

Hollow

By Neverbird

Chapter 1

Burning every bridge that I cross

to find some beautiful place to get lost...

-Elliott Smith

Early June

There is a doorknob, around which Harry's fingers curve with trepidation. He hesitates, before twisting it to the right and pressing forward. The door slides slowly open, allowing a shaft of sunlight to creep inside.

"All right, Harry?" Hermione asks, her hand finding his shoulder. Harry nods wordlessly. How to explain what he is feeling? In front of him, through the crack in the door, he sees a dusty room in which he has not set foot for over fifteen years. Sunlight from the outside illuminates a patch of faded floral carpet, drawing his eyes to the spot.

Harry draws a sharp breath and pushes the door open at once, letting Hermione and Ron follow him inside. A dozen different details of the room catch his eye all at once, and he is motionless, overwhelmed. Ron and Hermione linger by the doorway, watching him.

A moment later, his body visibly relaxes. He turns to Ron and Hermione with a vague smile. "Stop giving me that look. I'm fine."

"It's okay if you're not, Harry," Hermione murmurs solemnly.

"I'm fine," Harry repeats. "Merlin, what a bloody mess." He runs his hand along the arm of a chair, crowning his fingertips with circles of dust. "It looks like no one's lived here for years."

"I'd be surprised if anyone had," Hermione replies, feeling along the wall for a light switch. "Given the circumstances... Muggles can be very superstitious." Her hand finds the switch and flicks it, with no consequence. "New lightbulbs," she mutters to herself.

"It's been a decade and a half, though," Harry muses. "You'd think that someone..." He is momentarily distracted by Ron, who has occupied himself with writing his first and last name the thick dust coating the window. "Ron, we're in hiding, mate."

"Huh? Oh – oops," Ron says sheepishly, erasing his handiwork with a crude smear of his palm.

"It's actually in better condition than I expected," says Hermione. "You'd think Voldemort wouldn't have been so... well, I suppose the Ministry would have cleaned things up a bit when they came to erase the neighbors' memories." She smiles wearily. "And talking of cleaning, we should probably get started, if we want this place to be livable for the night."

"Muggle cleaning," Ron groans.

"This won't be as bad as Grimmauld Place," Hermione promises cheerfully. "Should only take us a few days, I expect." She investigates the hall closet for a broom.

Hours pass in a haze of sweeping, wiping, and dusting. Ron, though unenthusiastic at first, soon falls into the rhythm of washing the windows, wiping away the dust in bizarre patterns to amuse himself. The room brightens gradually as he restores each pane of glass to its former transparent glory. It is an uncommonly sunny day for England. Ron is inspired to prop a few of the windows open with dusty books he has found on the floor.

Of all the things Harry had thought he might feel, clearing the dust away from his parents' furniture and possessions, he had not expected to feel peaceful – and yet, between the late afternoon sun, the chirping of birds, and the repetition of scrubbing, every tragedy he's known seems to fall away. This morning, he had woken up at 4 Privet Drive for the very last time. For the moment, he is wholly content to be with his two best friends in this vaguely familiar house, tucked away in the quiet part of Godric's Hollow. Next door, two little girls are mucking about underneath a sprinkler, their delighted squeals periodically drowned out by the whir of a passing car. This town is so thoroughly Muggle that, though Harry knows better, he can't help but feel safe.

There are dead insects in all of the corners, and the task of expunging them falls to Hermione. She sweeps them into her dustbin, and empties them into a plastic rubbish bag. Standing on tiptoe, she uses her broom to knock cobwebs down from the ceiling. She labors to sweep away every leg of every spider, feeling a surge of protectiveness towards Ron. Locks of curly hair escape her ponytail and are caught by the soft breeze from outside, tickling her face. She extricates another spider body from the bristles of her broom, humming old Muggle songs to herself.

Dusk approaches, and Ron's stomach grumbles a plea to be fed. There is a Tesco about five blocks away – an easy walk in this weather. The air has chilled slightly, but it feels refreshing after a day of physical work inside a stuffy house. Hermione reties her ponytail as she walks, mentally cataloguing the household items and cleaning supplies they need.

"Oh, he's still doing fine," Ron is telling Harry. "No, the healers expect he'll act a bit funny for a few days around the full moon, but it's not like he's a full blown – you know. I reckon it's more like he's turned into a woman. A couple days of crazy each month, but ultimately harmless."

"Excuse me?" Hermione demands indignantly. Harry cannot suppress a snort of laughter, and Hermione glares disapprovingly at both of them.

"All except our Hermione, that is," Ron cheerfully disclaims, catching her around the shoulders in a brief, one-armed hug, "Who is perfectly agreeable at *all* times of *every* month." Hermione rolls her eyes, but smiles slightly.

They arrive at the Tesco, and Ron is in awe of its grandeur. He has never been in a Muggle grocery store before – in fact, he has never been in a grocery store, period, as food always seemed to simply materialize in his mother's kitchen. The shopping trolley in particular is a source of deep joy; he pushes it just enough to gain momentum, before jumping on at the back and gliding down the aisles. "It's wicked," he decrees, clapping Harry on the back as he passes. "It's like riding a broom with nothing between your legs!"

"Nothing between your legs?" Harry asks wickedly. "Nothing at all?" Hermione snickers.

They roll up to the checkout an hour later, trolley laden with cleaning supplies, light bulbs, and various food items. With the enduring strength of the galleon against the pound, they can afford to be relaxed about their spending; upon discovering this, Ron makes an orgasmic little noise, and adds an armful of Muggle sweets to their load. The walk home is decidedly less comfortable, as the bags seem to become heavier and heavier by the minute. Nevertheless, Ron experiences his first Galaxy bar the moment he steps inside, which is all it takes to cement the fact that Tesco is the Most Bloody Awesome Place Ever Invented.

They continue to work into the night, their motivation waning and frustration compounding. "So. Much. Bloody. Rubbish," Ron mutters, dumping another load into the bin. "For the love of Merlin, this would all take, like, a bloody second if I could use my wand."

"So Voldemort could trace your magic and immediately apparate to our doorstep?" Harry laughs bitterly. "How about you don't."

"Yeah, well..." Ron wipes his hand on his trousers and scowls. "I mean, I thought there was supposed to be some sort of protection

here, you know, like, from your mum. Isn't that what Dumbledore had said?"

"Only til my birthday." Harry sighs. "Anyway, we've been over this, remember? The no-magic rule isn't about me – for now, Voldemort can't touch me here. But you and Hermione – I reckon you're fairly high up on his list, you know? And if he were able to find you..."

"I get it." Ron says quietly.

Harry pauses for a beat. "She would have liked you both. My mum, I mean. I wish she could have... she would have wanted to protect you, too." He looks quickly away, seemingly intent on scrubbing a stubborn patch of grunge off a table.

Hermione and Ron exchange an anxious glance. "Harry, we'll be fine," she says firmly. "We're keeping a very low profile, and living like Muggles. He won't be able to find us here."

"I know," Harry says slowly, uncertainly. "But I guess... I mean, you don't think he might catch on? This is, you know, where we lived. My mum and dad and me. And he killed them here."

"But Harry, remember what you know about Voldemort. I don't think he'll look for you here, I really don't, because it would be unfathomable to him that someone would actually choose to give up magic, even temporarily. Particularly someone as important as you – oh, don't give me that look, you *know* you're important. But really, Harry, try not to worry. I honestly think we'll be fine."

"What she said," Ron concurs.

"You're right," Harry says, "I mean, yeah. You're absolutely right. I'll stop being paranoid now."

"I think it's just been a long day for all of us," Hermione says kindly. "Maybe we should turn in for the night, so we'll be well rested for the big surprise tomorrow morning." She smiles mysteriously.

"Surprise?" Ron asks eagerly. He and Harry regard her with matching expressions of bewildered curiosity.

"I think I'll take the room with the rosebud wallpaper," she declares, ignoring them. "Goodnight, boys." She hugs them both. "Don't forget to turn off the light!" Yawning, she takes her leave.

"Surprise...?" Ron repeats.

In a room lit only by a single dim lantern, Snape purses his lips and regards Draco calmly. "Why yes, I feel as if I can guarantee that it will be excruciatingly painful. Is that going to be a problem?"

"Yes," mutters Draco.

One dark eyebrow quirks.

"What?" Draco snaps. "I'm not a bloody Gryffindor, okay? I don't *crave* pain." His gray eyes flash resentfully. "But I'm still going to let you do it, so you can calm the fuck down."

"Do I seem remotely agitated?" Snape inquires placidly. Gently, he pushes up Draco's sleeve, and cradles the boy's forearm in his hand. His fingers graze the dark tattoo boldly imprinted in the pale skin beneath Draco's elbow, ending just before his wrist. "It will have to be taken care of immediately, of course."

"Yes, I know," Draco scoffs. "Because two days make that much of a difference, apparently."

"In two days, you'll be of age," Snape replies, "And for the purpose of this procedure, it makes all the difference in the world."

Draco glares into the lantern and doesn't reply.

"You're lucky you're so young, Draco. You're also incredibly lucky you've never killed anyone. It would never work, otherwise." He glances momentarily at his own left sleeve and frowns.

"Yeah...lucky." Draco laughs bitingly. "Can we just... let's just get it over with."

"Fine," says Snape. He mutters a quick cleansing spell, and Draco feels his forearm tingle. Snape then covers the tattoo with a thick layer of brown potion, which quickly gets absorbed into Draco's skin. "This will help with the pain," he explains. "At least, it will make it bearable for you... I believe."

Draco grimaces. "Has anyone ever removed one before?"

"No," Snape says matter-of-factly.

"Oh," says Draco.

Snape brandishes his wand. "Are you ready?" he asks.

Draco bites his lip. "What if I said no?"

"'No' is not an option," Snape sighs. "Draco, right now, the Dark Lord believes you to be dead – but with the Mark, he can track you down more easily than you could possibly imagine. And if he realizes that you are alive, hiding from him, then I can predict with some certainty that your death will be the best of all possible outcomes." He stares gravely at Draco, his solemn face as sallow as ever in the dim light. "You are attempting to lie to the Dark Lord," he continues. "You'd best make it at least somewhat believable."

Draco closes his eyes, feeling suddenly short of air, as if he is breathing through a drinking straw. "Fine, just – just do it quickly." His voice cracks. "Please."

A shock of pain. Continuous, exquisite, pulsing, throbbing pain. Whatever potion Snape put on his arm, it must not be working, it can't be working, because the pain is like nothing Draco has ever experienced. His eyes clench shut.

Perhaps this is what it feels like for women to give birth, though in his case, something is being born out of every pore in his forearm rather than his vagina. Draco does not have a vagina. He must not

cry out. He knows that most people could not endure this degree of pain without whimpering like pathetic Muggle infants, and he wants so desperately to be better than that. He is better than that. But of course Harry Fucking Potter never bursts in when Draco is being manly and stoic – oh no. Potter drops in just in time to witness him sobbing, crying to Myrtle- and that *look* he gave Draco when he caught his eye in the mirror. That bloody look, the expression on his face -

Draco forces his eyes to open – he would rather witness every detail of this barbaric procedure than revisit the shame of being looked at by Potter. Snape's wand hovers above his forearm, making tiny back and forth movements, and periodically arcing upwards. Draco is reminded of a time a few years earlier, watching Madame Malkin re-stitch the sleeves of a pair of robes that had previously overwhelmed his short arms. Except, on that occasion, it didn't feel like an entire lost civilization was being excavated from his left arm. Nor does he expect to walk away this time with a sweet new pair of dress robes. In fact, he'll be pleasantly surprised if he walks away with his arm intact.

It is interesting to observe Snape's face as he works, calm but intently focused. As always, he projects an air of unruffled competence, for which Draco knows he will be grateful sometime in the near future. At the moment, however, Draco cannot help but indulge in a soothing fantasy, wherein his arm wrenches itself free from Snape's grasp – on its own volition, of course, certainly out of Draco's control- his hand curling tightly into a fist and landing one sublimely devastating punch on Snape's hooked nose.

Finally, abruptly, Snape lowers his wand, and the pain stops. For a moment, Draco is rendered speechless and motionless by the sheer intensity of his relief. Snape's wandless hand continues to clutch Draco's arm tightly. "Lumos," he grunts, breathing heavily.

Draco's heart accelerates wildly as his arm is poked, prodded, and thoroughly examined by Snape's sharp black eyes. What if it didn't work – or worse, what if the procedure must be repeated? Draco doesn't think he could bear it. There are limits to his courage. After what seems like a century of deliberation, Snape exhales audibly

and releases his arm. "I believe we have been successful," he murmurs.

"Let me see," demands Draco, his voice jumping like a second year Hufflepuff. He jerks his forearm in front of his face, and scrutinizes it with amazement. Except for a bit of redness and tenderness, already beginning to fade, there is no sign of the Mark ever having existed. The vague, restless panic that had shadowed him all year suddenly dissipates; instead, he is filled with a deep, warming joy, and a rush of relief, poignant to the point of near intoxication. He is startled to realize he is blinking back tears.

At first he had been proud to display the Dark Mark, he remembers. After all, it was the symbol of his membership to a group that would lend him power, and that acknowledged him as worthy of that power by virtue of the family into which he had been born. His inclusion in the elite circle of Death Eaters at such a young age had been unprecedented – his ego had swelled outrageously. Vince and Greg had basically been in awe of him, even more so than usual. Better yet, word from Azkaban had reached him of his father's resounding approval.

