, as he’s lying in bed with his wand casting Lumos, trying not to think too deeply about anything at all, the curtain to his bed slides open and Malfoy’s head emerges. He doesn’t ask if it’s OK to invade Harry’s privacy in the middle of the night, just climbs up, shutting the curtain behind him.

“Cast that muffling spell,” Malfoy hisses, as Harry struggles to sit up.

Harry does so. “Um, what can I do for you?” he asks, like a wally.

Malfoy snorts, and shuffles across the bed so he’s sitting next to Harry, leaning against the headboard, but on top of the covers. “You asked if trying the potion did any good,” he says, and half-turns towards Harry. “I said no.”

“And?” Harry asks, rubbing his eyes and wondering if he should Accio his glasses.

Malfoy shrugs. “Take a look.”

Harry Accios his glasses, and Malfoy tugs down the neck of his top. The soulmark looks angry. It’s more of a stain than a thing of beauty; it reminds Harry uncomfortably of the Dark Mark. “So . . . it worked a bit?” he asks.

Malfoy’s face pulls itself into something disagreeable. “Go on – touch me,” he says, and Harry can feel his face burst into flame.

“Yes, right on the penis, oooh, oooh,” Malfoy says flatly, and snorts. “The soulmark, you enormous idiot,” he clarifies.

Harry bites his lip and places a hand flat against Malfoy’s skin, sliding it under the neck of his top. He’s cool to the touch, and for a moment they just sit there uncomfortably, until Malfoy twitches and Harry removes his hand. The soulmark’s . . . changed a bit. Not a lot, granted, but it’s less angry. Harry’s now more gnawing on his lip than biting. Malfoy’s so tense and rigid next to him.

“Shove round a bit, so I can give you a back rub,” Harry says, because *that* will make the situation more relaxed all round, he thinks, regretting it almost as soon as he says it. But . . . he has a funny feeling, and it’s worth trying it out.

“Why?” Malfoy asks, after a frozen moment, raising an eyebrow.

“I . . . just do it, OK?” Harry says.

Malfoy does as asked, sliding down the bed so Harry can tuck in behind him, and leaning forward slightly.

Harry’s never given anyone a back rub before, but it’s never sounded like something you needed a qualification for, so he cracks on with it. His fingers are sore in about ten seconds, Malfoy’s muscles are knotted up so tight, but he fights through the discomfort, rubbing firm circles in his neck, and shoulders, and sliding fingers up and down his back, until Malfoy’s actually relaxing against him, his breath coming faster.

“That . . . feel OK?” Harry asks, when he thinks his fingers are going to drop off.

Malfoy clears his throat. “Yes,” he says, his voice rough, and this inspires Harry to carry on for a bit longer.

Soon, though, he has to give up. And . . . he has to see if what he thinks will happen has, in actual fact, happened. So he stops massaging, squeezes Malfoy’s shoulder, and says, “Er –

what's the soulmark like now?"

Malfoy doesn't turn around to show Harry. Instead, he just looks down. And says, as if it's entirely expected, and normal, and fine, and not at all a massive, terrible disaster:

"It's turned completely gold."

A short interlude for grief

The next few weeks pass almost normally. Well, as normally as they can pass, given everything. Besides, Harry's in almost constant detention for a while, as punishment for bunking off school without permission – although not the *same* detention as Malfoy, he notices. He's sent each afternoon to McGonagall's office, while Malfoy is banished to Slughorn's.

It helps, a bit, not being with Malfoy all the time. He finds he can almost concentrate on his schoolwork. McGonagall doesn't actually set him anything to do, during his enforced solitude, so he tries to use the time wisely. Hermione would be proud of him, if she were speaking to him. She's still angry over the Amortentia business. "It's not the fact that you did it, mate," Ron says, looking around shiftily in case Hermione catches him with Harry and gets upset again. "It's the fact you didn't trust her enough to tell her you were going to. She was really worried when you vanished, and we couldn't ask anyone for help because then the whole thing would come out." Ron drops his voice even lower. "I think she's blaming herself too – that she can't find a countercharm. You know what she's like. I . . . think the whole thing is reminding her of her parents. She still thinks she failed them, mate." He shakes his head, expression grim, and leaves Harry to his thoughts.

So, despite doing his schoolwork, he finds plenty of time to reflect: on what a terrible friend he is to Hermione, and how much he loves her and Ron, and . . . and how much he wants what they have between them, for himself. It's all getting mixed up in his head: his longing for that meeting of mind and spirit, tangling with flashes of Malfoy – the way he looks at Harry when he thinks Harry's not watching; the way his soulmark blossoms under Harry's fingertips; the way . . . the way he had Harry weeping at his feet, begging him to love him, and yet didn't do anything at all to take advantage of the situation. It's not what Harry expects of him.

Harry knows he's not always the quickest on the uptake when it comes to his own emotions. It took him far too long to realise that he could see Ginny as more than a friend, and it was only after Ginny ended that it he realised exactly *why* friends was all they could ever successfully be. But he's not a complete idiot, either. He knows he fancies Malfoy. Has possibly always fancied him, on some level, although back then it was too mixed up with hatred, and rivalry, and . . . Well, they were just children, weren't they? And then they grew up, and it was war – real-life, actual war, where their friends died, and their enemies died, and sometimes the two were the same, and it wasn't exactly conducive to looking over at Malfoy and thinking, *Yeah, he's hot*.

Harry's still not sure he actually thinks Malfoy's hot. He's just . . . Malfoy. But when he looks at him now, his insides roil. And there's the wanking, too. He's done quite a bit of wanking recently – in the bathroom, where Zabini can't spring out and score him – and it's Malfoy who rises in his mind as, er, other parts of his anatomy rise.

Harry thinks, too – although he tries *not* to think it, because it terrifies him – that Malfoy is as obsessed by Harry himself, as Harry is with him. But . . . he still doesn't really know Malfoy,

not really. Malfoy's been brought up with a completely different outlook on life to Harry – taught to value his own supremacy over Muggles, and over other wizards. And now his family's reputation is damaged, and his position in the world is changed, and . . . he has a tattoo round his neck that claims he belongs to the wizard who saved the world. Doubt niggles away at Harry. Whatever the truth of Malfoy's feelings, it would be out of character for him not to use that to his own advantage.

As October ticks by though, Harry doesn't feel like Malfoy's using anything to his own advantage. He's quiet, whenever he's in Harry's presence, and not in a sullen, sarcastic way – just, well, quiet. As if he's gone somewhere else in his mind. Though wherever he's gone, he still takes the time to watch Harry, and then pretend he wasn't when Harry catches his eye.

Hermione may not be talking to Harry, but she's talking to *Malfoy*, Harry realises, when he catches them one day sitting together in the library, heads close together. He ducks behind a stack before they can see him, and wonders what they were talking about.

“Did Hermione give you any ideas about fixing the spell?” he asks Malfoy later, when he finds him alone.

Malfoy gives him a funny look, as if Harry's accusing him of something. “No. And I promised Mother I wouldn't try anything without her permission, in any case. Why?”

Harry shrugs, and tries to look like he doesn't care that Hermione was talking to Malfoy and he doesn't know what about. “No reason,” he says. “Just wondering.”

Malfoy doesn't crack under this intense interrogation and confess, so Harry lets it drop, but he still wonders, all the same. He can't tell why it's upsetting him that Malfoy and Hermione are friendly, and that in itself worries him. Is it that he doesn't know what they've been talking about? Or is something more stupid – like, that they've been leaving him out? Malfoy's not going to try to steal his friend; the idea is ridiculous. And . . . Hermione's not going to try to steal Malfoy, either, he thinks, feeling like a complete wally.

But, it's true that Malfoy seems to be relaxing into himself a bit more. Mostly, he doesn't even ask Harry to help him with his Muggle Studies homework any more. Yes, that was just a pretext for them to meet to talk, about how to find the counterspell, and that's no longer proving very productive, but even so. Harry doesn't even know what the last couple of lessons were about, though he knows they've been covering Muggle high society of some kind, because Pansy's been getting excited about their next lesson being some kind of field trip to a bespoke tailor rather than just a lesson in the usual café.

Harry can't help but feel, gloomily, that time is just . . . passing, without his permission, and he's losing his grip. And every day that passes takes him closer to the end of October, to the anniversary of his parents' deaths. He should be used to it by now, he tells himself, and tries to pull himself together. But somehow the date seems to get worse as he gets older – rawer, the grief more sharp. He supposes it's that it won't be long before he's older than his mum and dad were when they died. The thought fills him with sadness – for his own loss, and for theirs. And under everything is the constant tang of bitterness that maybe his lack of soulmark means he'll never have what they had – even if he does outlive them, five times over.

It's a weight off Harry's mind when Hermione decides to start talking to him again, a couple of days before All Hallow's Eve. It's clearly a weight off hers too, because after she's had a little weep – Harry's well practiced in awkwardness these days, and barely finds it tricky at all to give her a hug and bang her on the back – she starts smiling properly, and tells him he's a massive idiot, and she loves him, but can he please use his *brain* next time, rather than destroy her peace of mind like that? Harry thinks she's overreacting a bit, but he's so pleased to have her talking to him again – and Ron, too, who was loyally taking his fiancée's side – that he thinks he'll keep that to himself. Although . . . it occurs to him now, rather too late, that Hermione might have thought he was desperate enough to actually try her suggestion of death-brinkmanship as a way of curse-breaking, and he feels hot with guilt. He had disappeared for four days, without telling her what he was doing, after all.

The school is buzzing with preparations for the Halloween feast, although Ron is mostly buzzing because he's remembered to send his mum her birthday present on time, despite the cruel lack of reminders from his siblings. Sitting at lunch on the Monday of Mrs Weasley's birthday – Ron still marvelling at his amazingness – he comes to a decision. He doesn't want to go to the Halloween feast this year, so he's just not going to. It's not compulsory, is it? He's going to go to Godric's Hollow and watch the sun rise over his parents' grave.

"That's a bit morbid, Potter, don't you think?" Zabini says, when Harry expresses this, and shoves in a mouthful of pasta. "Come and get drunk with us instead. You've been like a wet weekend recently. I'm worried about you."

Nott gives Zabini a sour look, then turns to Harry. "Don't listen to him," he says dismissively. "I visit my own mother's grave as often as I can. My father will soon join her there, I suppose."

This adds an extra layer of awkwardness and gloom to the proceedings, and even Zabini tries to chew more quietly.

"Would you like me to come with you, Harry?" Hermione asks, leaning over to squeeze his arm in companionship. "I'd be happy to."

"Me too," Ron says. "You don't need to ask – I'm there."

Harry thinks about Ron and Hermione joining him. And then he thinks about . . . every other person in the wizarding world also joining him. He's sure they'll be respectful, but no, he's not actually that sure. They might think being respectful includes mass singing of 'He saved us all', and all the other songs about Harry's mighty victory, and Harry can already feel his quiet vigil slipping away into noisy, unwelcome spectacle.

Harry can feel Malfoy's eyes on him – cool, speculative – as he shrugs and says, "Actually, maybe I won't go, after all. It'll be crowded, and I don't think I'm in the mood for that."

"Yes, better to come to the feast, and thence to Hogsmeade to get properly bladdered," Zabini says, nodding. "You'll feel much better afterwards, I promise."

Harry nods, because he thinks Zabini's only trying to help, even though the suggestion is a shit one, in his opinion. He doesn't want to get drunk, on top of being miserable; then he'll just be drunk and miserable. Where's the joy in that? Malfoy passes him a thickly buttered slice of bread, and he takes it and chews it automatically. He could just make a quick appearance at the feast, and then run away and hide in his dormitory all night. Yes – that's probably the best way out of it, he thinks, and tries not to feel even worse about the whole thing.