And even among this chosen few, Draco had stood out as special, uniquely talented and capable. The Dark Lord had recognized this, and had honored him with an assignment of staggering importance. This is what Draco had once believed. Of course, it had quickly become obvious that it was his expendability, as opposed to his aptitude, that had inspired Voldemort to select him for this particular task – and yet he was bound to complete it anyway. If he tried and failed, he would surely die, but if he didn't try, his parents would be killed as punishment. So he had done what any self-respecting Slytherin would have – he committed himself to succeeding, however long the odds.

Thus, it had been a relentlessly miserable year. The demands placed upon him were beyond the comprehension of any of his friends, absorbed as they were in impressing each other, snogging, and very occasionally studying. For the first time in his life, Draco felt thoroughly and utterly isolated from all of them. Every morning,

he woke up wishing he was someone else, anyone whose life was uncomplicated by the Dark Mark and all associated responsibilities. More than once, disturbingly enough, he had found himself envying the blithe simplicity of his Hufflepuff year-mates, who seemed to have nothing more pressing to worry about than being too stupid to pass their classes.

For Draco, nothing had been simple. Plans that had seemed brilliant and even glamorous in theory were painfully messy in execution. He had walked around in a daze for a week after the incident with that Bell girl. Surely, he wasn't supposed to care whether she died or not, and yet his relief at her survival had been alarmingly powerful. And despite the fact that he loathed every nasty freckle on Ron Weasley's homely face, he had never intended him as a target. Thank Merlin that no one had been with him when he overheard the news that the Weasel had been poisoned. Draco had been forced to proceed immediately to the sixth floor bathroom, where he had violently released the contents of his stomach, and spent the remainder of the afternoon sobbing and dripping snot into the crook of his own elbow.

"Is everything...okay?" Snape asks, achieving consummate awkwardness with a stiff pat of Draco's shoulder.

"Yes. Thank you," Draco mutters, mortified. Fuck. He never used to cry before sixth year. Okay, that's a blatant lie – he's always had a certain degree of what his mother tactfully referred to as "pureblood sensitivity". Still, he had never been one to break down in front of people outside the family, and even then, his episodes were brief and dignified. And he would never have thought that he was capable of crying out of happiness or relief, but now it doesn't seem to matter what emotion he is experiencing, so long as it is strong. Fuck it all, no wonder Moaning Bloody Myrtle thinks they're soul mates.

"So," Draco, with effort, manages to compose himself, "I'm officially no longer a Death Eater. And I'm safe, right? He can't find me anymore?"

"You are safe for the moment," Snape replies. He seems very relieved that there are no more tears to which he must attend. "The next step, of course, is to place you in hiding. I have a location in mind, actually – the last place he'd ever expect."

"And where is that?" Draco asks, genuinely curious.

Snape sighs. "Before I tell you, I must ask – have you given any consideration to where you stand with regards to your personal politics?"

"My politics?"

"Your political beliefs, I should say. Specifically, your opinions regarding the appropriate social status of Muggle borns and half bloods."

Draco frowns. "Is this a trick question?"

"No. It is an incredibly important question. I'd prefer for you to answer honestly."

"Honestly?" says Draco. "My opinions can be whatever you need them to be. Though I'd really like to know where you think you're sending me, if this is so bloody important."

"Well, I'll tell you up front, you're not going to like it," Snape warns.

"Yeah," mutters Draco, his eyes narrowing. "That much I'd figured."

The doorbell rings early the next morning, just as Ron, Harry, and Hermione are sitting down for breakfast.

"The surprise!" yelps Ron, launching out of his seat and skidding towards the door. Harry is at his heels. Hermione, who has stoically endured a barrage of questions from the moment they woke up, calmly takes a bite of her cereal.

Ron opens the door with great flourish, grinning expectantly. He is greeted by a familiar figure dressed very inexpertly as a Muggle, in

a suit and an odd, tight cap. "Good morning, Ron," he greets cheerfully.

Ron's face falls. "Oh," he says. "Hi Dad." He glances sidelong at Hermione, who has joined them at the door. "What a thrilling surprise," he mutters, raising his eyebrows and looking disgruntled.

Hermione raises her eyebrows right back at him, before turning her attention to their visitor. "Hi, Mr. Weasley! Glad you could make it." Ron's eyes narrow suspiciously as she and his dad exchange fleeting, mischievous grins.

"Hello Hermione, Harry. It's wonderful to see you again."

"Good morning, Mr. Weasley," Harry replies politely. "I like your doo rag."

"Can we get you something to eat or drink?" Hermione offers.

Mr. Weasley chuckles and pats his belly. "No, I'm quite fine, thank you. I've already had the satisfaction of a customary Molly Weasley breakfast feast this morning. Which reminds me..." He flicks his wand quickly and produces a large, covered plate, which he hands to Ron. "She's a bit worried that you three will go hungry."

Ron peeks under the foil and groans with pleasure. "Do me a favor, Dad, and tell her we're starving to death."

"We'll see," Mr. Weasley replies. "Should we relocate to the kitchen?" Soon, Harry, Ron, and Hermione have happily forsaken their cold cereal, in favor of eggs, bacon, sausage, and toast with homemade marmalade.

"So what's the latest at home?" asks Ron, who seems much more at peace with his surprise now that bacon is involved.

Mr. Weasley sighs. "It's the usual wedding drama. This time it's Mundungus."

"Mundungus Fletcher?" asks Hermione.

"That's the one," Mr. Weasley replies. "He's out of Azkaban, received a full pardon, and now Bill's insisting on inviting him to the wedding-,"

"So? That's brilliant!" Ron interjects.

"Yes, well, your mum's going spare, as you might imagine. Doesn't want him in the house- thinks he'll steal all the silver."

"I wouldn't put it past him," Harry mutters resentfully.

"Well, I'd hope he would be on his best behavior, given that half the Ministry will be there, but it's hard to say..." He trails off, glancing distractedly in the direction of the door. "Hermione, can I trouble you for the time?"

"It's about half past ten." She smiles.

"Excellent," Mr. Weasley replies, nodding eagerly. Harry and Ron exchange a curious glance.

"Well. If you kids will help me clear the table, I'd be happy to scourgify – oh! Is that a *dishwasher*?

Hermione nods. "I can show you how to use it, if you'd like. The doorbell rings. "Oh, would you two mind getting that?" she asks innocently.

"Sure...", Harry replies, glancing warily at Ron, who merely shrugs. The doorbell rings again, and is followed by several sharp knocks. Harry opens the door.

A stocky Muggle man stands on their doorstep, wearing a tool belt and a name badge proclaiming him to be "Steven". He cracks his knuckles noisily. "Are you Arthur Weasel?"

"He's Arthur *Weasley*," Ron gestures over his shoulder to his dad. "Who are you?"

"I'm Steve from Telecom," he replies, offering his hand to shake. "I'm here to install your high speed internet."

Hermione and Mr. Weasley lean against the counter, beaming.

Pardon the anti-Hufflepuff remarks – they most certainly do NOT reflect the opinion of the author.

I also realize that there are a few inconsistencies with HBP, mostly having to do with timing. I hope they're not too conspicuous and/or obnoxious. Try to bear with me. :)

So, you're gonna go review now, right? *Right?*

Chapter 2

"Tell me you're joking," Draco demands, "You must be joking, right?" A wave of panic accompanies the rising bile in Draco's throat.

"I think you'll find that I'm quite serious," Snape calmly replies.

"But this is just – do you honestly think – I mean, this has to be a fucking joke!"

"It's the safest option, Draco. Possibly the only safe option."

"Safe!" exclaims Draco, laughing forcefully, if a bit hysterically. "Yeah, totally safe. If we don't kill each other, that is."

"Then you'll have to make a sincere effort not to," Snape concludes, closing his eyes momentarily. "Draco, believe me, I wouldn't have suggested it if I thought there was another way, but—"

"Perhaps you should keep thinking," Draco says hotly.

"Perhaps you should shut your ignorant mouth." Snape suggests, "And I would advise you never again to adopt that tone with someone who still has the freedom to use magic whenever he pleases."

Draco's eyes flash. "Don't talk to me like I'm a Muggle."

"You might as well be one. Draco, how can I make you understand how vulnerable you are, how desperately you need protection? All I'm trying to do is direct you to the one person who might be able to provide it."

"Oh, and I suppose Potter's just going to greet me with open arms? I'm sure that I'm really on his good side, now that he knows I've spent my year plotting to off the Headmaster, and, *oh yeah*, I nearly killed his best mate in the process. Add that to, what, six years of generalized mutual loathing, not to mention the fact that he's a stubborn, self-righteous arsehole to begin with." He glares expectantly at Snape.

"Oh, have you finished whinging?" Snape remarks, yawning. "Yes, well. Stubborn and self-righteous he may be, but it's Potter's protection or death, as far as you're concerned. And I'll be forthright – it would be quite out of character for the Dark Lord to spare your mother, under the circumstances."

"You don't know that," Draco says, blanching. "And you still haven't explained how I'm going to prevent Potter from killing me on sight when I turn up on his doorstep. Don't know if you realize, but he and I aren't the sort of mates who have each other round for tea - given that he thinks I'm a bloody murderer and all."

"Potter doesn't think you're a murderer, Draco."

Draco snorts, "How would you know - I suppose you've been reading his mind?"

"Not recently," Snape murmurs. "But surely he knows you're not a killer, given that Dumbledore made a point to tell him so, quite explicitly."

Draco frowns. "I don't understand."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Draco, but did the Headmaster not repeatedly emphasize that you lack the capacity to murder?"

"He was talking to me - practically egging me on!"

"But why would he do that?" Snape's lips curve into a small, patronizing smile. "Dumbledore is not so foolish as you seem to believe. He was, I am certain, speaking for Potter's benefit, not yours."

"How do you know that?" Draco demands. "You weren't there!"

"His words are exquisitely clear in your memory, Draco."

"In my memory?" Draco is momentarily struck dumb with fury over this egregious violation of his privacy - but Snape is spared the usual explosion that occurs when he takes the liberty of probing Draco's mind, as Draco's curiosity is even more powerful than his rage. "But why would Dumbledore give an elf's arse if Potter thinks I'm a killer? I might as well be a bloody killer - I would have done it, you know," he finishes, a bit uncertainly.

"Perhaps," Snape acquiesces, "But the Headmaster had his reasons for convincing Potter of your innocence. For one thing, he understood that Harry Potter's forgiveness would be the key to your survival."

Draco's eyes snap open. "I didn't know Dumbledore cared whether or not I survive."

"Yes, well. There's another reason," continues Snape. "The Headmaster was of the opinion that Potter requires your specific help in preparing to defeat the Dark Lord."

"Defeat him? What could I possibly-,"

"There is something you can do, Draco, and it's more important than you could ever imagine. It's the reason why Dumbledore ordered me to take the Unbreakable and practically begged me to destroy him." A brief look of contempt flits across Snape's features. "He believed you would kill him, you see. He lied to Harry – he did, in fact, think that you were capable of committing murder, particularly when the lives of your family were at stake. And so he sacrificed himself to make sure he died at my hand instead of yours."

Draco laughs nervously, overwhelmed.

"Well, what is this task that's so important, then?" he chokes out, finally, "And why the hell does Potter think he needs *my* help?"

"I don't believe Potter knows he needs your help, at this point," Snape replies.

"Oh, fantastic. He'll be so thrilled." Draco exhales heavily. "You do realize that he'll owl his auror friends the moment he sees me, right? Unless, of course, he fancies killing me himself."

Snape smiles slightly. "Not if you show up with a host gift he can't refuse."

"So what can you do with an internet?" Ron asks, staring perplexedly at the monitor in front of him. The computer they have been given certainly isn't the newest model, but it is reasonably functional and solidly within their price range. That is to say, it was free - Ron's dad had found it attached to one of the plugs in his collection.

"*The* internet, Ron," Hermione corrects kindly. "It's an absolute wealth of information. We can look up almost anything, really. We can investigate Tom Riddle's Muggle background - see if we can find anything that Dumbledore missed. We can research the history of different kinds of artifacts, search for antique stores in different areas..." Her face is flushed and her eyes gleam with academic fervor. "Really, it could lead us right to the horcruxes!"

"Dudley has the internet," Harry contributes. "He mainly uses it to look at porn – loads of it, all for free."

"Wow," breathes Ron – and then, with a guilty glance at Hermione, he adds hastily, "That's awful."

"Yes, well, feminine exploitation aside, it's an incredible research tool," Hermione reaffirms. "It takes a bit of practice to learn how to navigate through cyberspace, but I'd be happy to sit down with you and go over the basics. The sooner we get started, the better, really."

Ron and Harry exchange a brief glance. "Um, why don't you go relax, Hermione? I don't mind going over things with Ron. He can be so, well, *you* know, and I wouldn't want you to, um, to lose patience with him..."

"It's true," Ron mournfully avows, "I can be a bit thick."

"We've got it completely under control. I've seen Dudley sail the 'net loads of times." Harry calculatedly widens his eyes and cocks his head to one side, in order to achieve maximum output of boyish charm.

A trace of an amused smile lurks in the corners of Hermione's mouth. "All right," she relents, "I'll leave you two to your *sailing*. I'll be in my room reading if you need me."

"So," Harry says uncertainly, staring at the vaguely familiar piece of machinery before him. "The internet... is like the floo network. You just tell it where you want to go, and then –,"

"It transports you there?" Ron supplies eagerly.

"Not literally," Harry quickly clarifies. "You tell it what page you want to look at, and then that page shows up on your screen."

"That's awesome," pronounces Ron. "Can I try?" He stares intently at the screen and enunciates, "Quidditch. Girls. In. Bikinis."

Harry smiles. "The computer can't hear you. You have to type it into the search box, like this." Ron watches with great interest as Harry carefully presses little square buttons with letters on them, until the phrase "Quidditch girls in bikinis" appears in a box on the screen.

Harry then cups his hand over an oval-shaped bit of plastic, connected to the computer by a long, snakelike cord. "This is the mouse," he explains, "It's like your wand." He rolls it along the desk, and Ron is amazed to see a tiny little arrow move synchronically across the screen. "Are you paying attention?" asks Harry. "Good. Now you press this button."

"Why is it called a mouse? Was it transfigured?"

"No... well, I don't know." Harry is stumped. "I guess it's possible... Anyway, all you have to do now is wait for just a second, and then... oh."

"Did it work? Where are all the pictures? I want to see some girls with big quaffles, ha ha."

Harry frowns. "All that's coming up are adverts for swimsuits. I don't think it recognizes the word 'Quidditch' – I guess you can only find Muggle things on the internet. Do you think the Ministry removes pages that violate the Statute of Secrecy?"

"Maybe," Ron considers. "I can ask my dad, I guess."

"Hermione would probably know, too. But we, uh, should probably finish our own research before we bother her."

"Yes," Ron agrees gravely. "There is so much we have to learn about lesbian schoolgirls that it would just be a waste of Hermione's time. Let's let the poor girl read in peace."

Snape's couch is about as comfortable as one might expect, given that it belongs to Snape. It is impossible for Draco to sink deeply enough into the cushions to truly look the part of the sullen, put upon teenager that he is. This irritates him profoundly, and he kicks the leg of the couch with his heel while he waits.

Snape returns from the kitchen with a bottle of wine, two glasses, and a book. Draco snorts rudely – the privilege of alcohol won't go far in placating him. His father has been giving him wine since he was twelve.

Snape places the book and the glasses on the table. Draco sits up a bit straighter, his gray eyes registering a flicker of interest. "What book is that?" he asks, straining to read the title, which is completely obscured by Snape's arm as he unhurriedly fills the two glasses halfway with wine.

Draco ignores his glass and reaches for the book as soon as Snape withdraws his hand. "*Antiquus Sortiarius Malum: Anciente Dark Magick*," he recites, glancing up at Snape in surprise. "Dumbledore told you to read this?"

"He did not," Snape says simply.

Draco opens to the first page, letting the heavy leather cover fall across his thigh. The parchment inside is thin and yellowed with age, with ink that dances across the pages in faded curlicues. "Is this a first edition?" asks Draco. Snape nods. "Nice," Draco murmurs, impressed.

"I've had it for quite awhile," replies Snape. "The information contained within is... fascinating, to say the least. I think you'll find it to be most useful."

Draco laughs tartly. "I thought we were trying to get on Potter's good side. I'm not sure if expanding my knowledge of dark magic will inspire him to trust me."

"I flatter myself that I know what I'm doing." Snape sighs briefly and takes a sip of wine. "Turn to the very last chapter, if you will, and read to me everything it says about horcruxes."

In the room with the rosebud wallpaper, frustration is mounting. Hermione lies in the midst of a maelstrom of books, her face flushed and framed by a chaotic halo of curls. She has been searching for hours, with no meaningful insights to show for her efforts. Not one book in James and Lily's entire collection even acknowledges the existence of horcruxes, much less provides any useful information on the subject. She feels utterly defeated – no, more than that, really. She actually feels as though the books have betrayed her, as if they're colluding in withholding a fascinating secret from her. *Stupid books*, she thinks rebelliously, all the while lovingly stroking the cover of one without realizing it.

She is supposed to be the one with the answers, she thinks, staring dazedly at a framed print of flowers on the wall. Lilies, she realizes. She wonders if Harry's mother chose it herself, or if it was the sort of thing that people gave her when they didn't know what else to buy.

Hermione often ruminates on the subject of Harry's parents, all the more so now that she's residing in what was once their home. Every detail of the décor presents a mystery. She will never know why the bottom shelf of the

bookcase wobbles, or the origin of the odd blue stain at the edge of the carpet. Harry was too young to remember the mundane details of the short time he spent with his parents. For some reason, this strikes Hermione as profoundly, poignantly tragic.

But it's useless to dwell on such realities, Hermione tells herself firmly. She unfurls her legs and rises to her feet. For Harry's sake, it is absolutely essential for her to focus on what they can and must gain, rather than what they've already lost.

And for Ron's sake, urges a cheeky little voice in her head, it is absolutely essential that she avails herself of a judicious amount of Sleekeasy's hair potion before checking in on them.

Hermione returns to find Harry and Ron very much as she left them – huddled together, staring raptly at the computer screen with a level of focus normally reserved for only the most crucial of Quidditch-related occasions. "So, er, any luck with the horcruxes, guys?" she ventures, taking private delight in the moment where they both jump involuntarily at the sound of her voice and hastily attempt to close several browser windows.

"Um...well," Harry sputters, blushing. Ron's ears have turned a remarkable shade of red.

"May I take a look?" Hermione requests innocently. "It looks like you've been working so hard..." Ron and Harry exchange a miserable, guilty glance. "*Doomed*," Ron mutters. Oh yes, she is enjoying this.

With obvious reluctance, Harry relinquishes the mouse to Hermione, who glances curiously at him before enlarging one of many minimized windows. "What is – *oh*," she murmurs. "Oh wow... Where did you – oh- oh wow."

"That's what I said," Ron replies solemnly.

"Yes, well," Hermione rubs her forehead, looking distressed, "I mean... *wow*. Who'd have guessed dolphins and humans were so...compatible" She shakes her head incredulously. "I think I could have lived with never knowing that. So I guess, um, I guess you didn't get started on those horcruxes, huh?"

"Not exactly," murmurs Harry.

"No, not horcruxes... but we did look at whores on crutches," Ron offers brightly. "We investigated that topic fairly thoroughly, actually."

Hermione grimaces. "Let me see," she mutters warily, maximizing the appropriate browser window. "Hmph. It doesn't look like there's *anything* wrong with that woman's legs." The boys exchange covert grins.

"So I guess it was unreasonable for me to hope that you two might have accomplished any useful research in my absence."

Ron gives one of her curls an affectionate tug. "Depends on your definition of useful. And besides," he points out, "We thought we'd best leave the truly important research to you, given that we weren't the County Essex junior science fair champion four years in a row."

"You looked me up?" Hermione asks, smiling despite herself.

"Oh yes – we know *all* about your sordid past now. The spelling bee in year four, the essay contest in year five..." Ron shakes his head. "Scandalous, really."

Harry leans back casually in his chair. "Look at him pretending he's not rabidly jealous." He grins conspiratorially at Hermione. "He sulked for nearly an hour when he discovered there was nothing about him on the entire internet."

"Like there's anything about you either! Just a bunch of old Muggle blokes who happen to have your name." He snorts, "Some celebrity you are – ha! The Boy Who Lived in *total anonymity*."

"Anonymity is exactly what we're aiming for right now," Hermione reminds them gently.

"Yeah, well, I'm just *saying*-."

Hermione lets her hand rest momentarily on Ron's shoulder, and he promptly shuts up.

"So what about you, Hermione?" Harry asks, feeling a bit awkward. Ron and Hermione proceed to blush and avoid each others' gaze. "Did you find anything in the books?"

"Hmm?" she starts, looking flustered. "Sorry, what did you say?"

Harry raises his eyebrows at her. "The books you were reading upstairs. Was there anything useful?"

"No," Hermione sighs. "Nothing at all. I'll have to reread, of course, to see if there's anything in the subtext, but there certainly wasn't any explicit information on horcruxes." She runs a hand through her hair and frowns. "And no dolphin sex either." she adds as an afterthought.

"No books on dolphin sex?" Harry murmurs soberly. "And they called themselves my parents."

"How do you expect me to find it," demands Draco, "If you can't even tell me what I'm looking for?"

Snape rubs the bridge of his nose wearily. "I suppose you'll have to be creative. Start with what you know-."

"So, nothing, basically."

"You know that the object in question probably once belonged to Godric Gryffindor or Rowena Ravenclaw, most likely the latter. That's certainly a starting point – unless you don't trust yourself to discern the true heirlooms from worthless imitation pieces."

"Excuse me?" Draco snaps, deeply affronted. "I am a *Malfoy*. I think I can tell the difference between a genuine Founders' Period artifact and some piece of rubbish mass manufactured by the Weasel twins."

"A skill that will undoubtedly serve you well. It would be, I fear, a waste of your time to search for the Dark Lord's soul inside objects that mimic the sound of violent flatulence."

A slight twitch haunts each corner of Draco's mouth.

Snape smiles briefly and continues. "You will need to move quickly. I'm sure you understand that you remain in grave danger until you manage to ally yourself with Potter and his friends."

"Yes, yes, I understand. But - " Draco breaks suddenly into a bright smile, his first in months. "Bloody Merlin, that mental image... can't you just picture Aunt Bellatrix being all like, 'Master, your soul just farted again.'" He loses himself momentarily in a fit of irreverent giggles. "Oopsy daisy, Master!"

Snape raises an eyebrow. "I shudder to imagine," he deadpans, eliciting another snicker from Draco. "Yes, well. I trust that it will not come to that. But Draco?"

"Hmm?"

"I do not expect this journey to be easy for you. I wish that I could be there to support you through it, but I'm afraid that any communication between us will put us both at risk."

Draco nods soberly, for once refraining from making any sort of impudent remark.

"When you find the horcrux, you must immediately contact your cousin Nymphadora. I understand that you may not have always gotten along with her in the past, but she is the only one who understands the situation and can lead you to Potter. I assure you, she is trustworthy."

"Do I have any choice?"

"Not really, no."

"Okay." Draco grimaces briefly. "But, you know, you still haven't told me why Potter needs my help. I understand that he can provide protection for me, but what's this big thing I'm supposed to do for him?"

"Well," Snape admits, "Dumbledore never explicitly told me. I expect that you'll be called upon to destroy one of the horcruxes, but that's mere speculation. You'll have to trust that your purpose will become clearer with time."

"You're not giving me much to work with here," Draco murmurs.

Snape nods wearily. "I know. But I *will* leave you with this advice. In searching for this item, you'd be wise to capitalize upon the knowledge of others. There are ways to obtain information without revealing your own motives. And since this particular horcrux was most likely created while the Dark Lord was still at Hogwarts, I would begin by seeking out individuals who knew him when he was the boy Tom Riddle."

"But I don't know anyone who knew him then, other than some of the Death Eaters – all of whom believe me to be dead." Draco frowns.

"Keep thinking, Draco, and be creative. You never know who will be able to give you a ghost of insight." He smiles cryptically and reaches into the pockets of his robes for his wand. "I'm going to cast a glamour on you that will make you unrecognizable, unless you choose to reveal yourself. As long

as you refrain from using magic, it is reasonably unlikely that the Dark Lord will harbor any suspicions."

"No magic." Draco exhales on a groan. "I won't enjoy this."

"I wouldn't expect you to."

"And I suppose you need me to leave soon..."

"Tomorrow would be ideal."

"Fine." Draco scowls. "But – Snape?"

"Yes, Draco?"

"I really – just – well-," Draco clutches awkwardly at his own hair. "Thank you" he finally mutters.

Snape gives a startled grunt as Draco's arms briefly encircle his shoulders in something akin to a hug.

It is long past midnight, and Harry cannot seem to will himself to sleep. It isn't that Ron has hogged all the blankets. It's so warm, in fact, that Harry reckons he's more comfortable without them anyway. And his parents' bed is certainly large enough for both of them, even with Ron's limbs unfurled like a fan. It's just – Harry tucks his hands behind his head and sighs – it's just that he doesn't know how to shut his brain off some nights. He tries to sleep, and can't, and then he panics quietly, because he *needs* to sleep, can't afford to be knackered, but then the panic only makes it harder to let himself drift, and the cycle just feeds itself.

Tonight, he abandons all pretense and gropes around his nightstand for his glasses. The room comes into focus as soon as he puts them on, and the very notion of sleep seems unfathomable, ridiculous. He glances at Ron's sprawled form – he is gently snoring as his chest rhythmically rises and falls. Ron has been blessed with the ability to sleep under any and all circumstances. Harry tries not to disturb him as he slides out of bed and quietly creeps out of the room.

In his bare feet, he pads down the hallway to the kitchen, abducts a biscuit from the pantry, and drifts into the sitting room. The computer remains powered on from this afternoon's explorations, its screen glowing enticingly.

Harry sinks into one of the chairs and takes hold of the mouse with his unoccupied hand.

He connects to the internet, and spends several minutes browsing the Muggle news. He investigates the weather forecast for tomorrow. He licks a few crumbs from the corner of his mouth.