On Tuesday morning Harry wakes up determined to be cheerful and not let a little thing like the brutal murder of his parents, when he was only a baby, put a crimp on his day. He thinks he's managing it quite well, and barely wanting to burst into tears at all, when, later that evening, Malfoy ruins it all.

Harry doesn't *want* to go out to Hogsmeade and get pissed with Malfoy, who doesn't drink, and who's a constant itch in Harry's brain, and he definitely doesn't want to do it tonight, of all nights. But what else could Malfoy mean when he strides into their dormitory as Harry's sitting on his bed – not brooding, definitely not brooding – and says, firmly, “Wrap up warm, Potter, we're going out.”

“I don't want to,” Harry says, and it comes out small, and he feels even worse.

“I know you don't,” Malfoy says, which Harry thinks is pretty heartless, “but it'll make you feel better. At least, I don't know that it will, but you'll regret it if you don't. Please,” he adds, sounding tetchy and wound up. “Trust me on this one.”

It's the *please* that does it. Harry gets to his feet reluctantly, shoving on a thick jumper and his warmest outer robe, and follows Malfoy out of the castle. Malfoy's just wearing his school robes, Harry realises as he walks behind him, and this strikes him as odd, but he can't summon up enough enthusiasm to ask Malfoy why he hasn't changed to go out.

They're heading towards Hogsmeade – of course they are – but when they pass through the gates that mark the end of the castle's drive, Malfoy stops. They've been walking in silence, single file, but now Malfoy turns, and holds out both hands. His fingers are red with cold, Harry notices.

“Sorry, I should have arranged a Portkey,” Malfoy says awkwardly. “It's quite a way.”

Where the hell are they going? Harry wonders, but he reaches over and takes hold of Malfoy's hands. They're freezing, and he squeezes them on instinct; Malfoy squeezes back. Harry almost wants to enjoy the moment, but he can't – Malfoy's Apparating them halfway across the globe, it feels like, in dizzying jumps.

When they finally reach their destination, though, and Malfoy releases his hands, Harry knows exactly where they are, even before he's caught his breath: the graveyard in Godric's Hollow. It's quiet, almost eerily so. He can see his parents' grave in the distance, the white marble glowing as if it's lit by some inner fire. It's just an illusion, but oh, it makes his heart ache, to think there's a tiny piece of them still alive in some way, right in front of him.

Their grave is covered in flowers – heaps and heaps of them, all fresh, and he can smell the fragrance even from here.

Harry realises, as he takes it all in, that he's not alone in the graveyard, of course he isn't. But . . the crowds are smaller than he'd have expected, and they're keeping their distance. No one waves, or shouts stupid things about his bravery at him. Some people nod, and it's respectful, and he feels himself welling up with emotion.

Malfoy, a quiet presence at his side, turns, as if to go, but Harry grabs his arm. "Did . . . did you have something to do with all – this?" he asks, indicating the quiet, distant crowd.

Malfoy's frown deepens, and he shifts his feet, as if he's uncomfortable. "Sort of, I suppose," he says. "I had a brief word with Auror Robards, about the unacceptable rowdiness at the gravesite at this time of year, and I think he took my point." He shrugs. "I presume he's implemented some sort of crowd control. Now, Potter, I really should leave you to it."

"Oh," Harry says, still struggling to take this in. "Do you have to?"

Malfoy's expression turns very very strange. "Well, no. But . . ."

But what? Harry waits, to see what Malfoy will say.

"I don't think my presence in this place is exactly appropriate, do you?" Malfoy says, shoving his hands in his robe pockets and frowning hard. "Given everything. I don't think I need to spell it out."

"I'd like it if you stayed, though," Harry says, and finds it to be true, even as he says it.

Astonishment crashes across Malfoy's face, like a breaking wave. "O-of course, then," he stammers, and then doesn't seem to know what to do with himself.

Harry's having enough trouble dealing with his own emotions, without handling whatever crisis he's provoked in Malfoy. So he doesn't even try; he just slips his arm into Malfoy's, and starts to walk towards his parents' grave.

They sit quietly together in front of the tombstone, side by side. Harry doesn't feel much like talking, and happily Malfoy doesn't seem to want to either. It's awkward, but acceptably so. Harry supposes being with Malfoy is never going to be anything other than awkward. But . . . here Malfoy is, despite it all. Sitting next to Harry, just because he was asked.

After a long while, though, Malfoy asks, "So, what were your parents like?"

Harry knows what they were like – he's heard stories of how kind and fierce and loyal his mum was, and how brave and reckless and loving his dad was. But at the same time he doesn't know them at all, and it kills him. "I . . . never met them. Not that I remember," he says, feeling heat spike behind his eyes.

"Hm," Malfoy says. "They were probably like you, then, I suppose. A terrible combination of pig-headed, and moral, and reckless to the point of stupidity. And . . . and . . . good-hearted, I

suppose,” he says, with deep reluctance. “Knowing you, Potter, I’m sure they were good people.”

They *were* good people, Harry thinks, and this unexpected kindness creates a fault-line in his self-control. He tries to pull himself together, but he just feels so *sad*. And why the hell shouldn’t he feel sad, anyway? It’s not against the law.

“It’s all right,” Malfoy says, a little stiffly, next to him, and puts an arm around his shoulder. “Breathe, Potter. Breathe.”

Harry supposes it’s a bit embarrassing, to cry like a baby in front of Malfoy, but right now he doesn’t actually care.

When he’s finished crying, quite a long time later, he feels surprisingly better. As if a weight he didn’t know he was carrying’s been lifted off his shoulders. Though there *is* a weight on his shoulders still – Malfoy’s. He’s still got his arm around Harry’s shoulders, rubbing his thumb in comforting circles against Harry’s arm as they sit there.

Harry sniffs, and Malfoy releases him, fishing in his pocket for a hanky, which he passes over. “It’s clean,” Malfoy says, “before you ask. And *no*, I don’t want it back after, thank you.”

Only a tosser would carry about monogrammed silk handkerchiefs, rather than paper tissues, Harry thinks as he looks at Malfoy’s monogrammed silk handkerchief, and then blows his nose hard.

“Better?” Malfoy asks, when Harry’s done, and somehow Harry thinks he’s not inquiring about the snot situation.

He looks over at Malfoy – who doesn’t look sarcastic, or mocking, or unpleasant, but instead looks . . . worried. He almost looks scared, Harry thinks, and doesn’t know why. All he knows for sure is that he’s glad Malfoy’s there with him. It’s something he’d have never expected, but there it is. Malfoy’s there, and he’s glad.

The fastest orgasm in history

Harry's sitting at lunch at the Gryffindor table on Friday, with Ron and Hermione on his side of the table and Malfoy and Greg on the other. They've barely started eating when Greg says, without preamble, "We all got given tickets to some Muggle cultural shit in class today. We're meant to take someone new along, to share the joy of Muggleness, or something. Want to come with me, Hermione?"

Harry nearly falls off the bench, which is a challenge. Hermione doesn't look less shocked, but she bravely raises her chin and says, "Yes, OK. What is it though?"

Ron, who has his mouth full, scowls, and then his forehead creases, as he clearly considers whether or not he should be jealous that another man has asked Hermione out for the evening. He takes another look at Greg, and the worry lines fall off his face. Harry can clearly see him thinking: *Nah*.

Greg takes a bite of his quiche. "Dunno what it is," he says, spraying crumbs, and Malfoy shudders next to him.

"Ballet," he tells Hermione, and smirks. "I wish you much joy."

"Don't know what you're looking so smug about," Greg says, still chewing. "You've got to go to something too."

"Yes – I must suffer the Muggles murdering choral music," Malfoy says, pushing away his plate as if it offends him.

"Who are you going to ask?" Greg presses.

Malfoy carries on looking at the plate.

"Harry, want to go with Draco?" Greg says. "He wants to ask you, but he's too chicken-shit, I reckon."

"So! What ballet is it?" Hermione asks loudly, which doesn't really cover up the sound of Ron having a heart-attack with his mouth full, but at least Ron's death throes provide a bit of distraction.

Malfoy's eyes flick up, and then to the side, and he wets his lips. "Well, I suppose I wouldn't actively mind if you suffered alongside me," he says to Harry, while Ron gurgles. "So you're welcome to join me, if you want."

"Yeah, OK," Harry says, and tries not to feel as if he's just agreed to something epic in significance.

Harry decides – at least he decides to tell himself firmly – before his almost, sort-of, pseudo date with Malfoy that he’s not going to worry about whether this is, or isn’t, an actual date. Or whether he does, or doesn’t, want it to be. To be honest, he’s sick to death of winding himself up in knots; if they get any tighter, he’ll strangle himself from the inside.

It’s easier to think it’s not a date when he goes to his bedroom on Saturday night to get ready, and finds Malfoy already in there, doing up his shoelaces. Malfoy’s his room-mate, and they’re just friends – well, sort of. Friends who stare at each other a lot, and one of whom has a massive tattoo of the other’s name around his throat. That sort of friends.

Malfoy stands up, his posture defensive and awkward, as if he’s not sure of himself. “I feel a bit stupid,” he says, sounding cross. “Do I look OK?”

Harry swallows. “You look—” *Merlin*. “Fine,” he finishes. Malfoy’s wearing a dark three-piece Muggle suit, so well-fitted that it might almost have been made for him. It probably has been made for him, Harry thinks, remembering Pansy’s excited burbling about a bespoke tailor from a week or two ago. His shirt is pale purple, and silver cuff-links glint at his wrists. He looks . . .

Harry can’t find words to describe how good he looks.

“Fine, eh? Your enthusiasm overwhelms me,” Malfoy drawls, and relaxes a bit. “Thought I’d Muggle-up, given the occasion.”

“Not sure I have anything so smart,” Harry says, suddenly worrying.

“I’m happy to outshine you for once, Potter,” Malfoy says, and his lips quirk into something that’s not precisely a smile. Harry wonders if Malfoy’s going to stand there and watch him panic over his outfit, but he just says, “Right, I’ll wait for you in the common room, then,” and strides out.

Harry rummages in his trunk and decides on his black jeans and a fitted white shirt. He tries to remember an ironing charm, and then remembers he has a library of spell-books in his trunk, so he looks one up. He gets dressed quickly, and frowns into the mirror. He’s not sure he looks great, but equally he doesn’t think anyone will look twice and laugh, which is the main thing. He needs a jumper though, or he’s going to freeze; a robe’s going to look odd, next to Malfoy’s pitch-perfect Muggle outfit, and he doesn’t own a coat. He digs in his trunk and discovers – it’s either his school jumper, a hoodie, or one of Mrs Weasley’s knitted creations. None of the options are acceptable. So he dithers, and grabs a Weasley jumper; at least he won’t forget his own name, he thinks as he pulls the dark-green sweater embellished with an H over his head, messing up his hair. He’s grown since he last wore it, and it’s almost too tight, but he takes a quick look in the mirror and thinks he looks OK.

He leaves the dormitory before he can work up a proper panic. He can feel it building, starting in his guts and rising up to sit, fluttering, in his chest. Malfoy’s slouching on one of the sofas with the others when he emerges into the common room, though he shoots up when Harry enters. His hair’s dishevelled, as if he’s been tugging at it.

“What’s the ‘H’ stand for, Potter?” Pansy asks, eyes sparkling. “Hero?”

“Heartthrob, surely,” Millicent says, and gives Harry the strangest look.

“Humungous ego, more likely,” Malfoy says drily, and looks Harry up and down in a way that has him squirming inside. “Come on, or we’ll be late.”

The Portkey takes them to somewhere in London Harry’s not familiar with. It’s packed with wealthy Muggles, and the cars in the road are low, and shiny, and clearly both expensive and driven by tossers. Malfoy looks around, frowning. “That way, I think,” he says, and leads them towards a large, ornate church. Inside, Malfoy shows their tickets to the smiling man at the door, and they’re given a programme each, and left to wander in to choose their own seats. The chairs are wooden, and hard, and the church itself is modern but highly decorated, with a huge, golden organ dominating one end.

“Do you believe in God?” Harry asks as they sit down, wondering why the subject’s never come up at Hogwarts before, that he can remember. Do any wizards believe in God? The Dursleys were traditional Church of England Christians, meaning they knew right from wrong, but never actually went to services, except at Christmas, sometimes, when they left Harry behind. It hasn’t left Harry feeling very warm towards religion, although he sometimes wonders if there’s anything in it.

Malfoy considers this. “Religion is more of a Muggle thing, Potter,” he says, resting his programme on his knee. “I mean, it’s part of Wizarding history too, which you’d know if you’d ever paid attention in Binns’ classes. But it’s less necessary to have faith in magic, when you actually know it exists. I expect that’s why it’s fallen out of fashion in the wizarding world, at any rate.”

The vicar of the church approaches the pulpit and begins to speak, talking a little about the church, and then introducing the orchestra and choir. Harry’s not sure he’s going to enjoy it, in all honesty; he’s never really experienced classical music before, and he’s tense in case Malfoy suddenly starts whispering loudly about Muggle music being shit, or something. But Malfoy doesn’t do anything embarrassing; he just sits back in his chair and listens, occasionally consulting his programme, and follows the Muggle audience in polite applause at the appropriate moments.

In the interval, he rises without comment, and soon returns with two small plastic glasses of wine. He hands one to Harry, and takes a ginger sip of his own. “Almost drinkable,” he says, and quirks a smile, taking a second sip.

Harry wonders what it means, that Malfoy’s drinking in his company. Is the music that bad? Or is it his company that needs obliterating? Or is – the thought seems strange – Malfoy finally relaxing enough to be OK with getting a bit squiffy with Harry?

The music starts again soon after, but Harry can’t concentrate. He shouldn’t have had a drink on an empty stomach, he thinks. But it’s not that, really. It’s Malfoy – what else? Malfoy knocks back his drink, and leans over to place the empty glass beside him on the floor. And then he spreads his legs. It’s only a small movement, but it means Malfoy’s leg is pressed up flush against Harry’s, their thighs touching.

Harry tries not to breathe, and finds that's a bit too difficult, so he tries to breathe normally, and finds that's almost as tough. In. Out. In. Out. The orchestra are playing a loud bit, and Malfoy stretches, hyper casually, and rests his hand, equally casually, on Harry's leg. It's the sort of intimate but perfectly acceptable gesture one person might make to another, if they were dating, and wanted to suggest to their partner that they were loved.

Something odd is happening inside him. Harry doesn't know whether it's good or bad, only that it is. He takes a breath, and then another. And then, very deliberately, he drops down his left hand to cover Malfoy's with his own.

When the music finishes, Harry moves his hand to clap, and Malfoy claps beside him, shifting away so he's not so close. Harry wonders what, exactly, is going to happen now, but he's forgotten that Malfoy is the king of ignoring things like this. It soon becomes clear that Malfoy's just going to pretend that they weren't just sitting there, basically holding hands, until Harry's heart felt like it was going to burst out of his chest.

"Bit out of tune at points," Malfoy says as they stand up to leave, "but with some all right moments, I suppose. What did you think?"

Harry thinks he wasn't listening to the music at all; he was too busy holding hands with Malfoy. "Yeah, it was OK," he says.

"You have a fine career ahead of you as a music critic," Malfoy says, sniggering, and leads the way outside. It's cold in the street, but dry, and the window displays of the posh shops that line the street drip with jewels and sparkle with lights. "Want to go for a drink?" he asks, and doesn't wait for a reply, just carries on walking. He's already opening the door to a bar attached to a plush-looking hotel when Harry catches up with him, and Harry follows him through, into chic, leather-upholstered darkness.

Malfoy orders them drinks, and when they come he basically necks his, tipping it up to his throat and swallowing, before putting down the nearly empty glass and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Harry begins to feel slightly nervous. He sips at his drink more slowly, and tries not to stress out when Malfoy orders a second round, and repeats the process. "Um, are you OK?" he asks, when Malfoy struggles through a third. His cheeks are flushing, although the room's not that hot, and he strips off his suit jacket, undoing the top button of his waistcoat.

"Absolutely fine," Malfoy says firmly, and orders a fourth drink. "Drink up, Potter."

Harry doesn't really want to get pissed on an empty stomach; especially not after last time. He wonders, again, if it's a good thing that Malfoy's drinking with him – that he's able to relax in his company. But then, this doesn't feel like Malfoy relaxing. It feels like Malfoy going completely off his rocker. Is he gearing up to something? If so, Harry's not sure he wants to know what it is. If Malfoy needs to get drunk to do it, it can't be anything good.

When Malfoy finally makes his move, it's less than good. Because he . . . tries it on with Harry, and Harry really, really, really wants to say yes. But Malfoy's so drunk by now he's swaying. He can't focus on Harry properly as he leans in and says, slurring, into Harry's ear, "Fancy a shag, then, Potter?" And he puts his hand on Harry's leg again. It's not so pleasant, this time; his grip is too tight, and Harry can feel tension radiating throughout him. Does Malfoy even *want* to . . . to do what he's saying? It's like he's forcing himself to say it, like he's reading from a script someone else has written for him. It could be nerves, Harry thinks, feeling his own nerves jangle. Or it could be that Malfoy's given up, decided the soulmark thing is never going to go away, and is trying to force himself to accept it.

If there's even a *hint* of the latter, Harry's having no part of it. And besides; Harry's only just ready to accept he likes Malfoy that way. It's a pretty big step to go from dancing around possibly, maybe finding each other attractive, to going to bed together. "Um, I think you're a bit drunk," Harry says, trying to move back a bit. "Perhaps we should go back to Hogwarts and—"

Malfoy tries to lean towards Harry again, and slips off his seat. The only reason he doesn't fall on his arse is that Harry grabs him, rising from his own seat to pull Malfoy upright. They end up in a sort of hug, Malfoy hiding his face in Harry's shoulder, and Harry trying not to let his heart pound its way out of his chest.

"Don't you want me, then?" Malfoy asks quietly. His tone is . . . odd.

Yes, Harry's cock says, and his heart squeezes in sympathy. "Um," he says. "I'll get you a glass of water, and then we can—"

Malfoy won't let him go; he's breathing, very hot and heavy, against Harry's neck. Harry's tries to divert enough blood to his brain to work out what to do next. He doesn't have a sobering potion on him; he didn't think he'd need one.

"Uh, why don't you give me the Portkey, Malfoy," Harry suggests.

"Think I left it in the church," Malfoy mumbles into his neck. "Don't feel so well."

Can Harry Side-Along Malfoy all the way back to Scotland? He's a bit drunk himself, and he suspects if he tries, he'll Splinch them both. A terrible, no good idea occurs to him, and once he's had it, he can't think of another option. They're in a hotel bar, aren't they? He can . . . get a twin room, or sleep on the sofa, or something.

Harry manages to half-drag Malfoy out of the bar and into the hotel reception, ignoring the judgmental expression of the neatly-uniformed man on reception. Luckily, there's a lift, so they don't have to tackle the stairs, and they lurch together towards the room, Harry taking several tries to get the key card working, but eventually they're in.

Malfoy toes off his shoes and socks, and stumbles towards the enormous double bed, shedding waistcoat, shirt and trousers as he does so, and flopping on top of the duvet, in just his boxers. Harry considers locking himself in the bathroom, but decides that's too cowardly. Instead, he fills up a toothglass with water from the tap, and takes it over to Malfoy, who knocks it back, then tugs at Harry, who falls awkwardly on the bed, still fully dressed.

Malfoy attempts to pull off Harry's jumper, and for a moment Harry almost lets him. Malfoy's so . . . flushed, and his expression so soft and odd. When Harry looks down at his soulmark, it's warm and friendly, and Harry just wants to let himself be folded into Malfoy's arms and . . . let the rest follow, naturally. But . . . Malfoy's drunk. And he doesn't drink, according to Zabini. It suggests he's had to get pissed before he can bring himself to . . . what? Confess his feelings? It's not exactly romance, Harry thinks, pulling away and going to get Malfoy a refill of his water glass.

When he gets back, Malfoy's half-sleep, although he smiles, anxious and unfocused, at Harry. Harry steels himself, and with a bit of heaving, manages to get Malfoy under the covers, tucking him in, and then turns off the light. He fumbles his way over to the sofa on the other side of the room and squashes on to it, fully dressed. It's not comfortable, but he thinks he stands a chance of falling asleep on it. He doesn't have a hope in hell, if he tries to sleep in the same bed as Malfoy.

Harry wakes up with a start. Someone is throwing things at his head. He dodges, just in time to see a shoe sail past his nose and hit the arm of the sofa beside him. "What the—?" he says, blinking in confusion. He seems to have slept in his glasses, and they're digging painfully into his nose.

"Spineless, snivelling—" Malfoy says, nonsensically, and flings his waistcoat at Harry.

Harry catches it, and sits up, swinging his legs over the side of the sofa. "Seriously, stop it!" he says. "What the hell?"

Malfoy groans, and sits back on the edge of the bed. He's still in his pants, but he's wrapped the bedsheet around himself. "My head hurts," he says, putting his head in his hands. "Put me out of my misery, for Salazar's sake."

"I'll ask Poppy for a headache potion when we're back at school," Harry offers.

"I think my head might fall off if I try to Apparate," Malfoy mutters into his hands, and then looks up, attempting a glare. "I'd hex *yours* off, you unspeakable wanker, but then I'd go to Azkaban, and I'm not doing that for anyone. My father doesn't speak highly of it in his letters."

"Me?" Harry says tightly, a lot of last night coming back to him, in embarrassing, painful flashes. He wonders how much Malfoy can remember, throughout the alcoholic fug. "What did *I* do?"

Malfoy's mouth firms. "It's more what you *didn't* do," he says. He's going red, but he doesn't look away, and Harry wonders how much courage that takes. He thinks he's going to die, personally. Maybe that's Malfoy's intention. To kill him off, so they don't have to talk about it. "Is this why you have no soulmark, Potter?" Malfoy continues, his voice scathing, even as his face turns scarlet. "Because you're a prude? Or is no one good enough for you, or something? Saint Potter and his perfect, untouched prick. Or maybe it's just *me*, and—"

Harry's had enough. "For fuck's sake, Malfoy, give it a rest! You were completely pissed. What was I supposed to do?"

This seems to throw Malfoy. He blinks, very slow, like a snake. "I'm sorry," he says, his tone less wild now. "Did you . . . did you just imply that you wouldn't touch me because I was *drunk*?"

"Um, yes," Harry says.

Malfoy shuts his eyes tight for a moment, and pinches the bridge of his nose with his fingers. Then he stands up, letting the sheet slide away from his body, and takes a couple of steps towards Harry. "Get up," he says, sounding tetchy.

Harry stands up, wary. What's Malfoy up to?