Pulling up the search engine, Harry dutifully types in the name "Tom Riddle". Serious research in the middle of the night, he thinks - Hermione would be proud. A long list of results emerges. For one heady moment, Harry is overwhelmed and delighted by this staggering quantity of crucial information.

Then, it dawns upon him just how many Toms there are in the Muggle world, and just how many hits the word "riddle" generates. A quick scan of his current choices confirms that Harry is far less likely to uncover any useful information about the boy Voldemort than he is to learn the favorite jokes of a ten-year-old American lad who happens to share his name.

Harry rubs his scar, closing his eyes briefly with frustration. There are too many choices to sift through at this late hour, and it seems that his motivation has vanished. He decides to return to his bed and take another stab at sleeping – he firmly decides this, and yet his hand lingers on the mouse.

His heart beats quickly. The room is awash with silence.

Checking quickly behind him to make sure he is truly alone, he types in another name: Draco Malfoy. He's not sure what causes him to do it, or even inspires him to think of Malfoy at this juncture, other than a vague curiosity as to his whereabouts. He certainly doesn't expect Malfoy to have any sort of presence on the Muggle information network - and yet his breath hitches as he waits.

The search yields no results. Feeling slightly off-kilter, Harry shuts down the computer and returns to bed.

Chapter 3

Morning breaks at Godric's Hollow, bringing with it gloomy gray skies and rain-streaked windows. Harry and Ron lounge groggily about the kitchen table in their pajamas, each head of hair giving the appearance of having survived a violent tornado.

Hermione breezes in, looking bright eyed and dewy in a crisp collared shirt and pleated skirt. "Good morning, boys," she greets, stifling a laugh as she swings open the refrigerator door. "Anyone fancy some breakfast?"

"Already ate," grunts Ron, gesturing weakly at the pair of empty bowls on the table. "Mashed up some Mars bars..."

"How wonderfully healthy of you."

"We used spoons," Harry points out.

"Oh, well in *that* case..." Hermione cracks a pair of eggs into a bowl and whisks them with flourish. "So, it's already June 5th – do you know what that means?"

"Draco Malfoy's birthday," Harry replies promptly.

Ron looks at him like he's gone utterly mad. "How on earth do you know that, mate?"

"Dunno," Harry replies, blushing slightly.

Hermione glances at him curiously. "I was actually talking about Bill and Fleur's wedding. You realize, it's exactly one week away."

"A week?" Ron sits up a bit straighter. "You're right. Wow. We should, uh, I reckon we should get them a present or something."

"We really should," Hermione replies, emptying her eggs into a buttered pan. "And I need to buy a dress, of course..."

"Just wear your robes from the Yule Ball. I'll be wearing mine," Harry suggests.

"Yes, but it's different for girls," Hermione sighs. "These kinds of occasions are so... you know, everyone will be looking at what everyone else is

wearing, and they'll all recognize my outfit from the ball, and Fleur's friends certainly seem like the type to...Merlin, I just hate this sort of thing."

Ron shrugs. "I don't think it's that big of a deal. I can't imagine anyone noticed what you were wearing at the ball."

Hermione gives him an exasperated look, before turning her back on him and scrambling her eggs with unnecessary violence.

"What?" Ron demands. He turns to Harry in utter bewilderment. "'What did I say?'"

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On the morning of his seventeenth birthday, Draco loads his belongings into a small rucksack, and bids his godfather farewell. For the first time in his entire life, he finds himself with neither a destination nor a clear plan of action. Snape has endowed him with five hundred pounds of Muggle cash, which fails to inspire any spark of enthusiasm - no doubt, it will be spent on Muggle transportation to convey him to his new, tragically Muggle life. How ironic, he reflects bitterly, that the very day he's legally of age to perform unsupervised spells marks the beginning of his hiatus from the wizarding world.

Of course, the weather is hideous, as sod's law doth decree. Rain plummets steadily down, with no promise of stopping in the near future. Draco has never been terribly appreciative of rain. He tolerates it for Quidditch, of course, but never feels moved to dance and muck about in puddles like a drunken Gryffindor. Malfoys, as a rule, prefer to keep their hair dry.

In the end, it is his aversion to being wet that motivates Draco to move quickly in the direction of the nearest train station. Even the prospect of being surrounded by agitated Muggles is more appealing than letting the rain soak through his cloak. The route there seems longer than he remembers, and he is haunted by the vague worry that he has wandered off track. Twice he very nearly forfeits all pride, and considers appealing to his fellow pedestrians for directions. Mercifully, he is not reduced to such indignity - he eventually finds his way, through a combination of luck, memory, and a general attentiveness to street signs.

Once inside, however, panic sets in. The station is familiar, in a hazy sort of way, from the handful of trips he took to visit Snape when he was young. Of course, his father never deigned to employ Muggle transport, even though a fair tenth of the passengers on any given day are clearly wizards - Draco

can tell. But his mother never minded, and even seemed to prefer the slower pace of the trains. When it was just Draco and his mother, the trains had suited them quite nicely.

Now, navigating through the throngs of early summer travelers, Draco is somewhat disheartened to find that rail travel isn't quite as painless as he remembers. There are simply so many people – rain-soaked, harried, unattractive people. The station's acoustics do nothing to muffle the wails of hundreds of wretched children with snot encrusted noses. More than once, some bumbling Muggle rolls over his feet with his overstuffed suitcase. The ticket vendor is nowhere to be found. Draco longs for the days when all that was required of him was to maintain a firm grip on his mother's hand.

Finally, he spots a queue of people winding around a corner. Not entirely sure what he's lining up for, he nevertheless falls into place behind a young Muggle businessman with a notably cute ass. Draco blushes and looks away immediately, horrified with himself for noticing. Discreetly checking out other men is one thing, but a *Muggle*? He doubts there would be a quicker way to drive his poor father to St. Mungo's.

Several minutes later, it becomes clear that he has stumbled into the ticket line. "Thank bloody Merlin," he mutters under his breath. Now, he realizes, he must simply decide on a destination.

"I would begin by seeking out individuals who knew him when he was still the boy Tom Riddle," Snape had said. Draco's jaw clenches involuntarily. He knows exactly what most of Tom Riddle's school chums are up to these days and, as he would prefer not to be vaporized, he fully intends to avoid all of them.

He supposes he might as well begin on familiar territory. Hogwarts isn't far from here – only a couple of hours by train, though of course the Express won't be running. Draco frowns, considering this. He will simply have to take the regional train to Hogsmeade, and figure out how to proceed once he gets there.

Draco gradually progresses in line, relieved to have decided on at least a partial plan. Before long, the Cute Muggle Ass has departed for the platforms, and Draco finds himself at the front of the queue.

The man behind the counter beckons him forward with a grunt. "Can I help yeh?"

"Yes – one ticket to Hogsmeade, please."

"Pardon?"

"Hogsmeade," Draco repeats.

"Swansea, you mean?"

"No," Draco says slowly. "Hogsmeade. It's –." He struggles to clarify. "It's, you know, *Hogsmeade*," he finishes lamely. It is gradually dawning upon Draco that there is no Hogsmeade, as far as Muggles are concerned.

"Never mind," he mutters, shaking his head and turning hastily away from the counter. He nearly bumps into a plump, balding man with twinkling brown eyes. "Sorry," he starts, but the man simply winks and catches him round the shoulders, escorting him back up to the counter. The ticket seller flares his nostrils disinterestedly.

"Sorry for the confusion," the brown-eyed man says cheerfully. "But I'm sure that what this young man actually wants is a ticket to Inverness."

. "Inverness? Why didn't you just say so?" grumbles the man behind the counter.

"I, erm, got mixed up," Draco replies dazedly. He glances sideways at his rescuer, who nods, almost imperceptibly.

Ticket in hand, Draco lingers by the queue until the balding man has completed his own purchase. "Sir, I just want to thank you," he says, almost shyly. "I don't know what I would have done-."

"Oh, don't give it a second thought. I'm happy to help." The man chuckles. "Haven't done much Muggle traveling, have you?" Draco shakes his head. "Well, lucky for you that you ran into me. I'll tell you exactly what to do."

Draco smiles sheepishly. "That would be great."

"Well," the man says, "The easiest way to get to Hogsmeade is the Hogwarts Express, though obviously it won't be running now that it's summer holiday." He pauses and regards Draco with mild curiosity. "You know, you look like you're still young enough to be a student there."

Draco nods cautiously.

"Wonderful! I went there myself back in the day - best years of my life. What house are you, if you don't mind my asking?"

It occurs to Draco that this is a fairly loaded question, and he appraises the man carefully before answering. "Hufflepuff," he decides, cringing inwardly.

The man's entire face lights up. "Brilliant!" he exclaims. "I was a Hufflepuff myself, you know. Of course, that was thirty some odd years ago – Merlin, has it really been that long?" He shakes his head, his smile never wavering. "Anyway, I wouldn't have pegged you as a Hufflepuff, you know?"

"You wouldn't?" Draco swallows nervously. If it takes this stranger less than five minutes to perceive that Draco is a Slytherin, how will he be able to conceal his identity from people who actually know him?

"Well, of course not," the old man laughs genially. "You look like one of Arthur Weasley's brood, but they're all in Gryffindor!"

Draco laughs weakly, but is internally horrified. It occurs to him that, in his haste to leave, he hasn't bothered to investigate his glamour in a mirror. Snape wouldn't have made him look like a Weasel, would he have? As casually as possible, Draco musses up his own hair a bit, allowing a lock of it to fall in front of his eyes. It does appear to be shockingly ginger. *That sly bastard*, he thinks peevishly.

The man continues to grin at Draco, oblivious to his inner turmoil. "Well, my boy, I'd best let you catch your train. But before you go, listen carefully - I'll tell you exactly how to get to Hogsmeade. Do you have a decent amount of Muggle money with you?"

"A couple hundred pounds," Draco replies vaguely, not entirely sure how that translates to galleons.

"Oh, you'll be fine. More than fine. So, when you get off at Inverness, you'll want to hop a Muggle taxi to Cawdor Castle. Just join the queue of people waiting for taxis, and then tell the driver to take you to Cawdor Castle in Nairn. You got that?"

"Cawdor Castle," Draco repeats, brows furrowed.

"Good. So, once you're there, get a map of the grounds, and find the Thorn Tree. Will you remember that? Okay. You'll have to make sure there are absolutely no Muggles in the room with you – you know that, of course, common sense. Well. There will be a metal gate surrounding the tree, behind which you will find several small jelly beans. Each of these is a portkey, and will transport you directly to Honeydukes. Highly convenient, if you ask me." He pats his plump stomach and smiles.

"Wow, I really appreciate – I mean, if there's anything I can do to repay you, seriously-,"

"Never you mind that," the old man chuckles. "Just keep rooting for Hufflepuff to win the House Cup next year, and we'll call it even!"

Draco smiles faintly, feeling grateful but a little nauseated.

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The morning's steady rain has given way to lingering gray clouds and clammy warmth. Ron, Harry, and Hermione are returning from the shops, balancing bags on their arms and trying to curb their mounting irritation at each other.

"It feels late," Harry observes, glancing at the sky.

"Yes, well," Hermione shifts her bags to steal an anxious peek at her watch. "It's already half past three." She shakes her head and sighs. "I can't believe we wasted so much time shopping, of all things..."

"Well, we needed to buy Bill and Fleur a present," Ron points out. "And I think we made out okay, all things considering. I mean, how awesome are Muggle steak knives?"

"Pretty awesome," Harry concurs.

"Yes, but..." Hermione sighs. "I feel so guilty. We should have tried to come home sooner, and spent more time researching the horcruxes. We've done hardly anything so far."

Ron shrugs. "Don't look at me – I'm not the one who spent nearly an hour looking at weird Muggle dress clothes-."

"Oh, give it a rest with the Muggle dresses already! They're only weird because you're not used to them."

"No, I'm pretty sure they're just weird, aren't they, Harry? Remember the one with the tiny straps where the sleeves should be, like some glorified undergarment?"

Hermione shakes her head exasperatedly. That's what Muggle girls *wear*, Ron. It's what I wear-."

"What, you mean the one with the glitter and all the holes up the sides? Are you telling me you would actually wear that?"

"Well, no, but-,"

"Ha!" Ron wags his finger triumphantly in the air. "Even you admit that Muggle dress clothes are ridiculous!"

"You are infuriating," Hermione informs him. She speeds up to walk next to Harry, who has wisely decided to disengage from the conversation.

"But I'm supposed to be infuriating," Ron jogs to catch up with them. "I work very hard at it, I'll have you know. Ron Weasley, putting the 'anger' in Granger since 1991."

"Putting the anger in Granger?" Hermione murmurs, cracking a smile almost reluctantly.

Ron grins and shrugs.

Hermione blinks at him. "It doesn't even rhyme."

"Poetry doesn't have to rhyme," replies Ron. Not wanting to miss this window of opportunity, he swoops in to hug Hermione, his bags swinging gently into her back. "See, you're not really mad," he assures her. "How could you stay mad when I'm so charming?"

"About as charming as year-old pumpkin juice," she mutters, smiling despite herself.