Malfoy mutters to himself, voice increasing in tetchiness, "If anyone had ever suggested to me that I would find a fucking Weasley jumper sexy at some point in my life, I would have made them promise to shoot me in the head."

"Um—"

"Shut up, Potter. My head is going to fall off, and I hate you, and I hate what you're doing to me, and I kind of hate myself a bit right now, but . . ." Malfoy takes another step closer, and then another, until he's standing right in front of Harry – all bare skin, and silver tattoo, and silver-white hair. He doesn't seem real. "*Merlin*, I want to touch you, and I fucking want you to *want* me to touch you. Not shy away like a sodding frightened unicorn."

"I-I-I don't believe you want to though," Harry stammers, feeling like Malfoy's sharp stare is piercing right through him. He is *not* having this conversation, he thinks, a haze of unreality shading over everything. Surely, he's not.

Malfoy narrows his eyes. He's too close, and he's too . . . not exactly attractive, exactly, but striking. Charismatic. Harry can't look away. "Why not?" he asks. "Don't say something thick. My head hurts too much."

"Because you don't like me!" Harry protests, which sounds weak to his ears. "And . . ." He swallows, not sure where he's going with this.

"Yes, Potter, because 'liking' someone is so key in wanting to fuck their brains out," Malfoy says, his lip curling. "And in no way can the fact I have your name scrawled across my chest be construed as a clue that I might, possibly, harbour feelings of some sort towards you, now, can it?"

"But . . ."

"Come *on*," Malfoy says, frustration rich in his voice. "I really didn't want to have this conversation, if you can tell. I just wanted to . . ." Get drunk and let the alcohol have it for him, Harry thinks.

But then he finds it hard to think at all. Malfoy takes a final step towards him, so their bodies are almost touching, and he slides his hands down Harry's sides, coming to rest at his hips. He leans in, nose in Harry's hair, and breathes into his ear the question: "Well?"

Harry's heart is racing. His cock is trapped in his jeans, hard and swollen. He swallows. Malfoy is so close. If he just moves a fraction, he'll—

Malfoy moves a fraction, thigh pressing gently between Harry's legs, to graze his denim-covered erection. Harry's not sure if he's done it on purpose – Malfoy's trembling, despite his bravado – but either way, Malfoy's *touching his cock*.

"Say yes," Malfoy breathes, very low, into Harry's ear.

"Y-y-yes," Harry manages, although he's not sure what he's saying yes to, other than the idea that if he doesn't get a hand around his dick soon he's going to die.

Malfoy's hands move to the button of his jeans, and the sound of him unzipping his trousers is very loud in the quiet hotel room. Malfoy yanks them down, just below Harry's arse, tugging his boxers with them. He doesn't move to kiss Harry, and he doesn't say anything either, just breathes, hot and heavy, against Harry's neck, and . . .

Malfoy's hand is very hot, and his fingers very long. Harry can't stop himself from groaning as Malfoy tentatively moves his hand. His dick is already dripping with pre-come, and the sensation of Malfoy's fingers slicking him up almost has him coming, but he clenches his stomach hard and manages to hold himself together.

"You want this as much as I do," Malfoy says in his ear, very low and intense – and angry. His fingers tighten around Harry's cock, and he works his hand up and down hard and fast. Harry shuts his eyes, the sensation overwhelming. He can feel his knees trying to buckle, as desire swirls in his gut, his abdomen, has his thighs quivering with it as the feelings build and build.

"I fucking *know* you want this as much as I do," Malfoy says. His thumb twists over the head of Harry's cock as he works, and Harry nearly falls, but Malfoy's got an arm around his waist, holding him steady. "You can come, if you want," he says, hand still working. "I want you to," he adds, his voice hot, and heavy, and dark.

Malfoy's arm moves from Harry's waist to drop between Harry's legs and tug, gently, on his balls. Harry comes helplessly, clinging to Malfoy, breath coming hard and fast as his dick pulses into Malfoy's slowing hand.

They stand there like that for a while, Malfoy gently holding Harry's dick as he rides the aftershocks, his heartrate slowing as he tries to breathe. Then Malfoy snorts, and lets go, wiping his hand on Harry's stomach. "I promise I won't tell Blaise you came so quickly," he says, and turns, walking quickly back towards the bed, and retrieving his clothes from where they're lying on the floor.

"Um . . ." Harry says with complete coherence, pulling his boxers and jeans back up as Malfoy dresses with his back to him.

Malfoy turns, doing up his shirt. His expression is triumphant, but there's something else in his eyes. He looks scared to death, underneath it all.

"Don't you want me to . . .?" Harry mumbles, blushing. He's never touched another man's cock before, but then he suspects Malfoy might also be a novice at it, and it was still pretty fucking amazing.

The terror blooms more brightly in Malfoy's eyes, but he keeps his chin up high. "What, and be late for class?" he says. "Thanks, but I'd best be off." He takes a deep breath and then he vanishes, Apparating away. To school, possibly.

But not to class, Harry thinks, sitting down heavily on the sofa. Because it's Sunday. He stands up, to follow Malfoy, and then sits down again. What should he do? He's trembling, he notices, and can't seem to stop. Does Malfoy really like him that way? It seems pretty obvious. He did just stick his hand down Harry's pants, after all. But . . . he didn't seem all that pleased about it, and he didn't stick around for Harry to return the favour. He gave the impression, in fact, that if Harry tried, he might hex his cock off, whatever the consequences.

Is it . . . just sex, then? Harry takes off his glasses and rubs his hands over his face. He thinks that if Malfoy just wants to have sex, he could easily find someone a bit more . . . obvious than Harry to approach. There's Zabini, for a start. Despite his protestations of his absolute straightness, he seems the sort who's entirely flexible, when required.

Maybe Malfoy believes in the soulmarks though, Harry thinks with gloom. And if he does, then he believes that he's fated to love Harry, while Harry is . . . fated to *not* love him. If Malfoy truly believes that, then . . . Well. No wonder he's been unpredictable, recently. Lurching from bravado to terror to depression and back again.

Harry groans out loud. What the fuck is he going to do? All of a sudden, the room feels too close, the walls closing in on him. He can't make himself go back down to reception and check out properly – he doesn't want to talk to anyone – so he counts out the money he thinks he owes and pops it on the pillow. It takes him a while to be able to concentrate enough to Apparate, but he tells himself not to be stupid, and manages it in the end.

It's a lot longer before he can talk himself into walking down the drive and going back into the castle though. Malfoy might be inside, and Harry doesn't think his heart can cope.

Heart's desire, revisited

Harry really, really wants to have a heart to heart with Malfoy. Really, he absolutely, totally does. The problem is that that's a lie. He can think of little he wants more. He knows he *should* have a heart to heart with him, but it's bloody difficult. Not just because he still doesn't know what in his own heart, really, but also because, well, this is Malfoy. Malfoy, the king of ignoring difficult situations.

Malfoy's excelling himself this time.

Harry doesn't think it's coincidence that the first time he sees Malfoy again after the hotel room, late on Sunday, he's surrounded by people. And the next time he sees him, he's surrounded by people. And then again. And again. He can hardly stroll up to him when he's in a crowd and demand to know – what, exactly? Whether he wants Harry to love him? Why he left before Harry could toss him off in return? The closest Harry gets to raising the topic is when Greg asks him, brow furrowed, if he had a good time at the concert, because Malfoy's gone weird again, and Malfoy interrupts to say that it was *fine*, and he's *not* gone weird, and Greg takes the hint and shuts up.

Greg and Hermione seemed to have an *actual* good time together, to both of their surprise, even though Greg later confesses to Harry that the ballet was full of blokes dressed like girls, and girls without tits. Harry thinks it's a bit rich to accuse muscled men in leotards of looking like girls, when wizards are notorious for wearing what's basically dresses, but he doesn't press the issue.

Harry tries to think how he could raise the issue with Hermione, and get her advice, but he can't think about it without going red. And besides; he promised Malfoy he wouldn't tell anyone he was gay. Hermione knows Malfoy's gay – he's got a sodding soulmark with a bloke's name on it – but Harry still doesn't think he should confirm it, and break his promise. And that's leaving out the fact that he really doesn't want Hermione to know that Malfoy touched him up. She'd probably tell Ron, and Ron would die. Literally. Harry likes Ron, and he doesn't want to end his life prematurely.

Monday slides into Tuesday, into Wednesday, into Thursday, and still Harry hasn't managed to catch Malfoy on his own. It's ridiculous, and stupid, and Malfoy can't look him in the face, and Harry can't look *him* in the face either, because every time he tries, all he can think about is the way it felt when Malfoy had his hands on him. Friday slips away into nothing, and Saturday . . .

Saturday is the first Quidditch match of the year. Slytherin versus Gryffindor. And all of a sudden, Harry's had enough of all this. What is he, a coward? An idiot? Yes, probably both of those, but still, he finds some courage from somewhere, and bolsters it with his stupidity, and says, at breakfast, "Thinking about the match is making me miss my broom. Want to go for a fly afterwards, Malfoy?"

Malfoy swallows his mouthful of cereal the wrong way, and his eyes start watering. “Why?” he asks, licking his lips, when he’s recovered himself.

“Because I want to,” Harry says firmly. And adds, also firmly, “With you,” in case Malfoy hasn’t got the picture.

Millicent raises her eyebrows, but doesn’t say anything, and Zabini looks like he’s going to wet his pants in glee. “Can I watch?” Zabini asks, and then grins, raising his hands in front of him as if to deflect the invisible death rays that Malfoy is beaming out of his eyes. “Private party, I understand. I’m not offended.”

“All right,” Malfoy says, sounding bored. But he pushes the rest of his cereal away untouched, and a muscle twitches in his cheek.

Harry barely cares who wins the Quidditch match. He feels a tiny flush of pride when Gryffindor scrape a win, and then an equally tiny pang of guilt, because he’s a Slytherin now and should be rooting for the snakes. The result doesn’t seem all that important now, though, for some reason.

He’s already wearing his flying gear, and so is Malfoy, so when the result is announced, and the enormous red banners are flying across the sky to celebrate the victory, he turns to Malfoy and says, “Shall we?”

Malfoy shrugs, his mouth tightening. “I suppose.”

It’s not the burning enthusiasm Harry was hoping for, but then he feels nervous enough to vomit, pretty much, so he tries not to get annoyed. Once he’s clear of the stands he kicks off from the ground, spinning up high, and trying to get a feel for the air around him, to get used to being in the sky again. It doesn’t take long. He’s always loved flying – the feel of the wind in his hair, the swoop that pulls at his stomach as he plunges and rises and plunges once more. He’s *good* at this, in a natural way that he’s never been good at anything else.

And yet . . . it dawns on him that he does only want to ever fly for fun, yes. He should have the courage of his convictions. He wants to fly for fun, and he wants to be an Auror, and eventually Head Auror, and he wants . . .

There's other things he wants. And for the first time in ages, today he feels like, despite the sodding soulmark spell, he might just get them.

Malfoy rises beside him, wind whipping through his hair, and his eyes are sparkling, the tension melting from his face. “Race you to the lake,” he shouts, and they streak the short distance to the loch, and barrel roll across it. The loch is wide, and the water choppy, waves racing across it as the wind pulls at the water.

They fly together in a kind of dance – racing, and weaving, and sometimes drawing so close together that Harry wonders if they’re going to crash, and get eaten by the Giant Squid, but they never do. It’s sheer exhilaration, and Harry’s heart is pounding, but with pleasure, and

excitement, rather than fear. This – this feels natural, and wonderful. To soar, with Malfoy by his side.

And plummet, with Malfoy by his side too, he supposes, as they drop back towards the land, about an hour later, half-frozen with cold.

“Are we going to talk about it?” Harry says, the moment they land, stumbling. He tries to stamp the feeling back into his toes, and Malfoy casts a Warming Charm that rolls over him, wave upon wave of heat.

“And say what?” Malfoy says sullenly. The sparkle’s gone from his eyes. “Are you expecting an apology, or something?”

Is Malfoy some sort of idiot? “No-o,” Harry says.

“Then let’s not, because I’m seriously losing the will to live,” Malfoy says. “Where are you *going*?” he adds, as Harry starts walking towards the Quidditch stand.

“Locker room,” Harry says.

It’s all in darkness when they get there; the winning team is no doubt back in their common room celebrating, while the Slytherins are probably . . . Who knows how the Slytherins cope with losing? Harry doesn’t. “Do you mind – losing the Quidditch, I mean,” he says, putting his broom in a rack on the wall and dropping down on to a long wooden bench, up against the opposite wall.

Malfoy copies his action, tugging off his outer robe and hanging it up before he sits. “Not really,” he says. “I never really cared about whether Slytherin won or not, to tell you the truth. I only cared about beating *you*.”

Was the same true in reverse? Maybe a little. Except, Harry really did enjoy the thrill of winning.

“Anyway, what are we doing, exactly?” Malfoy asks, turning narrowed eyes on Harry. “Having a nice sit down in a deserted room for fun?”

“Is this fun?” Harry asks, trying to keep his voice steady.

“Merlin, you’re not going to try to be *nice* to me, I hope,” Malfoy sneers. He gets to his feet, and Harry lurches up after him, grabbing him by the arm.

Malfoy doesn’t move. At least, he doesn’t move until Harry gives him a very gentle push, and he half-walks, half-stumbles until he’s at the closed door to the room, back flat against it. Malfoy swallows hard, and Harry can see his Adam’s apple bob.

“Um, OK?” Harry asks.

“*Yes*,” Malfoy snaps. “Fuck’s sake. You hardly need to ask.”

“I haven’t really asked for anything yet,” Harry says, nervously, and Malfoy just looks at him. Harry supposes he deserves it. He wishes he’d had a drink, and he’s equally glad he hasn’t. He places his hands flat against the fabric covering Malfoy’s stomach, enjoying the way Malfoy’s muscles clench, and slides his hands down, until he hits the waistband of his flying trousers.

Malfoy’s fallen silent, which Harry hopes is a good thing, and he undoes the knot at Malfoy’s waist, dragging the trousers down, and dropping to his knees as he does so. Malfoy emits a startled breath, and Harry leans in, to rub his cheek against the bulge in Malfoy’s briefs, mouthing kisses over the fabric.

Malfoy’s making small, odd noises, which sound loud in the stillness of the room, and Harry reaches up, heart racing a mile a minute, to pull his underpants down. Malfoy’s cock bobs free, right in Harry’s face. It’s long, and thick, and reddening, a bead of liquid rising at the tip. Harry can feel himself flush, and he moves his head to lick the tip of Malfoy’s cock clean. The taste is odd, and musky, but the noise Malfoy makes goes straight to Harry’s own cock.

Malfoy reaches down with a trembling hand, and winds his fingers so tight into Harry’s hair it hurts. “Ow!”

“Sorry,” Malfoy murmurs, not sounding sorry. “Do that *again*, please.”

Harry obliges, taking long, slow lick after long, slow lick, until Malfoy’s babbling nonsense above him. When he looks up, Malfoy’s stomach is clenched completely solid, and his face is screwed up tight. Harry takes Malfoy’s cock in his mouth and sucks, gently at first, and then with more pressure. Malfoy’s eyes shoot open, and he looks down, at Harry.

It’s possibly the most intimate thing Harry’s ever done, the most embarrassed, and turned on, and amazed he’s ever felt. To feel Malfoy’s cock, harden and leak in his mouth. To hear the sounds he’s making. And to look him in the eye, as Malfoy’s cheeks redden and redden, his eyes locked on Harry’s, as he watches Harry suck him off.

Harry’s cheeks are starting to ache, but he continues sucking, moving his head up and down. Malfoy’s starting to shake now, his thighs juddering, and he releases Harry’s hair to clutch, wildly at the wall. “H-h-h-*Harry*,” he says, “I’m going to—” and he comes hard, flooding Harry’s mouth with bitterness, his eyes rolling back in his head.

Harry swallows, and again, wiping the back of his mouth, and thinks, *Oh my fucking God*. Malfoy looks completely wrecked. His forehead is damp, and his hair darkening around the temples. He braces himself against the wall, and staggers to the bench seat, shoving up his pants and trousers as he does so, and tucking himself away. He runs his hands through his hair and closes his eyes for a brief moment.

When he opens them again, his stare is very intense. “Come here, then. I don’t think I can stand up,” he says.

Harry comes here. And five minutes later, he actually comes, holding on to the coat pegs above Malfoy’s head for dear life as Malfoy’s mouth around his cock turns his spine to jelly.

April is reputed to be the cruellest month. November, on the other hand, Harry finds to be the most overwhelming month, possibly in the history of his life. Emotionally speaking, at any rate. Or maybe not emotionally; physically, is more accurate. There are emotions bubbling all over the place, as far as he can tell – certainly on his side – but what Malfoy might actually be feeling, other than horny, he has no fucking idea.

Harry's unplanned, awkward seduction in the Quidditch locker room seems to have given Malfoy the idea that Harry's up for it.

Harry *is* up for it. Sort of. He just wishes he was better at sorting out the tangle of what's sex and what's love in his head. He . . . doesn't think he's in love with Malfoy. But it's hard to know what he's feeling, exactly, when Malfoy has him flat on his back on his bed, a pillow under his hips and his legs spread – the others are all in class, where they should be too – and is rubbing gentle, lazy circles around his arsehole with a finger, while telling him a story about . . . something. Harry has no idea, really. He's trying to resist grabbing his own cock and wanking, because then this will be over far too quickly. Malfoy's finger is slick with lubricant, and Harry can feel his arsehole flutter, and relax, and flutter. The next time he relaxes, Malfoy presses his finger in, very, very gently. Harry can feel himself clench around the intrusion, a tiny sting, and then relax, and Malfoy's finger moves again, sliding in and pressing, gently, against his insides.

Malfoy hits something that's both extremely sensitive and extremely amazing, and Harry tenses around his finger, and this makes the feeling stronger, brighter. Malfoy's still talking, and still stroking this tiny, sparkling spot inside Harry – he's got his finger *inside Harry* – and Harry reaches down, and takes his cock in hand, and nearly bites through his own lip it feels so good.

Malfoy goes pink and stops talking, his finger still moving. He wets his lips, his eyes dropping to watch Harry's hand working. "You feel amazing," he murmurs. "You *look* amazing."

It's so unexpected, and delicious, to hear Malfoy saying something so . . . warm, and intimate, that Harry comes, all over himself, to the echo of Malfoy saying *amazing*, as if he can't quite believe his luck.

Of course, after he's come, Malfoy cleans them both up with a quick wave of his wand, frowns into the middle distance, and says, "We'd better get back to class," and manages to think up a convincing excuse as to why they're both late, when they get there. It's bloody hard to concentrate, sitting next to Malfoy, who has hands, which have fingers, one of which was just up Harry's bum. He has a mouth, too, which has sucked Harry's cock, but . . .

But hasn't kissed him. It's not that Harry's not *enjoying* himself, exactly. But . . . Malfoy hasn't kissed him.

He supposes, gloomily, that he hasn't kissed Malfoy either, but whenever he's moved even vaguely as if he was going to, Malfoy's shied away, like a startled dragon. Harry doesn't really fancy being burned to death, metaphorically speaking.

The first week of November bleeds into the second. Harry goes flying again with Malfoy, more than once. And sucks him off, more than once. And tries not to notice that Malfoy's soulmark, sometimes grey, more often silver, in the past, is now bright sparkling gold pretty much all of the time.

In the third week, Harry stops Auror Robards after class on Friday. "I was wondering if I could ask a favour," he says, trying to sound keen and academic rather than mental.

"Anything!" Auror Robards says, and then grins. "Well, within reason, Harry."

"I'm doing some research on the seven potions we're tested on in our NEWTs," Harry says. "I mean, we are – me and my partner. One of them's Amortentia. I heard the ministry has a room where they brew it, for research purposes? I was wondering—"

"If I could let you take a look?" Robards interrupts, frowning a bit as he packs up his things. "I don't see why not, you being you. I'm sure I can arrange it. Who's your Potions partner?"

This is going to be the tricky bit, Harry thinks. "Er, Draco Malfoy," he says.

Robards raises his eyebrows in surprise. "Really?"

"Yes, sir," Harry says, trying not to wince.

"Well, I can't promise anything, but I'll see what I can do," Robards says, and adds, on seeing Harry's face fall, "I'll try my best, Harry, seeing as it's obviously important to you. I don't want you failing your exams now, do I?" And he laughs, heartily. "I'll Owl you."

Robards Owls on Monday. Harry opens up the letter with shaking fingers to see, in Robards' untidy, thick black scrawl:

All is A-OK. Just drop by during working hours and tell 'em I sent you. They'll let you in for half an hour or so.

R.

Malfoy doesn't seem overly enthusiastic when Harry tells him they have permission to go to the Ministry to enter their Ever-Locked Room where they store the secrets to love. Harry can't think why.

"This is almost as bad as your Amortentia plan," Malfoy says, folding his arms and glaring. "Though I suppose at least you have permission from the Ministry, so I won't need to ask my Mother before I agree to it. Have you told Granger?"

Harry tells Granger.

“This is almost as stupid as your Amortentia plan,” Hermione says. “Or looking in the Mirror of Erised!”

“Or washing Malfoy’s hair,” Harry counters, stung. “That one went so well too.”

“At least you have permission, I suppose,” Hermione says. “How on earth did you manage that?”

“I just asked Robards,” Harry admits, “and he sorted it out for me.”

“Why didn’t you try that first, then?” Hermione asks, in tones of judgement.

That’s exactly what Malfoy said. Harry thinks he won’t tell Hermione that. “So, what’s the plan when you get in there?” Hermione asks.

This is a problematic part of the plan, as far as Harry’s concerned. Because it’s tricky to plan, when you don’t know what you’re facing. All Harry’s heard about the room is that it contains the most powerful force in the universe – love. He’s not even sure if that refers to the fountain of Amortentia which is meant to be in the centre of it, or if it’s something else entirely. Amortentia isn’t love. But how can they have extracted love, and kept it in a room?

“So there *is* no plan,” Hermione says.

Malfoy said that too. This is starting to get on Harry’s nerves.

“No,” he says. “We’re going to wing it.”

They decide to wing it the next day, even though that’s a Saturday.

“Robards said working hours only though,” Malfoy says, looking vastly unenthusiastic about the whole business.

“That’s pretty much all the time in the Ministry,” Harry explains, which seems to surprise Malfoy.

“Father didn’t work that many hours,” he says.

That’s because he had a shit work ethic then, Harry wants to say, but doesn’t. He supposes it’s not great to work every hour Merlin sends, really. Not if you want to keep having friends, and seeing other things than your desk and the pizza delivery boy. He already had a taste of that over the last year, and although he enjoyed the work, he’s not sure he enjoyed the lifestyle very much.