Harry sees the way they walk just a bit closer to each other, tentatively. There has been a shift, he perceives. He doesn't know when, exactly – possibly at Dumbledore's funeral – but nevertheless, something has changed between Ron and Hermione. Maybe it's just that Ron has learned how quickly the combination of affectionate teasing and slight physical contact work to diffuse Hermione's anger. Perhaps they are simply succumbing to what's been obvious to everyone else for over a year. Either way, it's flirting, however inexpertly, or if not actual flirting, there's a definite flirtatious undertone. Sometimes it amuses Harry; sometimes it disturbs him. And sometimes it makes him feel lonely.

The rain is just beginning to pick up again as they arrive at their house. They duck quickly inside and lay their bags down in the foyer. Hermione is

immediately struck by the impression that something is amiss. "Did we leave the lights on?" she wonders aloud.

"Looks like it," Harry replies, yawning. He takes off his glasses and halfheartedly employs his shirt to dry them.

"That's funny, because I specifically remember -." Her musings are cut abruptly short by a disturbingly loud crash resounding from the kitchen.

All three of them freeze in their tracks, wide-eyed with alarm. "What was that?" yelps Ron. Hermione gently hushes him, listening vigilantly.

The sounds of cabinets opening and closing mingles with the occasional thud of matter meeting matter, presumably a leg or foot meeting the wooden table legs. "Bloody OW!" exclaims a vaguely familiar voice. "Bugger..."

Harry starts forward, but Ron pulls him back by the shirt. "Are you crazy, mate?" he whispers, a palpable tremor in his voice. "We're completely unarmed, and that could be a Death Eater in there!"

"But," Harry protests, "I really think it's just-,"

"SHH," hisses Hermione. They all become conscious of footsteps quickly approaching. Too late to hide, Hermione and Ron instinctively position themselves protectively in front of Harry, who makes an enraged little noise and tries furiously to push them aside. The footsteps grow increasingly loud, before finally coming to a stop in the doorway of the living room.

"Wotcher, mates," greets their visitor. "Hope you don't mind, I just let myself in - quite the place you've got here, huh! I've been feasting on your monstrous stash of chocolate." She licks a spot of dairy milk out the corner of her mouth.

"Hello, Tonks," Hermione murmurs, shoulders sinking with relief.

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Early evening finds Draco at Honeydukes, clutching his jelly bean portkey and leaning against a shelf of Fizzing Whizbees for support. He feels utterly drained and exhausted, and he still doesn't know how he's going to get into the school. This isn't to say he won't be inspired shortly – he does have a better track record for breaking into Hogwarts than most. Still, Draco wonders if he ought not to have been so stubborn in his refusal of Muggle train food, ghastly as was its presentation. Now his brain and stomach are

rallying to be fed, and it occurs to Draco that he is unlikely to achieve any great insights until he answers their call.

It will have to be sweets for dinner, Draco decides. It is his birthday, after all. Honeydukes' offerings are somewhat more pedestrian than the gourmet fare his mother used to owl him at school, but currently, even the prospect of a vomit flavored Bertie's bean seems heavenly. He proceeds first to a large shelf of truffles, deeply inhaling the rich scent of chocolate and selecting a few choice items for purchase. He is just about to move on to the Pumpkin Pasties when an unpleasantly familiar voice captures his attention:

"Oh, hey, is that – George, look, it's Ron!"

Draco freezes in his tracks. No. Oh no.

"Our Ickle Ron?"

"The very one! How marvelous. What superb timing. Oy, Ron!"

No. Fuck. Fuck. Draco clenches his eyes shut and, for the first time in his life, prays for Ron Weasley to appear. Because if Ron Weasley is here in Honeydukes, that means he, Draco Malfoy, is not being mistaken for the *Weasel by his own Weasel brothers*. If Ron Weasley is here, it means that Draco isn't currently living out an experience more desperately mortifying than anything in his wildest, most masochistic daydreams.. Fucking no. This fucking glamour. Bloody fucking Snape.

The twins' footsteps thunder closer. "Ron, have you gone deaf, mate? Turn your arse around – it's us!"

Draco sighs deeply, succumbing to the inevitable. Slowly, he turns around.

The twins' eyes register genuine surprise, but they remain sublimely unembarrassed. "Ha!" exclaims one, looking amused. "Wow - you look *just* like our brother Ron from the back."

. "Seriously, mate, are you our long lost brother, or what?" The other twin seems even more delighted. "A cousin, perhaps? A proud bearer of the noble Weasley surname?"

"No relation," Draco mutters, annoyed.

The first twin absently musses his own ginger hair and studies Draco. "The hair is just like ours, and the freckles. But I reckon the features are too delicate for a Weasley."

"Meaning, sorry mate, but you look just a wee bit like a girl," the other twin translates. "Which is probably why we mistook you for our baby brother Veronica."

"Sort of tragic, though, really, if we can't tell which ones are our brothers."

"Well, I say it serves Ron right for all those times he called me Fred!"

"Ah, but you are Fred."

"Ah, yes."

"Um, excuse me," Draco murmurs, maneuvering to slip past them. "I'll leave you to it, then."

"Leave us to what?" The twin who may or may not be Fred fixes his attention on Draco all of the sudden. "Where are you going?"

"Oh, well, you know, I was going to-,"

"You were going to help us out, mate? Give us a hand? We have just the job for a bloke like you." He rubs Draco's head fondly, as if they're old buddies.

Draco winces. "Actually, well, I really do have to go-,"

"Nope – I'm afraid we are in dire need of your services. What are you, a Fourth-year? Fifth-year? Let me guess, Hufflepuff?"

Draco shrugs unhappily, which the twins seem to interpret as a yes.

"Good. Perfect. Now, listen carefully, because I have a sad and poignant story to share with you." He flings a freckled arm around Draco's shoulders and sighs. "Once upon a time, my friend, about ten years ago, our oldest brother Bill received a very naughty book, with an abundance of very naughty illustrations in full color. It was a congratulatory gift from one of his mates for being named Head Boy.

"A beautiful gift," the other twin interjects, "from a true and loyal friend."

"Indeed," the first twin affirms, nodding solemnly. He pauses for a moment, presumably out of respect for either True Friendship or Very Naughty

Illustrations in Full Color. "Well," he continues finally, "Our brother was painstakingly careful with that book – never brought it out of his dormitory, never let a teacher see it. But then, one fateful morning, tragedy struck. His roommate, his foolish, careless roommate Alistair Wood, decided to borrow the book in order to avoid slipping into a coma during History of Magic – perfectly sensible, of course. But then, as legend has it, Alistair made the fatal mistake of taking the book out again in Potions class." He shakes his head with deep, wrenching sorrow. "The beautiful book was confiscated by Snape, hidden away in Filch's office, and never seen or heard from again."

Here, the other twin takes over. "But alas, our dear brother Bill is getting married in a week, and oh how we agonized over finding the perfect present. We wanted something timeless, something precious, something he could proudly pass down to future generations of deserving Weasley males. No present seemed worthy of the occasion, but then we remembered the celebrated book that had been lost ten years prior. We felt compelled to rescue it from the squalid confines of Filch's office, and return it to its rightful place of honor on Bill's bookshelf."

"But," his brother gravely interjects, "I'm afraid it hasn't been so easy for us. With the school closed, there has been nothing to lure Filch away from his office for long enough for us to plunder our prize."

"And he finally seems to have learned, the slow bastard, never to leave his office unattended unless he's got his eyes on both Fred and myself. Which is where you come in."

Draco shakes his head slowly.

"Hear us out, young Hufflepuff friend. This is your mission. We'll run distraction, but we need you to sneak into Filch's office and get this book for us. It should be easy to find, as it will be the only thing in the file marked 'William Weasley'."

"But-," Draco protests.

"We'll meet you up in the prefects' toilets so you can hand it over to us. It will be so easy, mate, you'll see." He grins beatifically and ruffles Draco's red hair. "And, of course, we'll reward you with a bountiful supply of candy, not to mention anything you'd like from our own fine establishment in Diagon Alley - Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes." He puffs up his chest proudly. "Committed to fulfilling all your needs for pranking, shenanigans, and tomfoolery since 1996."

Draco continues to shake his head, all the more emphatically. "I just don't think-"

"And for what it's worth," the other twin adds, ignoring him, "You'll learn a very secret passage between Hogwarts and Honeydukes, which will no doubt prove most useful - if the school ever reopens, that is."

Draco abruptly stops shaking his head, and regards the twins, blinking. A secret passage into Hogwarts?

"Fine, I'll do it," he says, laboring to sound casual. "But you have to buy me the candy first."

"You good-hearted lad! We knew you wouldn't let us down!" The twins exchange triumphant high fives and, despite Draco's weak protests, proceed to plant theatrical, saliva-rich kisses on his pale forehead. "By all means, let's get the man some chocolate."

Minutes later, Draco finds himself trailing the identical, flame-colored heads down the cellar stairs and through a long, narrow passage. He refuses to reflect on the fact that he is spending his seventeenth birthday in the company of the Weasel twins. He doesn't even know what to think anymore. He simply pops another truffle into his mouth and commands himself to enjoy it – it's the closest bloody thing to a birthday present he'll be getting this year.

Chapter 4

"So, I guess you're wondering why I'm here," says Tonks, casually tossing her wrapper in the direction of the bin. It lands on the floor by Harry's feet. "Bugger. Anyway, do you want the good news first or the bad news?"

"The bad news." Harry regards her grimly, wringing his hands.

"Okay, then. So, I'm not sure if you're aware, but our spies have been monitoring Death Eater activity pretty closely for the last couple of months."

"That's the bad news?" asks Ron.

Tonks laughs. "No, that part's actually quite a wonderful leap forward for our side – we've pretty much developed a foolproof way of tracking most of them without them realizing it."

"That's fantastic," murmurs Hermione. "Can I ask you how you're doing it?"

"Oh, well, actually it was Remus' idea." She smiles proudly. "Absolutely ingenious. He knew how to make a map that tracks the whereabouts of all of You Know Who's supporters – shows us exactly where each one is at any time. It's the most remarkable thing... can't say I really understand the mechanics of it, but it's based on their Dark Marks somehow. Anyone with the Mark shows up on the map, and the map shows everything. I mean, have you ever heard of anything like that?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione bite back grins.

Anyway, so we've been keeping fairly detailed records of their comings and goings for three months or so, and-"

"Wait," interjects Ron, turning suddenly serious. "If you know where they all are, why can't you just kill them? I mean, really."

Tonks nods. "Well, that's what a lot of us said, until Kingsley pointed out that if anyone might lead us to the horcruxes, it would be the Death Eaters. I'd imagine that You Know Who has a hunch now that we're looking for them, and he would have mobilized his whole force to protect them. So what do we do? We follow them and see what we can find."

"And have you had any luck?" asks Hermione.

"Well," replies Tonks. "I guess that brings us to the good news. Do you still want the bad news first?"

"No, tell us the good," Harry says, looking at her hopefully. "You've found a horcrux?"

"We think so. We have strong suspicions about one particular store in Hogmeade that the Death Eaters have been frequenting for a few weeks. We're planning to scope it out in a few days."

"And attack the Death Eaters there?"

"If we need to," confirms Tonks.

"That's fantastic!" Harry exclaims, jumping up. "I'd like to help. I mean it – I'm coming with you. You can't say no – I'm the only one, well except for Dumbledore, of course, but I'm the only person alive who has done this before, so I can help, right?" He places a hand on each of Tonks' shoulders and gazes at her imploringly.

Tonks smiles slightly. "That's why I'm here." Harry lets out an excited little yelp and hugs her.

Hermione frowns. "Tonks – I hate to ask, but what's the bad news?"

Tonks nods gravely. "There have been some attacks – on Muggles, mostly. At first, we dismissed them as unrelated, since they occurred in locations markedly removed from Death Eater activity, according to our tracking maps."

"Which have proven to be reliable otherwise?" Hermione asks.

"Unfailingly," Tonks assures. "Which is why we were quite taken aback to discover, upon routine investigation, that six of the Muggle deaths in question were caused by dark curses of the sort we normally only associate with the Death Eaters. Which means one of two things. Either our maps are missing a Death Eater somehow, or some reasonably skilled, exceptionally discreet entity, not bearing a Mark, has been working alongside You Know Who."

"That's so strange." Hermione blinks. "I wonder...I don't know. Do you think I could take a look at the map for myself at some point, Tonks?"

"Sure," she shrugs. "I have a copy on me right now, if you'd like – we all carry them around for protection."

"I'd love to see it too, actually," remarks Harry.

They migrate to the kitchen table, where Tonks removes a folded scrap of parchment from her satchel, approximately the size of a playing card. She taps it briefly with her wand, and it proceeds to unfold itself, expanding tremendously in the process. Harry isn't surprised to see that the parchment, now the size of a large placemat, is completely blank.

"Remus installed a password," Tonks explains unnecessarily. She taps it once more with her wand. "Padfoot," she mutters. Hermione and Harry exchange a smile.

At once, the tiny fibers in the parchment rearrange themselves to form crisp, clear images labeled with black text. Small spots of green flicker in certain corners and occasionally converge in modest clusters. Ron leans forward, peering through the gap between Harry and Hermione's heads. He runs his fingers absently through his own red hair. "Wow, um, I see you're covering kind of a wide territory here." The map appears to be a map of the entire world.