McGonagall allows them to use her Floo, because it’s Ministry business, and when they arrive at the Ministry Harry is welcomed like an old friend. Malfoy is welcomed like an old friend too – an old friend no one ever really liked. But people are polite enough, and after Harry’s worked his way round basically every floor in the building, shaking hands and drinking tea until it’s coming out of his ears, they end up outside the door to the Ever-Locked

Room, which a smiling Unspeakable opens for them. “I’ll give you boys half an hour,” she says. “Just bang on the door if you want to leave before then. We can’t leave the door open, or it disturbs the experiment.”

“Ever-Locked Room is a bit of a misnomer, then,” Malfoy mutters to Harry as she unlocks it, and opens it a crack to let them slip through. “*Usually*-Locked Room would be more accurate.”

The key turns in the lock behind them, and Harry tries not to panic. He doesn’t like being locked in, even in a room this large.

Malfoy sniffs, and looks around with judgement writ large across his face. “Where’s the love then, eh, Potter?” In the centre of the room, a fountain does, indeed, flow with Amortentia, filling the room with a scent that’s both masculine and floral, with an undertone of wood, and fresh sheets, and something slightly bitter. It’s familiar, but Harry can’t place it, again struck by the sensation of the smell surrounding him.

The air feels curiously thick, and Harry wonders if they’re going to be poisoned by the potion fumes, and hallucinate something. Maybe that’s the trick to the room – you see a vision of love? He says this out loud, and Malfoy stares at him as if he’s mad. “Maybe I should drop my trousers and you’ll see a vision of cock,” he says facetiously.

“You’re not helping!” Harry says, looking around and trying to see what he’s missing here. “We have less than half an hour, so try to be useful, rather than just taking the piss.”

“We could spend half an hour more fruitfully playing with my penis,” Malfoy mutters, but strides off and vanishes behind the fountain for a second, before coming back into view. “Can’t see anything different on that side,” he says. “But remind me – what do you hope to learn by coming here, exactly? What was your plan again?”

Malfoy knows he doesn’t have a plan. He’s just being a wanker. But . . . it’s a good point. What *does* he hope to gain by investigating love itself? Maybe, he thinks uncomfortably, he’s just being selfish by bringing Malfoy here. It’s nothing to do with breaking the curse they’re under, not really. He just wants some evidence – anything will do – that he’s capable of loving someone properly, enough for them to be *his* soulmate. Otherwise, what’s the point of anything? Fooling around with Malfoy is fun, to a certain extent, but it’s not doing him any good emotionally. He keeps wondering if he’s . . . well, horrible. Leading Malfoy on, when he’s got nothing to offer him other than sex. But, maybe Malfoy doesn’t *want* anything more than sex, despite the mark.

Or maybe Malfoy doesn’t know what he wants, just like Harry, and is also tying himself up in knots, trying to find out.

“I hope you’re thinking something productive, rather than just wondering what’s for dinner,” Malfoy says, interrupting his brooding. “I can tell you – it’s curry. And I hope you’ll actually eat some, please.”

“You’re not my mother!” Harry snaps, a bit sick of Malfoy trying to force-feed him all the time.

Malfoy snorts. “I should bloody well hope not.” Then he says, low and sulky, “I just think you’ve got a bit too thin, that’s all. I’d rather you ate a bit more, OK?”

Harry’s not sure it *is* OK – does Malfoy think he’s some sort of unattractive skeleton, then? But now’s not the time. “Maybe you should get your soulmark out and see if it, I dunno, changes, or something,” he says.

Malfoy wrinkles his nose. “What if the Unspeakables are watching us secretly, to see what we do? That’ll go down well, if I whip out an enormous illegal tattoo that’s strangely relevant to the contents of this room. Which include, I might add, a fountain of the strongest love potion ever brewed, and you, the object of my affections.” He doesn’t say it warmly.

“All right, all right. Come here, then, and I’ll just peer down your neck,” Harry says, trying not to get cross.

Malfoy wrinkles his nose, as if he can smell something bad, but does as Harry suggests. As soon as Harry touches his skin, though, something strange happens: sparks fly.

“What the—?” Malfoy says, jumping away as if he’s been burned.

“Did it hurt?” Harry asks, examining his finger. There’s no obvious burn mark, and he didn’t feel much, other than a tiny buzz of something unexpected.

“No,” Malfoy says, his eyebrows drawing together. He reaches over towards Harry and takes his hand. Immediately, sparks fly again, but Malfoy doesn’t let go. He keeps holding Harry’s hand, squeezing hard, as tiny pin-pricks of light jump between them, faster and faster, until it’s so bright Harry has to look away. “Odd,” Malfoy murmurs, and lets go, but doesn’t step back; instead, he reaches up to stroke a finger across Harry’s cheek. Again, lights dance between them. “You try,” Malfoy demands.

Harry cups Malfoy’s cheek, and if anything the lightshow is even brighter, more dazzling.

They stay like that for some time, and as they hold still, the lights fade, and then brighten, in a dazzling, blinding, and somehow satisfying cycle. When there’s a bang on the door, they pull apart, and the Unspeakable sticks her head round. “Time’s up!” she says. “Let’s go.”

She makes them tea, and they sit in her office. There are piles and piles of paper, everywhere Harry can see, all covered with illegible scribble. “Sorry about the mess,” she says. “Did you find what you were looking for?” She smiles at them over her own cup of tea.

“I don’t know,” Harry says, not sure how to answer that. “What do the sparks mean?”

She nearly spits her tea out. “Oh!” she says. “You two must be better friends than I thought if —” She breaks off in embarrassment. “How rude of me. I’m sorry. It’s just, people misunderstand the Love Chamber, most of the time. It’s not a room that *contains* love. It just . . .” She goes dreamy. “It illuminates the love that you bring into it,” she explains. “At least, that’s what we think it means. It’s still very much a work in progress, that room.”

“That was unhelpful, wasn’t it? Both soppy and cryptic,” Malfoy says when they leave, and Harry can’t help but agree.

Later, Harry attempts to soak out the knots of tension in his neck in a long, boiling hot bath, but just gives himself a few more as he tries to work out what the visit to the room had really meant. So . . . there was love between himself and Malfoy. Possibly. There were sparks, at the very least, but then he already knew that, didn’t he? There’d always been sparks, even when it had just been flailing fists and childish insults.

Malfoy still hasn’t kissed him.

Harry slips his head under the water and lets the hot water pour over his face, before surfacing again with a sigh.

And lo! Although it had come to pass that Hermione Jean Granger was not actually a universal cure-all, it still turned out she was a bloody good listener, and a brilliant friend

As soon as Harry emerges from the Slytherin common room the next morning, into the dungeons outside, Hermione peels herself off the wall outside. “Morning,” she says. “I thought we’d go out for breakfast today, Harry. If that’s all right with you, Draco?”

Malfoy, who’s close behind Harry, shoots her an unreadable look, and Harry remembers that she and Malfoy had been meeting up without him, back when she wasn’t speaking to him. He wonders if they still are, and if so, what they might talk about. It probably isn’t him. He bloody well *hopes* it isn’t him.

It’s probably him, isn’t it?

“No skin off my nose,” Malfoy says, and Zabini, who’s following on *his* heels, sniggers.

“Glad to get some time with Draco,” he says, slinging an arm around him. “Feel like I’ve hardly seen him recently.” It sounds like it could be facetious. It also sounds . . . surprisingly genuine. Zabini’s smile is real, even if he’s a scumbag. “Have fun, dudes.”

“Do you ever get used to Zabini, do you think?” Hermione asks as they walk out together. Hermione’s in Muggle clothes – jeans and a T-shirt, with a dusky-pink hoody, and an oversized powder blue woollen coat on top. “I brought you a jumper, if you don’t want to wear robes. I thought we’d pop into Edinburgh. Bit more private.” She pulls a grey slouchy jumper out of her bag. Harry tugs off his outer robe, and swaps into the jumper.

“I don’t know you ever get *used* to Zabini, exactly,” Harry says, from somewhere inside the jumper, before managing to get his head free. “He just grows on you. A bit like a fungus. I actually quite like him sometimes,” he says, and realises it’s true. OK, so Zabini can be a bit of a dick, and his practical jokes and teasing often go too far, but he’s surprisingly good at keeping secrets for someone who loves gossip as much as he does. He’s proving to be loyal, and that’s no mean feat in Harry’s book.

They Apparate to the Royal Mile, and find a small cosy café somewhere off it, where Harry thinks about ordering a slice of toast, and then remembers Malfoy insulting his body shape, and goes for bacon and eggs instead. Hermione smiles at him approvingly, and tells him she’s glad his appetite’s picking up a bit. They’ve all been worried about him.

When Harry has his mouth full of eggs, and toast, and crisp, crunchy bacon, Hermione says, her shoulders slightly raised and her mouth determined, “Now, I know it’s none of my business, but would you like to tell me what’s going on between you and Draco?”

Harry swallows, and thinks about that. He’d like to. A bit. But – “Maybe you’d like to tell *me* what you talk about together, you and him,” he says. He realises he sounds a bit like a five year old, but still.

Hermione spoons more sugar into her tea. "Him, mostly. And you a bit. He's talking about you even when he thinks he isn't, though." She takes a slurp of her tea. "He told me he's gay, you know. I don't think he wanted to tell me, except he knows you don't like keeping secrets from your friends." She sniffs. "I think he drew the line at Ron, though, so we'd best keep him out of it for now."

Malfoy had . . . what?

"I was wondering," Harry says, addressing his plate, "if, given we can't seem to actually break the sodding spell, I should, you know, try to actually fall in love with Malfoy. A bit. It would be the logical solution."

Hermione reaches across the table and squeezes his hand. "Aren't you already?"

The simplicity of the question takes Harry's breath away. Is he? "I don't know," he says. "Just because I fancy him, it doesn't mean I love him! I'm still not even sure I fucking *like* him all that much sometimes," he mutters.

Hermione removes her hand and picks up her cup of tea, blowing air over it to cool it. "You do know that things don't have to be perfect to be, well, perfect, don't you?" she says, which sounds like a load of bollocks to Harry, and he says as much.

"You and Ron are perfect," he says, to end it.

"We're bloody well *not*," Hermione says, and launches into a list of all the various ways Ron winds her up and means they shouldn't be friends at all, let alone husband and wife. "Don't tell him any of that," she says quickly, and grins. "I just wanted to lead by example. I suppose the main question is: can you respect him enough to get over what he's done? You can let the little things slide. It's the big things that count."

Harry's still thinking about that when they get back to school. If he weighs up what he knows about Malfoy, all the things he's done, and said, and *why* he's done and said them, what's the end result? On the one hand, Malfoy's an infuriating little tosser, who can't keep his temper, and sulks, and . . . well, is branded by the Dark Mark. He'll have that for the rest of his life, right there on the outside. A constant reminder to him, and to Harry, of – what? Of the poor choices his *father* made, and of his own weakness, in not standing up to them. Could Harry have stood up to them, in Malfoy's position? He doesn't think it's fair to speculate. In the end, Malfoy proved himself weak enough that he couldn't murder Dumbledore, and strong enough that he could look Harry in the face and say, *no, it isn't him*, even though the lie could have led him to his own death. In the recent months, too, Harry's found Malfoy . . . irritating, yes, but strangely thoughtful, in unexpected, small ways.

But . . . and again, the familiar, niggling doubts rise to Harry's mind, tangling up with images of glittering soulmarks, and his own blank lack. What if this whole relationship is just a fantasy, rising out of a dark spell that's twisted their complicated rivalry into something more intimate, but no less difficult? He doesn't think Malfoy will be happy to spend the rest of his life in a lopsided relationship, and Harry doesn't want to spend the rest of *his* life wondering if he's actually broken as a person.

And Malfoy hasn't kissed him yet, either. It's hard to forget.

At least that issue's easily solved, though, Harry thinks when they get back to school. He grasps his courage with both hands, and finds there's less there than he expected, but he gathers it up anyway. He finds Malfoy in the common room, with his feet up on the sofa, head in Pansy's lap, and says, "Can I have a word?"

"About what?" Malfoy asks. He's already sitting up, although his expression is anxious.

"Just . . . something," Harry says vaguely. "Private."

"Ooh-er," Pansy says cattily, and snorts. "Go on then, Malfoy, don't keep the Boy Who Lived waiting. It's rude. I'll catch you later, OK?"

Harry's not sure where to take Malfoy. He doesn't really want to snog him in a bathroom – if he actually gets to snog him, that is. He doesn't really want to hear that Malfoy *doesn't* want to snog him in a bathroom, either.

"Think our bedroom's probably empty," Malfoy says, still clearly ill at ease. "Blaise and Theo have gone out somewhere, and Greg's helping out with the Quidditch training this morning."

Harry leads the way, and Malfoy closes the door behind himself with extreme reluctance. He can clearly tell that an awkward conversation, yet again, lies ahead of him.

"I was wondering . . . I mean, I was hoping . . ." Harry loses his nerve. "Should I call you Draco? Rather than Malfoy, I mean."

This goes down about as well as a lead balloon, for some reason. Harry's not sure why, but he wonders if Malfoy was expecting him to say something else, and is disappointed. "What?" Malfoy says scathingly. "Seriously, Potter? You think the fact we occasionally suck each other's cock means we should call each other by our first names, as if we're friends? Next you'll be wanting us to go out holding hands and braiding each other's hair, like little girls. Fuck *that*."

"I . . . *Aren't* we friends, then?" Harry asks, hating how small and meek it comes out, but hating how bitter and defeated Malfoy sounds even more. The conversation seems to have revved up from reasonable to horrible in much too short a time. All he wanted was to fucking kiss Malfoy, not have a tortured, emotional fight with him. He doesn't particularly care whether he can call him Draco or not – he's thought of him as Malfoy for so long that it doesn't make all that much of a difference to him.

Malfoy makes a noise that isn't precisely a howl of despair – it's too low and awful for that. "*Seriously?* Does this *feel* like friendship to you?"

Harry opens his mouth to protest – it's fucking *more* than that, and if Malfoy can't admit that then how much of a wanker is he? – but—

"Don't," Malfoy snaps.

“No, I’m going to!” Harry snaps right back. “So you’re seriously telling me, that although we’re – we’re—”

“Sucking cock,” Malfoy supplies coldly.

“I still can’t call you Draco, and I can’t even fucking kiss you?”

Malfoy’s eyes widen to dramatic proportions, even as Harry has the massive, sinking realisation that Millicent Bulstrode has walked in at exactly the wrong moment in the conversation. There’s no way she hasn’t overhead at least some of what they’ve just shouted at each other.

“I was just looking for Lady V,” Millicent says, seemingly unaffected. “Have you seen her anywhere?”

“Oh, fuck *off*,” Malfoy says, in tones of despair. “Fuck *off*, fuck off, fuck OFF!”

“All right, keep your hair on,” Millicent says, turning to go. “And by the way, yes, Potter, it does sound like Draco’s being an idiot. I’m entirely on your side. Draco, I know life hasn’t been entirely kind to you, but if you screw this one up, you won’t be able to blame your father for it this time, hmm?” She dashes out of the room before Malfoy can throw something at her. Bombs, maybe, Harry thinks. Or hastily conjured knives.

When Harry can bear to look over at Malfoy, his face is red, and upset, and he looks like he’s dithering between – well, knowing Malfoy, probably hiding under the bed or storming out. To Harry’s surprise, though, Malfoy doesn’t do either. Instead, he casts a locking charm on the door, and then . . . stops. As if he’s not quite sure what to do next.

“I don’t really care about calling you Draco, you know,” Harry says, and pulls a face. “I mean – unless you wanted me to.”

“As if I fucking *care* what you call me!” Malfoy says, and something in him seems to snap. He crosses the room in only a couple of strides, and practically flings himself at Harry, pressing his mouth hard against Harry’s own. He kisses like he wants to own Harry, and Harry lets him. No – it’s more than that. Harry relaxes into it, and lets Malfoy take control, grinding his hips against Harry’s, arms wrapping tight around him, one hand reaching up to tangle into his hair in a claiming grip that’s almost painful.

Malfoy gentles, eventually, pressing kiss after kiss against Harry’s lips, his cheeks, his neck, and finally burying his face into Harry’s hair as if he’s embarrassed by his own fervour. “I thought you didn’t want to,” he says, muffled, and sounds like he’s clawing his own eyes out with embarrassment. “Fuck’s sake.”

Harry draws back and looks Malfoy dead in the eye. “I want to,” he says, and kisses Malfoy over and over again, until his lips are sore.

It's December before Harry knows it. It feels like he's been back at school for five minutes, and yet simultaneously five years. But here he is, three months later – December.

McGonagall's taking names of students who are staying for Christmas, and Harry doesn't know what to do. Ron and Hermione are going to the Burrow, and he's invited, of course, but he's not sure he wants to go. Ginny will be there, and that would be awkward, and . . . and he's in love with Malfoy, a bit, and everything in his world has shifted and changed.

"If you're staying, I'll stay too," Malfoy says, as if he doesn't care. "But I'll have to go home for Christmas day itself, or Mother will flay me alive. I suppose I should, what with Father still . . . away."

There are so many awkwardnesses still between him and Malfoy that his father is just another tiny hump in the road, easily avoided if they're careful.

Malfoy doesn't like being careful, though. He likes to hit them at full speed, screaming as he does so, just because he can. "You do know I still love my father, don't you? I'd do anything I could, pretty much, to get him out of that awful place sooner. I have high hopes we'll have him home by *next* Christmas."

"Well, yes," Harry says, because he supposes it's true. He doesn't want Malfoy to reject his family, really. He just wants to know that Malfoy . . . Well. That he rejects their *values*, he supposes. Not the slightly scary, intense values around family loyalty at all costs, but the ones about pure-blood supremacy and Muggle-slaying.

Malfoy shrugs, bad tempered. "I can love someone who's a dick, you know. I'm getting good at that." He freezes, and then pretends he hasn't said that. Harry pretends too. He's also getting good at that; he's learning from the best.

It's almost a relief when Mrs Weasley sends Ron a Howler, in response to his letter telling her Harry won't be joining them for Christmas, and Ron, paling under his freckles, begs him on bended knee to change his mind, until he can't see any other option but to accept. Malfoy seems relieved too, though Harry's not offended; he saw Malfoy's face when he read the reply to his letter to his mother, telling her he'd be spending most of the holiday with Harry. It suggested that Narcissa Malfoy could not be counted amongst Harry's millions of other fans.

The last Muggle studies class of the year is a fun one. The students have to create a list of Christmas presents they'd buy their friends and family, if they were Muggles. They don't have *buy* them, of course, but Harry finds his room-mates' hilarity over the task surprisingly . . . touching. He does like them, after all. Well, most of them. Nott's still an unknown quantity, even now, and he's never going to be best mates with Pansy, even though it gets less of strain to mix with her with every passing day.

Zabini discovers a Muggle store called Ann Summers, and suddenly the Slytherin dormitory and common room is awash with tiny fake penises – they spring up from plastic straws, and appear unexpectedly in chocolate form. Best is the penis headdress that Zabini presents, with solemnity, to Greg, who obviously isn't quite sure whether to kill Zabini with it or wear it,

but the moment passes and he does it with good grace, looking like a massive, unspeakable idiot. He'll take it home for the holidays, he tells them all, and make his house-guests wear it on rotation. Nott, who is, Harry discovers, going to be one of Greg's house-guests, along with Zabini for at least a couple of days, looks less than pleased about this development.

Harry even helps Malfoy buy a few presents, although they aren't quite as penis-themed, for which Harry's actually quite grateful. When he asks Malfoy what he'd buy *him* for Christmas from a Muggle store, though, Malfoy seems strangely shift. Harry's not sure if that's because he has no idea – or because he *does*, and thinks that whatever he's chosen, Harry wouldn't actually like it. Either way, Malfoy's clearly not going to share, so Harry lets it go.

Harry's almost resigned to not being able to counter the soulmate spell now, but he can see that Malfoy never will be. Sometimes, when he thinks Harry's not looking, his fingers rise up to his neck, and he scratches at himself, as if he wishes he could tear his skin off. It makes Harry feel deeply uncomfortable, and guilty, at the same time, because it reminds him of his *own* issues, and he gets that niggling doubt in his mind again, that what he has with Malfoy just can't last.

Malfoy doesn't seem all that happy to be leaving Harry, on the last day of term, and Harry's not sure if that's because he's going to miss him or because he's going back to the Manor and his mother. He tries to think positively, and he finds it easier to believe it's leaving him that's upsetting Malfoy when they say goodbye in a private corner, and Malfoy kisses him so hard it leaves Harry breathless.

Harry wasn't sure if he should get Malfoy a Christmas present, but he's glad he did when Malfoy, going strangely red, hands him a small wrapped parcel. "If you share this with anyone I will hunt you down and destroy you," he says. "I mean, merry Christmas!" And he smiles a lop-sided grin.

Harry hands over his own parcel – it's a pair of cufflinks engraved with tiny stars. They remind him of the sparks that flew between them in the Love Chamber. "Er, I got you a Muggle gift," he says. "Not penis-themed," he adds, and Malfoy laughs, a bit nervously. "You can open it now if you like?" he says.

Malfoy shakes his head. "It's a Christmas present! Save mine for in *private*," he says again, and gives Harry a swift kiss on the cheek. "See you next year." He leaves without looking back, and Harry doesn't manage to catch him again before he Apparates home, but Harry feels almost content.

It's strange, and cheerful, and noisy, and *weird* to be back at the Burrow. All flavours of feelings mixed into one, and then shook up for good measure.

"This isn't going to be awkward, is it?" Ginny says, as soon as he arrives, without waiting to make sure that they're alone. "Please don't let it be awkward."

“It’s not going to be awkward,” Harry assures her, and to his surprise, it’s actually not.

What *is* awkward is when Christmas day arrives, and he takes himself up to the bedroom he still shares with Ron – although Ron sneaks in with Hermione whenever he thinks his mum’s not looking – and opens up Malfoy’s present. It’s a tiny vial of memory, and the note reads, in Malfoy’s bold, elegant, scrawl:

A contribution for your wank bank.

Bloody hell, Harry thinks, going red. No wonder Malfoy didn’t want him to open it in public. Mr Weasley has a beaten-up old pensieve, and he’s happy for Harry to borrow it, so Harry lugs it upstairs and locks himself in. He tips the memory into the bowl and crosses his fingers that it’s not actually Zabini eating a banana, or something, before sliding into the memory.

It’s not Zabini eating a banana.

It’s Malfoy, rather red in the face, in front of a full-length mirror in his bedroom. Harry remembers, vaguely, Malfoy popping home one weekend in December, and he’d thought it was to run an errand for his mother. He absolutely didn’t think it was for *this*. Fucking, fucking hell.

Malfoy’s completely naked, and on his knees, spread wide. His soulmark is practically glowing as he stares hard at the mirror, one hand working his cock with punishing slowness, and the other reaching down between his legs to fondle his balls, before reaching back between his legs and . . .