Tonks nods. "Well yes, but if I put my wand on a particular area I'd like to know more about, that portion of the map will enlarge itself, and the rest will disappear temporarily to accommodate it. You'll want to look more closely at the green bits – each little spot represents one of the Death Eaters. So let's say, for example, that I see heavy green in Europe-"

"Duh," Ron interjects. Tonks smiles wryly and taps her wand to the map, which rearranges itself to project an image of Europe alone. Another series of light taps direct the map to zoom in on only the United Kingdom, then Scotland, and then the Scottish highlands, until its focus becomes so specific that individual stores in Hogsmeade are distinguishable. The green dots, as well, have become more clearly defined, and Harry can see that each one is labeled with a familiar name: Dolohov, Mulciber, Nott.

"So here's the one we're concerned about, you see," remarks Tonks, pointing to a small shop not far from the Hog's Head.

"Dervish and Banges?" asks Harry. "I know it. I mean, I've walked by it."

"Yes, well, you're not the only one who has. According to the map, You Know Who's little buddies have been all but patrolling the area for the last two weeks."

"There must be a horcrux there, then!" Harry concludes, nodding excitedly. "When can we go check it out?"

"As soon as you can pack your overnight bags," Tonks replies. "A fair handful of the Order are already camped out at Hogwarts, discussing strategy. We'll stay the night there, I reckon, and most likely make our move on Dervish and Banges tomorrow."

Hermione worries her lower lip. "What makes you so sure it's a horcrux? Is it possible that we'll be walking into a trap?"

"Well," concedes Tonks, "obviously that's a possibility, but it does in fact appear that the Death Eaters are protecting a particular object at Dervish and Banges. And that object fits the profile of one of the remaining horcruxes."

"Which one?" asks Harry.

Tonks smiles slightly. "Helga Hufflepuff's cup. And Harry, I can't be sure, but I will say that it looks very much like the one in Dumbledore's pensieve."

"You saw it? You actually walked right into Dervish and Banges and had a look at that cup?" Ron looks impressed.

"As a matter of fact, I did," replies Tonks. "I disguised myself as a finely dressed old gentleman, went in, and inquired about purchasing it – that's one way to gauge the value of an object to its current owners. If they're not willing to part with it, they'll usually quote some obscene price that's sure to scare away all potential buyers. Of course, if you were to actually show up with the amount they asked for – and we're talking millions of galleons, easily – then, lo and behold, it's not for sale anymore, or they've promised it to someone else. It doesn't matter. If they're turning down an offer for five million galleons, you can bet the object in question is a Founders' Era piece, a dark object, or both."

"Of course," murmurs Hermione, absently twisting a lock of hair around her finger.

Tonks nods emphatically. "So there you have it. That's why we think we've found a horcrux," she concludes.

"Huh," Ron remarks, "So, when you disguised yourself as a man, did you just change, you know, the top half, or did you..." He trails off, blushing deeply. His freckles have all but disappeared into a sea of red.

Tonks raises her eyebrows. "You'll just have to wonder, won't you," she replies. "Now go pack your bags – they're expecting us at Hogwarts, you know."

Ron and Hermione obediently set out to accomplish this; Harry, however, lingers for a moment in the kitchen.

"Tonks?" he asks, when Ron and Hermione are out of earshot. "Do you mind if I look at the map for just a minute more?"

"Sure," she says. "Looking for anything in particular?"

"No, not really..." he replies vaguely. He leans forward in his chair, scanning the map slowly and carefully with his green eyes. "Hmm. Could you, uh, would you mind making it show all of Britain?"

Tonks complies, smiling to herself. Silently, she watches over his shoulder as he methodically examines each green dot, leaning in close to decipher the tiny name written next to each. He drums his fingers nervously on the edge of the table.

"Are you looking for Draco Malfoy?" she asks tentatively.

Harry jolts up straight in his chair. "What makes you think that?" His fingers have ceased their drumming. He turns to look at Tonks with wild eyes, his voice softening almost imperceptibly. "Do you know where he is?"

"Well," replies Tonks, "You won't find him on that map."

"But I thought..."

Tonks rubs her temple momentarily. Then, she pulls out a chair and takes a seat next to Harry. She gives his arm a sisterly pat. "Harry," she begins. She appears to be choosing her words with utmost care. "There's something I should tell you about Draco Malfoy. Oh no, it's nothing bad," she adds quickly, sensing Harry's mounting anxiety. "It's quite good, actually. Only I don't know how much you're going to –,"

"Hey, Harry, aren't you going to go pack, mate? You heard the woman - we're leaving soon." Ron deposits his own rucksack on the table and proceeds to make himself comfortable in a chair.

Tonks laughs good-naturedly. "He's right, Harry. You'd best get to packing now."

Harry tries to swallow his irritation. "Yeah, okay. I guess." Reluctantly, he draws himself out of his chair and away from the table."

"We'll finish this conversation later," Tonks assures him with a wink.

Evening finds Draco in the prefects' toilets, the cold tile chilling his bum through his trousers. The eve of his seventeenth birthday, and he's spending it in the lavatory. Okay, to be fair, every single one of his friends' seventeenth birthdays had ended with someone in the lav as well, but that was different. Finding yourself locked in a cool embrace with the toilet as a result of too much firewhiskey is one thing. But it's another thing entirely to be sitting cross-legged against the wall, facing the row of urinals, gorging on chocolate out of a paper bag. Those wretched Weasel twins hadn't even helped him eat any of it – they'd shaken his hand enthusiastically, thanked him for a job brilliantly done, and cheerfully departed. Not that Draco would have wanted to suffer their company for any longer; not that he cares in the slightest.

Another truffle finds its way to his waiting mouth. Draco closes his eyes and sighs. He's lonely and tired, his bum is cold, and he has no idea where he's going to find this so-called horcrux. He doesn't even know what to look for. And on top of everything, he's had to pretend to be a Hufflepuff twice today. The world is a cruel and wicked place. Clearly, he deserves another truffle.

A wisp of a memory nudges its way into Draco's consciousness. The Yule Ball, fourth year. He had lied to Pansy for the third time about needing to use the toilet - Merlin knows one needs periodic breaks in order to survive a night in her company. Draco had walked out to the far end of the balcony, beyond the indecorous over-the-railing vomiters, beyond the groping pairs of fifth-years. He had hoped to be alone for a moment in the farthest darkest corner, but there was a girl there already, sixth- or seventh-year maybe, obviously a Muggle-born. "Shh," she had whispered as he approached, as if he had great designs to converse with some Mudblood. The very idea nearly made him laugh out loud. And yet he had found himself moving towards her when she murmured, "Come see this."

On the edge of the balcony railing, leaning against a little knob, was a tiny fairy, fast asleep. Even now, Draco can remember the shudder of its translucent wings in the night breeze, and the way the Muggle-born girl had watched, transfixed. Though normally, Draco would not have refrained from expressing his contempt, at the time he had just stood alongside the girl and watched. And he had found himself wondering what it would feel like if the sight of a sleeping fairy was particularly unusual or special for him. The girl had sort of smiled without looking at him. "How did I get here?" she had murmured sadly, or maybe she had been laughing. Maybe both.

Draco had never really understood until now – here, on the bathroom floor of what used to be his school. He, Draco – heir to the Malfoy name and fortune, prefect, near the top of his class at Hogwarts. Draco Malfoy, singled out by the Dark Lord for one of his darkest and most important tasks. He, Draco Malfoy, staring dully at a row of urinals, chocolate collecting in the corners of his lips, his bum getting intimate with the tiles. Planning to do what he could to assist Harry Potter in overthrowing Voldemort. How on earth had he gotten here?

A sudden splash of water erupts from one of the urinals, dangerously proximal to Draco's dragon-hide shoes. He jolts upright and draws his knees to his chest at once. A loud gurgling noise hails the arrival of Moaning Myrtle, who emerges from the urinal looking about as vibrant as ever.

"Oh, it's you!" She brightens immediately at the sight of Draco. "Why are you wearing a glamour? Don't you know I can see right through it?"

"I can see right through you," Draco feels compelled to retort, though he manages to suppress the urge with difficulty.

"I can," Myrtle repeats, drifting closer to Draco. "I can see right through *all of it*." She glances at him sidelong, her mouth curved into something midway between a shy smile and a leer. Draco considers his options, and decides on the best viable course of action; that is, he buries his head in his hands and vehemently denies the reality of the situation.

When he musters up the courage to peek through his fingers several minutes later, Myrtle is still floating before him, looking deeply affronted. "I see how it is," she sulks, "You stay away for weeks, and when you finally return, you ignore me!"

"No, that's not..." Draco protests weakly. He closes his eyes momentarily. "I don't think you understand."

"Oh, believe me, I understand perfectly!" Tears are beginning to form in the corners of Myrtle's hazy eyes. "You're just like all the others. Oh yes, you can tell Myrtle anything – just pour your heart out to her, and she's there for you no matter what. But when it comes to *girlfriends-*," she sniffs dramatically, "You just don't see me that way."

To be fair, Draco thinks privately, he doesn't see any girl that way, but he has no particular interest in disclosing that to Myrtle at the moment. "Well, Myrtle, uh, you know, I just don't think it will work out, given that I'm alive and you're – I'm sorry, but you're dead."

"Just rub it in, why don't you!"

"I'm sorry, Myrtle, I really am. But I promise – how about this – I promise to come and see you if Potter murders me."

Myrtle regards him with shameless interest. "Harry Potter?"

"Yeah, him," Draco replies, staring distractedly through Myrtle's torso.

"Huh. Well, he did try to kill you that other time, so I guess it's possible, but if you're just saying that..."

"No, I mean it," Draco lies halfheartedly, rubbing wearily at his eyes. "Anyway, I've got loads to do, so I should probably get going..."

"You didn't look so busy a minute ago, when you were just sitting there eating sweets!" Myrtle's features pinch into an accusatory sort of pout.

"Yes, well," Draco swallows, "I just remembered something important, so –"

"Are you trying to get rid of me?"

An exquisitely awkward silence ensues, in which Draco is hesitant to deny this accusation. Myrtle seems like she would require minimal encouragement to stay with him indefinitely – and Draco certainly doesn't intend to round out his birthday by cozying up to a depressive ghost, gossiping and binging on chocolate like a pair of menstrual Gryffindors.

Politeness wins out. "No, oh no – of course I'm not trying to get rid of you!" he assures Myrtle. After all, he's in no position to be less than accommodating to anyone at this point, even someone who's been dead for fifty-five years.

Fifty-five years.

A chain of neurons fire in Draco's frontal cortex, and two ideas converge in his mind. Myrtle has been dead for fifty-five years. Tom Riddle attended Hogwarts fifty-five years ago. Could these two facts be more than tangentially related? Suddenly, the prospect of an evening spent gossiping with Myrtle actually seems quite productive.

"You know, I don't really have to go anywhere after all," Draco declares, giving his legs a good stretch. "Why don't we just relax for a while. Have a seat," he bids her. "Make yourself comfortable."

Myrtle regards him suspiciously through her glasses. "Why the change of heart?"

"Oh, you know," Draco endeavors to sound breezy and nonchalant. "I was just thinking of how long it's been since we've seen each other. Really, we owe it to ourselves to take the time to catch up. *And*," Draco is suddenly inspired. "Seeing as it's my birthday, I'd love to spend the evening with one of my closest friends. If you're not too busy," he adds, peering up through his eyelashes with calculated shyness.

"I'm not too busy," Myrtle enthusiastically informs him. "Is it really your birthday?"

"My seventeenth," Draco replies, telling the truth for the first time that day. He is startled by the surge of relief that accompanies this realization.

"You're of age," she observes. Her expression clouds over suddenly. "I'll never come of age, of course. I'll always be fifteen."

"Look at it this way. In a few decades, I'll be a hairless, belching old man, but you'll be as lovely as ever."

Myrtle, duly flattered, drifts over and slides down the wall beside him. "I'm so glad you're back," she whispers, her tone alarmingly suggestive. Her breath is like the coldest, most miserable day of winter. 'I think it's going to be a special night.'

Amid cringing and retching, Draco manages to manufacture something that passes for a smile.

Chapter 5

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"Here we are," Tonks pronounces at last. "I expect you all remember the Room of Requirement."

"Oh yeah! I recognize this corridor – oh, and there's that guy!" Ron gestures excitedly at the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy on the opposite wall. "He looks a bit madder than before, don't you think?"

"I think we're all going madder, to be fair," replies Tonks. She walks back and forth three times, until a door appears on what was, moments ago, a blank wall. She twists open the doorknob, and the trio follows her inside.

The room, Harry observes, is furnished quite modestly, with an oval wooden table, chairs, and a few faded striped sofas. Draped over one of these sofas is a well-worn pair of black trousers, in which (they eventually notice) Charlie Weasley's muscular legs are encapsulated. He leans his neck over the side of the couch. "Why, hello," he says, peering upside-down at them.

Remus Lupin, who has been pacing around the room in even circles, breaks his orbit to greet them. Tonks gives him a quick kiss and whispers something in his ear. A deep blush immediately blooms across Remus' cheeks, eliciting a round of grins and snickers from Hermione and the boys.

Charlie stretches lazily and, with groaning effort, draws himself into a sitting position. "Go ahead and take a seat, loves," he bids them, moving along the couch to make room. "Bet you didn't expect to be back here so soon."

Harry settles in beside him. "Wasn't sure I'd ever be back, actually," he murmurs, gazing about the room almost wistfully. It doesn't look anything like it did when he used it so regularly for D.A. meetings, and yet, it feels familiar. Maybe it's the scent of the air.