Oh.

Malfoy’s fingering himself, carefully and slowly, as he wanks. As he wanks for *Harry’s pleasure*. And his own, to be fair. His skin is flushing pink as his fingers move, and his lips keep parting, pressing together, parting. Harry can hear him panting, and the gasps grow louder.

After about ten minutes, Malfoy starts stammering nonsense, and then comes in several vivid spurts, come streaking the mirror. “*Harry*,” he mouths, chest heaving, and then his lips move, but Harry’s can’t tell what it is he’s saying. The memory ends there, cutting off the words, as if Malfoy had wanted to keep something in, but had wimped out at the last minute and cut the vital part out.

Still. It’s a fucking good present. Harry pulls out of the memory feeling so horny he wants to die. In a house full of Weasleys, and paper thin walls, and a borrowed pensieve he has to give back in a few minutes. He siphons the memory carefully back into its vial and shoves it in his trunk, locking it carefully. He thinks deep, calm, cold thoughts about how much he hates Malfoy – he really, really hates him – and eventually he’s in a fit state to join the others downstairs. They’re singing raucous songs along with the wireless, and he grins and joins in, because it’s Christmas, and he’s almost happy.

A funny kind of Christmas present, really

Harry's woken by what sounds like a very tense, and whispered, argument coming from downstairs. He blinks and Accios his glasses, looking across the room at the illuminated clock. It's 'Too early by far to get up' the time reads. He thinks he can recognise the voices, and—

He can bloody well recognise the voices. He jumps out of bed and wraps himself in his dressing gown. He's alone in the room, Ron clearly illicitly shacking up with Hermione, so he turns on the light and opens his door a crack, sliding through it and padding down the stairs.

"I'm sorry to disturb you so late," Malfoy says, his voice a bit too arsey for someone using the word 'sorry' and actually meaning it. "But I really do need to see Harry. I mean, Potter. Right away!"

"He's *asleep*," Mrs Weasley says, "as I should be too! I know you're friendly with Harry now, and I'm trying to understand that, but you can't just Floo into someone else's house in the middle of the night without a by your leave, and—"

"What's wrong?" Harry says, emerging blinking into the brightly lit front room.

Mrs Weasley turns. She's in her nighty, with her hair in curlers, and she looks very very anxious. "Harry, love, Draco here says it's urgent, but I'm sure it can wait till morning, can't it?" Her tone sharpens as she turns back to Malfoy.

"Harry, I . . ." Malfoy looks a bit like he's been run over by the Knight Bus.

"Is it all right if I take Malfoy up to my room, Mrs Weasley?" Harry asks politely. "He looks like he needs a friend."

Mrs Weasley sighs. "Of course, Harry. I'm going back to bed."

Malfoy follows Harry up the stairs silently, and sits down on the bed silently, and—

"What's wrong?" Harry says, locking the door behind them and casting Muffliato, before sitting down next to him.

"I can fix the spell," Malfoy says dully.

A strange crashing static buzzes through Harry's brain, and for a moment he can't hear anything other than his own heartbeat. "*What?*" he says. It's amazing news, he thinks, but . . . why isn't Malfoy happy? He looks like he's telling Harry he has a terminal curse, rather than that they can be free of the spell.

"It was my mother's Christmas present to me," Malfoy continues, staring fixedly at the wall.

“Sorry, what?” Harry repeats, thinking this story is starting to sound a bit less amazing already.

Malfoy grimaces. “I have the original spell, and the counterspell now. Mother . . .” He chokes a bit. “You remember Woodbead had his memory wiped?” Of *course* Harry fucking remembers! “That was her. After I went to her to make her promise she wouldn’t tell anyone, she had the bright idea to make sure Woodbead couldn’t share it either,” he says, voice flooded with bitterness. “She thought it would be useful. Useful! I can’t believe she had the way to fix this all along, but she . . . didn’t. I suppose she still thought there was a good chance that you would . . .” He trails off, very flat. “And my first thought when I opened it wasn’t to use the counterspell, but to . . .” He laughs, without any humour in it, and turns to Harry. “You know that the spell didn’t actually hit you, right? Mother was very clear on that. She didn’t just limit herself to freeing you from the Amortentia when she used Legilimency on you; she took the chance to have a good rummage around and see exactly what had happened when the spell hit. You and Woodbead both thought it did, because you’re fucking morons who can’t tell your arses from your elbows,” he says bitterly, “but you were just a fraction too far away for it to do more than glance off you. All this fucking time, I’ve been thinking . . .!”

Harry’s mouth is very dry. *What?* Is that true, or is Malfoy just trying to make him feel better? He feels like such an idiot, though, that there’s a good chance it’s real. It would be fucking *typical* of life, it were real. “Do you want to use the spell again on me then?” he asks faintly. “To see what, uh, my soulmark actually says?” He knows what it will say, all right; his whole body burns with it. But maybe Malfoy needs to see it, to know for sure that Harry . . .

Harry swallows hard. Is Malfoy his soulmate? It’s the wrong question, though. Harry still doesn’t believe in soulmates. He does, however, believe in Malfoy.

Malfoy’s still staring at the floor so hard that he might actually bore a hole through it any second. “No, I *don’t* want to cast an illegal spell on you and get chucked into Azkaban, thank you very much. Don’t be fucking ridiculous,” he says, as if Harry’s personally insulted him.

“Malfoy,” Harry asks, because it suddenly seems very important. “What did you see in the Mirror of Erised?”

Malfoy turns. He doesn’t look angry, as Harry half expects he will. He just looks . . . ill. As if he’s made of glass, and one tiny tap will shatter him forever, in to a million shards. “What do you *think* I saw?” he says, his voice very small and very raw and very pained. “Your fucking soulmark, of course – with my name.” He swallows, and asks, as if he can’t bear it. “What did *you* see?”

The buzzing’s back in Harry’s ears. “I just saw you,” he says. “Exactly as you are. Except, er, holding my arm a bit more gently,” he says. “You were gripping me too tight. Oh, and I could see your Dark Mark too,” he adds awkwardly.

“You . . . saw my Dark Mark?” Malfoy repeats, a bit stupidly. “Your heart’s desire is me . . . having a Dark Mark?”

“Well, *no*, not really,” Harry says, shifting uncomfortably beneath Malfoy’s suddenly piercing, searchlight gaze. “I mean . . . it’s just, you have it, you know? And . . . that’s OK, I suppose. Because it’s you. It’s not like you can get rid of it, can you?”

“I suppose not,” Malfoy says faintly, looking away.

It’s another jolly, awkward conversation with Malfoy, Harry thinks. Pretty much par for the course by now. “Well, pass over the counterspell, then,” he says. “Let’s crack on, shall we?”

Malfoy hesitates.

“What?”

“You don’t want to . . .?” Malfoy says, face twisting with embarrassment. “Before . . .?”

Is Malfoy asking him if he wants to have another look at his soulmark first, or something? Harry can feel himself frowning. “Not saying it’s not beautiful,” he says, trying to find the right words. “But, um . . . I get the impression it’s a massive pain in the arse for you, rather than anything good, so why would I want you to keep it for a moment longer than you have to?”

He’s clearly said the right thing, because Malfoy’s face clears, as if the sun has come out.

“And . . . and I don’t *need* to have your name written on my skin,” Harry says, trying not to set himself on fire with awkward embarrassment. He supposes it might be an acceptable way to go, so he perseveres. “Because your name’s written right here, on my heart,” he says, pointing to roughly where he thinks his heart might be.

Malfoy doesn’t seem to know what to say to that. He’s gone very still, and quiet, and he’s barely breathing.

“This is the point where you say something nice to me, I reckon,” Harry says, to break the awkward silence. He’s had enough of awkward. He thinks it might be good if they could move past awkward, maybe, and on to . . . something slightly less awkward. Mildly difficult, perhaps. Or almost OK. He’s be quite happy with almost OK, as a next step.

“What, like pointing out that your heart’s actually on the other side of your chest, you great galumphing idiot?” Malfoy says.

“Nice! I said nice!”

Malfoy’s almost smiling now, although he still looks like he’s struggling. “Go on then, cast the countercharm,” he says, and passes over a sheet of parchment.

Harry casts it. The room is filled with a sudden sense of disappointment, and Malfoy winces, for a moment. “Feels like sudden indigestion,” he says, and unbuttons his shirt, peering down at himself. His skin is blank, and instead of a pang of regret for the beautiful, curving lines and gambolling creatures, Harry feels exquisite, sharp relief. Malfoy’s free. *He’s* free. Free to

. . .

He has a sudden panic, though, about that. “You still . . . you know. Don’t you?”

Malfoy looks up at him, his face strangely open and vulnerable. Until he snorts derisively. “Have *your* name written on my right-sided heart, you mean?”

Something drops inside Harry, plunging deeper and deeper and—

“Stop looking like I kicked your crup,” Malfoy says, sounding tetchy. “You don’t fucking have one.” He turns to rummage around in his coat pocket. “I didn’t know if you’d like the Muggle Christmas present I bought you, so I panicked with the other one. It was fun to make, I suppose, but it’s not really my style. I think I was possessed by the malign spirit of Blaise Zabini. Here. Have this instead.” He shoves a small box at Harry, without style. It’s unwrapped, and plain, and when Harry opens it, puzzled, he finds . . .

It’s a ring. Thin, coiled platinum, shaped as if it’s been cast from tree roots. It’s beautiful. It’s strangely reminiscent of the soulmark, with its forest theme, and the odd way it glints, silver, in the gloom. It’s . . .

“It’s not an engagement ring, so don’t be presumptuous,” Malfoy says shortly. “Think of it as more of a . . . possibility. Of a future promise.”

Harry holds out his hand, and Malfoy, face tense, takes the ring out of the box and slides it on to Harry’s finger. It fits perfectly.

As does Malfoy’s hand, in Harry’s own.

Draco’s dying in Harry’s dream again. He’s dying, and Harry’s not *doing* anything. Just treading water as, beside him, the man he loves drowns.

And all of a sudden, dream Harry, or real Harry – who the fuck knows how dreaming works – thinks: sod *this*. Sod it right up the arse. “*Live*, you absolute wanker,” he screams with all his might, while around him the dark-grey sky, the grey-green water, roil. “Why won’t you *LIVE*?”

The strength of his thought wakes him up, heart thumping, and for a moment he’s not sure where he is, or even who he is – is this is a dream still? It has to be a dream still, because he’s in his familiar bed in the Burrow, surrounded by the dark shapes of his familiar things, but Draco Malfoy’s head is lying next to his on the pillow, his body a long, warm press beside him.

Malfoy’s wearing a pair of Harry’s pyjamas too, Harry realises. Along with a very strange expression – half asleep, half fucked-off, half . . .

That makes more than one half, Harry thinks, still sleepy, still staring, but there’s no other way Malfoy’s face can express quite so many things at once, is there? There’s love shining out of his eyes, Harry thinks, warming right through his skin. Love, and . . . wonder. But also, yes, the fucked-off-ness. He wouldn’t be Malfoy if there wasn’t a little bit of that.

“If you’re having erotic dreams again about someone who isn’t me, I’m going to transfigure you into an ant and stamp on you,” Malfoy mumbles, on a yawn. “Go the fuck back to sleep, Harry. But *quietly*.”

Harry tucks Malfoy into his arms, and sleeps. To dream of swimming underwater by Malfoy’s side, pulling hard towards the sparkling surface together, and bursting straight through. To soar, whooping with glee, above the surface of the lake and up, up, up, hand in hand into a dazzling blue wide open sky.

End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! ♥

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