"You know, I'm not sure I approve of us being here during summer holiday," Ron mutters to Hermione as they move to occupy a green striped couch by the door, "I mean, school in the summer? Is nothing sacred?" He shakes his head gravely.

"What's wrong with school in the summer?" Hermione asks, looking sincerely baffled.

"Well, nothing," Ron admits, "If you're completely stark raving mad." Then, observing the expression on her face, he hugs her round the shoulder and quickly amends, "Or if you are brilliant beyond description, to the point where summer school is just a lark."

Hermione pulls a grumpy face at him, but makes no move to extract herself from the hug. "Well," she replies haughtily, "Extra school is lovely, of course, but mostly I just like seeing you suffer." She smiles in his face.

"So," Charlie announces, "We're just waiting for Kingsley Shacklebolt, who, incidentally, should be – where the bloody hell is Kingsley anyway? It's been an hour, nearly-,"

Lupin clears his throat.

"Right," says Charlie. "Er, yes. So, when Kingsley gets here-."

Perfectly on cue, Kingsley bursts into the room. "Am I late? Ah, they're here," he notices. "Welcome, Harry, Ron, Hermione." He nods his big, bald head at each of them in turn.

"Just in time, Shacklebolt, my esteemed colleague," Charlie declares. "So, who's ready to run through the plan?"

"We are," proclaims Ron unnecessarily.

"Good – now I know Tonks has already given you some basic details about tomorrow's mission, am I right? You know what we're here for and all?"

"The horcrux, right?" asks Harry. "The cup, Helga Hufflepuff's-"

"Okay, great, you know that" Charlie nods enthusiastically. "So, basically, we plan on doing whatever we need to do to make sure we leave tomorrow with that cup."

Kingsley expounds upon this. "As you can imagine, the cup is likely to be well protected by Death Eaters, particularly if we're right about it being a horcrux. What that means, for the purposes of this mission, is that we're going to divide into two groups- one group to locate and obtain the horcrux, and another to take care of the Death Eaters. And, of course, we have backup forces on call, prepared to support us at a moment's notice if we get overwhelmed."

"How do we decide who gets what job?" Harry asks.

"Well," Kingsley replies. "As leader of this mission, I've decided for you. I've put you into teams, and I'll be telling you exactly what to do. And I need you to promise to comply with my orders no matter what, for everyone's safety."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione nod solemnly.

"I appreciate that," says Kingsley. "Now, the first thing I'm going to ask of you is incredibly important. I have assigned you each a partner- Lupin, Tonks, or Charlie. It's your responsibility to stay with your partner at all times and do as he or she asks."

"But what if my partner orders me to stay away from him?" Ron wants to know. "Or her," he adds as an afterthought, nodding at Tonks.

"Him. I'm your partner," Charlie informs him. "And while telling you to bugger off has been a great joy of my past and, no doubt, my future, I can promise you I'll restrain myself for the duration of this mission."

Ron snorts. "You're too kind."

Kingsley's mouth curves into a smile. "Team Weasley, you'll be looking for the horcrux. Harry and Tonks will be working with you."

"So I'm with Lupin," Hermione deduces, looking pleased. Lupin gives her a nod from across the room.

"You are," affirms Kingsley. "And you two will join me in confronting the Death Eaters, while the others abduct the horcrux."

Ron shifts away from her suddenly, leaning forward. "But she's a Muggleborn! Is that safe?" he asks. Hermione narrows her eyes at him.

"What – oh, come on, Hermione, you know I didn't mean it like that. It's just – the Death Eaters – they don't exactly love Muggleborns, and, well, I just think-" Two bright spots of color appear on his cheeks. "I just don't know if it's safe, having her do that."

"We're hunting down a fragment of You Know Who's soul in a nest of Death Eaters," Kingsley reminds him. "Nothing about this mission is going to be safe. But will Hermione be protected? Absolutely- by Lupin and myself, as well as the additional members of the Order who will be stationed nearby to support us."

"But distracting the Death Eaters is the most dangerous job, isn't it? So why should Hermione have to do it?" Ron persists.

"Why not Hermione?" she snaps, brown eyes glinting.

"There are many reasons why I picked Hermione for this particular task," Kingsley replies placidly. "For one, she knows an incredible number of spells, and performs them with unusual competence for a witch of her age." Hermione blushes, but nonetheless shoots a defiant look at Ron.

"You know, Ron has a point," Harry interjects suddenly. "Hermione doesn't need to go anywhere near the Death Eaters. I could – I mean, I'm not exactly rubbish at defense."

"You're kidding, right?" Hermione laughs humorlessly. "Put you out there, and they'd think it was Christmas and their birthday all at once."

"Oh, right," snaps Harry, "I forgot, I'm completely defenseless." He and Hermione proceed to have a curious sort of exchange consisting entirely of glares and huffy breaths.

Tonks clears her throat. "Harry, remember- you and I are the only ones who have actually seen what the horcrux looks like. Ron and Charlie will have a hard time finding it without us," she reminds him gently.

"Yes, but-,"

"I'm afraid these assignments are not up for debate," Kingsley announces cheerfully. "But if you feel uncomfortable with them, Tonks will gladly escort you back to Godric's Hollow. Is that what you'd prefer?"

The trio quickly shakes their heads, wide-eyed and tight-lipped.

"I didn't think so," murmurs Kingsley. "Well, then – welcome to the mission. I reckon it's time we got down to business."

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Draco continues to be amazed by the terrific awkwardness of girls.

There had been a night last year, one horrific night, when Draco and Pansy Parkinson had gotten completely pissed at a Quidditch party, and ended up sort of snogging outside the girls' dormitory. The kiss, initiated by Pansy,

had mainly consisted of lips mashing wetly against each other and Pansy more or less gnawing on Draco's lower lip. And afterwards – oh God, afterwards she cupped her moist hand on his cheek and gazed at him with a horrible misty expression like she was in heaven. And then she had huskily informed him that it had been the best kiss of her life.

For Draco's part, it had been the only kiss of his life, and it had left him thoroughly and indubitably revolted. Worse, in the days that ensued, Pansy had seemed determined to reenact the dreadful scene, cornering Draco in corridors and deserted classrooms. Already employing the services of Greg and Vince as his guards against Potter and other meddlers, Draco had managed to convince them to guard against Pansy while they were at it; and honestly, Draco wasn't sure which intrusion he dreaded more.

Those had been dark times for Draco. It had taken him a month to discourage Pansy, and nearly six more months after that before he could even stomach the thought of kissing anyone else; not a girl, though – never another girl. Draco sometimes entertains the idea that Pansy's disgusting kiss is the reason he fancies men – although, truly, he sort of knew that about himself already, and his utter revulsion at the kiss was just a dramatic bit of confirmation.

Tonight, Myrtle takes it upon herself to remind Draco once more why he never wants to be bothered with girls again, even dead ones.

"Do you have a girlfriend, Draco?" she asks, shrugging towards him.

"No."

"Really?" Myrtle seems pleased. "I'm not dating anyone either at the moment, you know."

"How surprising," mutters Draco.

"I know," Myrtle agrees, not quite catching the sarcasm, "But it's actually fairly hard to meet decent boys these days, I find. Besides you, of course." She shoots him a coy smile.

"But surely there must be loads of blokes down for a bit of fun in the toilets," Draco says quickly.

"Oh, you'd be surprised," she replies sadly, "Turns out, they're all interested in breathers."

"You don't say!"

Myrtle floats a lap around the light fixture, grunting in frustration. "I just can't imagine what they see in those living girls!"

Draco shrugs. "Honestly? No clue." Wearily, he bites into another truffle, halfheartedly licking the crème out the center.

"You don't care for them either, then?" Myrtle's voice is suddenly husky. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"What do you think I'm saying?" Draco asks, eyeing her warily as he licks a bit of chocolate out of the corner of his mouth.

"Oh, I think you know. And I think I know why you came here tonight," Myrtle coos, sidling up towards him.

Draco has never told anyone about his sexuality – not his parents, not Greg, Vince, or even Pansy (which, in retrospect, might have done a world of good). And he certainly hadn't been planning on divulging this information to Myrtle, particularly since his current plan – his only plan- is to flirt with her in hopes of getting more information.

But she's so sketchy. It isn't worth it.

"Myrtle, you should know- I'm gay." It bursts out suddenly, and doesn't sound nearly as casual as he had intended. He looks away abruptly, suddenly shy.

"Gay?" Myrtle gapes at him.

"Yes, you know... I like boys, and all."

"Oh, I know what it means! I just had no idea that *you* – but now that you mention it, of course, it seems fairly obvious." She looks somewhat annoyed.

"Really?" Draco murmurs. "How so?"

Myrtle ignores him. "So, do you have a boyfriend? You do, don't you? Who is he?"

"I don't have a boyfriend."

"No? Well, you should," she declares, warming up to the idea. "What about that handsome boy with all the muscles – what was his name, Cedric? He's gay, isn't he? I saw him in the bath once, you know."

"Cedric Diggory?" Draco swallows. "Wow, um. I'm sorry, Myrtle, but he died about two years ago. It was the Dark- You Know Who. Anyway-," he clears his throat, "I don't think he was gay. I mean, he had a girlfriend."

"He's dead?" Myrtle asks, pleased. "And he's straight, you say? I didn't know..." Bloodless as she is, Myrtle actually seems a bit flustered.

"Totally dead," Draco says generously, "And I bet he's pretty lonely."

"Yes, well," she says abruptly, "That still leaves us without someone for you. But who? What would you say is your type? Tall and angry looking? Sporty and muscular?"

"I don't have a type. Really, let's not-,"

"What about Harry Potter? He's gay, right? Oh, but I suppose he tried to kill you, so maybe not."

"Potter? Are you kidding me?" Draco lets out a biting laugh. "We can't even...Merlin." He rubs his nose, and then rests his cheek in his hand. "It would never..." He clasps his hands together, glancing up at Myrtle. "He's gay, though?"

"I've always suspected." She regards him slyly. "Are you interested?"

"What?" Draco exclaims. "No! Merlin's bloody beard, no!!"

"Is it because he tried to kill you that one time?"

"No! I mean, yes – I mean we're enemies, for fuck's sake!"

Inspiration strikes like the flash of a Golden Snitch in his periphery.

"Of course," Draco suddenly amends, "If we weren't enemies, it would be different."

"Oh?" inquires Myrtle.

Salazar, forgive me, Draco murmurs silently. He then turns to Myrtle with wide, innocent eyes and sighs sadly. "Do you want to know the truth?"

"You love him!" Myrtle exclaims.

Draco nods solemnly. "I love him," he confirms. "And I want to reconcile, only I don't think he'll ever forgive me... unless...oh, nevermind."

"Unless what?" Myrtle fidgets excitedly with her glasses.

"It's nothing," Draco replies, shaking his head. "It's just... well, there's this thing, this object he's looking for, and I thought that maybe if I found it and brought it to him..." He trails off, vaguely disturbed by the degree to which this lie resembles the truth.

"What is it? Maybe I can help."

"Oh, don't worry about it. It's something that was hidden, like, fifty-five years ago – I'm sure you wouldn't know anything about it."

Myrtle levitates several feet off the ground, chest puffed proudly. "Well, that's right when I died, you know. I'm sure I'll remember!"

"Really? Because that would be – but you probably can't help me. I mean, it belonged to a student at Hogwarts around that time, but he was a Slytherin. What were you, a Hufflepuff?"

"Ravenclaw," she corrects with a haughty sniff. "And I certainly knew some Slytherins."

"Okay." Draco peers up at her. "Do you remember someone named Tom Riddle?"

Myrtle hovers in the air a few feet above Draco, considering this. "I do remember him!" she murmurs, finally. He was quite popular, and he never liked me, but he had lovely, shiny black hair – of course, it was over fifty years ago, so I'm sure he's bald now," she adds smugly.

"He is, actually," Draco confirms. He looks up at Myrtle. "So you're a Ravenclaw, you said?"

"I *was* a Ravenclaw," Myrtle glumly replies.

"Well, good. Great, actually, because the thing I'm looking for kind of belonged to your girl Rowena. You don't remember Tom Riddle ever touching anything of hers, do you?"

Myrtle is momentarily silent. "You know," she says finally, her voice barely a whisper. "I might – there is something... You can go through the pipes, you know, and there's a secret tunnel of sorts, all lit by candelabras. But there's one candlestick that's sort of set apart, and it has her initials on it. But I've never seen Tom Riddle go anywhere near it. I don't think he cared much about us Ravenclaws when he was at Hogwarts."

Draco nods, eyes wide. "Okay, wow. Well, that actually sounds really promising, so–"

"And do you know what the strange thing is? Everytime I go down there, into the tunnel, it's like I'm drawn to that candlestick – I have to touch it, usually – don't know why. And when I do, when I touch it, it's the strangest thing. I think of him."

"Who?" Draco asks eagerly, "Tom Riddle?"

"Yeah, him. But I didn't fancy him! I hardly even knew him. That's why I never understood... but you say he has some kind of connection to the candlestick?"

"Merlin- can you- you have to lead me to it!" Draco jumps up and begins to pace the bathroom. "It has to be – Myrtle, I need you to tell me everything you know about it."

"Okay. Or, I mean, if you'll wait here for a moment, I could just bring it to you."

"Bring it to me? Right now?"

"If you want. But you would wait here for me, right?" Her eyes narrow sharply behind her spectacles. "You wouldn't just wait until I was gone, and then sneak away?"

"I could never abandon you!" Draco assures her. "We're friends." And Malfoys don't abandon their friends until *after* they give us what we want, he adds silently.

"We are friends," Myrtle smiles shyly "Best friends."

"Right!" Draco enthusiastically agrees, far too amazed by his good fortune to be disturbed by the fact that, at this point in his life, this statement is completely and undeniably true.

In his old bed in the boys' dormitory of Gryffindor Tower, Harry tries, once again, to fool himself into falling asleep. How to recapture the feeling of sinking into this very bed after four hours of Quidditch? His heavy arms and legs are giving in, but his mind is harder to trick.

A rustling noise captures his attention; he draws the curtains slightly apart for a look. There is a shadow of movement across the room, in the bed that used to be Dean Thomas' – limbs shifting and unfolding, groaning bedsprings, and the soft tap of bare feet on the wooden floor. The bed is Lupin's tonight, but where would Lupin be going at this hour? A rendezvous with Tonks the night before a mission? It seems so unlikely, and yet Harry can distinctly hear the faint creak of the door being opened and pushed carefully closed.

Nevertheless, he hesitates for a moment with the wand. Unlike Ron and Hermione, Harry technically isn't allowed to perform unsupervised magic for roughly two more months. But with Kingsley Shacklebolt himself sleeping in the next bed – that's supervision enough, isn't it?

Creeping through the corridors by wandlight feels eerily familiar; Harry knows everyone's been gone since school ended in May, but he studies the map vigilantly, half expecting his own name to converge suddenly with a teacher's around the next corner. It was lovely, he reflects, when the worst thing he had to worry about was detention.

Harry keeps a close eye on the banner that says "Remus Lupin", tracking its progress through narrow corridors and up a flight of stairs. Other banners bob back and forth in the map's periphery, too small for Harry to decipher their names without refocusing: three in the Gryffindor boys' dormitory, two in the girls', two in Filch's office, and two in one of the toilets – undoubtedly Peeves tormenting Moaning Myrtle. Harry smiles nostalgically. He almost misses Peeves.

Carefully retracing Lupin's winding path through the corridors, Harry arrives on the fourth floor, pausing outside a nondescript wooden door. According to the map, Lupin is inside, alone, standing perfectly still. Harry cannot imagine what he might be doing.

He knocks, but there's no answer. He knocks again. Slowly, Harry pushes the heavy door open, slipping inside.

The room is small, and dimly lit by a few dirty lanterns on the wall. Harry is surprised to find that Lupin is not standing at all; rather, he is sitting on the floor in front of a mirror, arms encircling his knees. He is absolutely, exquisitely silent. The mirror, Harry realizes, is the Mirror of Erised.

"Lupin?" Harry's voice sounds unnaturally loud to his own ears. Lupin turns around, startled. "Sorry to interrupt. I was just..." He rubs his forehead helplessly. "I don't know."

Lupin smiles kindly. "Couldn't sleep?"

"Not at all." He returns the smile, bashfully.

"The infamous Weasley snoring," Lupin murmurs.

Harry laughs softly. "I'm used to it. This is my – wow, I guess it's my seventh year sharing a room with Ron. So yeah, I mean, no, it's not that. It's just..."

"I understand. You have a lot on your mind."

"Yeah." Harry is silent for a moment. "I'm really sorry, by the way. I didn't mean to follow you – well, I guess I did..."

"It's quite all right – don't worry about it. I'm just curious to know how you – oh, but of course. The map." He nods comprehendingly.

"So this," Harry murmurs, settling in cross-legged beside Lupin. "I know this mirror, but I haven't seen it since – was it my first year or second? I think it was my first year. I saw my mum and dad in it, and my whole family. It was amazing." He smiles sadly. "I know it's not real."

"It's an interesting mirror," says Lupin. "You should take another look at it. You might see something different."

"What do you see?" Harry asks. "I'm sorry. That's really personal. You don't have to answer that." He shakes his head. "I'm sorry," he repeats.

"It's okay." Lupin smiles. "I see... an old friend who passed away."

"My dad?" asks Harry.

"No..." Lupin rests his hand on his cheek and nods slowly. "Your dad was one of the best friends I've ever had, and he was incredibly important to me. Your mum, too. I miss them every day."

"Me too."

"But in the mirror, I see someone – a different sort of friend, I guess. Kind of a different situation."

"A lover." Harry smiles knowingly.

Lupin blushes. "You could say that."

"When did she die?" Harry asks hesitantly. "Was it a long time ago?"

Lupin opens his mouth briefly, and then closes it. He looks at Harry. "Not so long ago." He blinks. "Harry, it wasn't a woman. It was Sirius."

Harry's eyes widen. "Serious like a serious relationship, or Sirius like my godfather Sirius?"

Lupin seems amused. "Both, I suppose."

"You and Sirius? Really? Not that there's – I mean, I think it's great, but I never would have... wow. Really, though?"

Lupin laughs. "Your dad had the exact same reaction." He shakes his head affectionately. "Amazing. You look so much like him."

"I really had no idea," Harry says, still a bit flabbergasted. "About you and Sirius, I mean. I know I look like my dad. But yeah – wow. So, you're - gay?"

"Well," says Lupin.

"But what about Tonks?" Harry asks.

Lupin smiles. "I like her, too. I guess I'm still figuring things out."

Harry nods. "Figuring things out," he murmurs absently. "I like that."

"I'm glad," says Lupin, yawning. He stretches and slowly draws himself up into a standing position. "Harry, I'm glad you followed me here tonight. I hate to cut this short, but we should probably both rest up for tomorrow."

"I know," Harry nods reluctantly. "Actually, do you mind if I stick around for just a minute or two more? I kind of want to take a look at the mirror for myself, just to see if it's changed."

"I don't see why not. Just promise me you won't be too long. You really should try to get some sleep."

"I promise."

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Remus leaves, shutting the door quietly behind him, and Harry turns toward the mirror. An image slides slowly into focus.

It's different than before, Harry realizes. He sees a room – it's the living room at Godric's Hollow, and it appears to be decorated for Christmas. The mantle is lined with garlands and holly, and there's an enormous tree in the corner – and there's Sirius, kneeling by the tree – he appears to be putting presents to his ear and shaking them. Harry grins - he'll have to tell Lupin. And Lupin himself is there, too, cozy in a big brown armchair, with Harry's mum perched on the arm. And there's his dad, grinning down at her. His mum and dad. They look old, he observes. Not Madame Pince old, but properly old, like Ron's parents. Middle-aged, like parents should be. And they look a bit nerdy. Harry smiles wistfully.

The Weasleys are there too, in full force, taking over all the couches in their bright new knitted jumpers. There's Mrs. Weasley wiping a smudge off a

disgruntled Ginny's cheek. And there's Fred, hankerchief out, wiping away very earnestly at Ginny's other cheek. Ginny looks furious. Mr. Weasley kneels reverently by a wall outlet, poised to plug in a string of Christmas lights. The lights flicker momentarily before revealing themselves to be broken, but Dumbledore – Dumbledore! – brings them back to life with a flick of his wand.

There's a fire in the fireplace – Hagrid is poking at it with his umbrella. Hermione looks on nervously, perhaps waiting for it to be engulfed in flames. She's knitting something – something tiny, probably for a house elf. Ron's sitting next to her, devouring Christmas biscuits like it's his job.

And himself. He spots himself on one of the couches, having what appears to be an animated, laughter-filled conversation with Draco Malfoy. Which is odd, because in real life, his most animated conversations with Malfoy tend to involve death threats, as opposed to laughter. How bewildering. He feels deeply unsettled.

But it's not real. Dumbledore had said so himself. But the mirror is supposed to reflect his desires. Is this what he – oh God. He hadn't noticed their hands before. He cannot imagine why his hands are intertwined with Draco Malfoy's hands. Could the mirror be broken, or does he actually want – but it's impossible. Because he's not *actually* – he can't be – because there was Ginny. And there was Cho. Sort of. But the mirror. He needs to talk to someone. He needs to talk to Lupin.

Chapter 6

Draco, staring expectantly at the sink drain through which Myrtle disappeared minutes earlier, is surprised to see her reemerge quite casually through the door.

"You found it!" he observes.

"Of course I found it. It's been in the exact same place for fifty-five years."

"Well, you carried it here, which, I'll be honest, I wasn't entirely sure was even possible. Given that you're a – you know."

"Everyone always says that," Myrtle remarks irritably. "Funny, isn't it, how you all spend years dodging Peeves' water balloons and dungbombs, but are suddenly astonished to find that I am perfectly capable of –"

"Right, right," Draco interjects impatiently. "How stupid of me. Anyway, I really appreciate your help, Myrtle. This candlestick could be exactly what I'm looking for."

"You can take a closer look at it if you want. It's all yours now."

"Wow, yeah, that would be great."

Myrtle sets it down before him on the tiles. The candlestick is silver and somewhat tarnished, and holds a long, black candle. A closer glance reveals that it is, indeed, engraved with Rowena Ravenclaw's initials. Draco picks it up carefully with both hands.

Immediately, the metal begins to glow with heat. The bathroom is silent, but a clearly articulated question rises in Draco's mind: *Are you pure of blood?*

Suddenly, Draco feels a painful, yanking sensation in his fingertips, not unlike the feeling of Snape removing his Dark Mark. "Ouch!" he yelps – but just as abruptly as it arrived, the pain is gone. The candlestick feels comfortably warm in Draco's hands.

"What happened?" asks Myrtle, seeming a bit awestruck.

"I don't – well, it seemed like it was testing whether or not I'm a pureblood. Which I am, of course." He puts down the candlestick and studies his fingertips, which, though no longer painful, are slightly charred and bloody looking. "Not sure I want to know what would have happened if I wasn't."

"It didn't seem to care whether my blood was pure." Myrtle frowns.

"Myrtle, you don't... have blood."

"I don't want to talk about it," she snaps.

"Fine," Draco says agreeably. "Anyway, yeah, thanks for your help, Myrtle - really, you saved me this time."

Myrtle sniffs. "Well, you'll just have to tell me if it works."

"If it works?"

"If it makes Harry Potter love you," Myrtle reminds him.

"Oh- oh, right." He rubs his cheek absently. "Of course. I'll, uh, let you know as soon - as soon as I find him, I guess."

"Won't you just send it by owl post?" she suggests.

"Well, it's a bit complicated, I guess, seeing as his whereabouts aren't exactly public information these days. So, no- actually, I've got to - Snape said I should contact a certain cousin of mine. Of course, I have no idea where she is, either."

"That's a shame," Myrtle says brightly. "Maybe you should just stay here until school starts and see if she turns up."

"Is Hogwarts even reopening this year?" Draco asks distractedly. He rubs his eyes. "You know," he says slowly, "She's my first cousin, so maybe... a blood letter would do it, right?"

"You talk about blood too much. It's very insensitive."

He ignores her. "I'm pretty sure all I have to do is write her name on the envelope in my own blood, and it should - I mean, I think she's a close enough relative..."

"How would I know?" is Myrtle's sullen reply.

"Well, I'll just try it and hope it works. I guess that means I should head down to the owlery."

Myrtle hovers morosely between the sinks, her eyes reflecting ocean-depths of injury and disappointment.

Draco sighs. "So, come with me, then."

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"I think I'm going to be sick," murmurs Ron, gazing helplessly at his own knees. Through the tinted windows, the towers of Hogwarts Castle grow ever the more distant; Kingsley had insisted that they arrive without fanfare in Muggle taxis.

"Okay," Charlie requests, "But be sure to vomit in that direction."

"Oh, yes. All over me, please, thanks," replies Harry, hardly bothering to roll his eyes.

"Are you all right, Ron?" Tonks, sitting in the front seat, twists her body around to look at him. "Should we pull over?"

"He's fine," Charlie says. "Right? You're fine." He delivers an affectionate punch to Ron's arm.

"I'm fine," Ron echoes weakly.

"Don't be nervous." Tonks reaches back to pat his knee encouragingly. "You know the plan backward and forward, your glamour looks great – all the glammers look great."

"If you do say so yourself," teases Charlie.

Tonks grins. "I'd like to see you do better."

"Oh, I could barely change a freckle, I'm the first to admit it."

"Any word from the others yet?" Ron interjects suddenly.

Tonks and Charlie exchange a glance. "You don't need to worry just yet, Ron," she says kindly. "I'm sure they're still on their way, just like us."

"She'll be fine," mutters Harry.

Ron blushes and ignores him. "Okay, well, just, if you could let me know when you hear from them..."

"You know we can't communicate with them once we get there," Tonks gently reminds him. "When we step in through that door, we've got to get into character immediately. None of our actions, or even our thoughts, can

suggest that we're in any way connected to the others, or to the mission itself. We're just customers having a browse."

"Yeah, about that," Harry ventures, "Do you really think we'll be able to fool them?"

"These blokes? Yeah," Charlie reassures them. "I mean, it'd be one thing if we were trying to keep You Know Who out of our heads, but whoever they have guarding the shop – well, they probably can't even do legilimency at all, for one thing, and if they can? I would think that maintaining your stream of in-character thoughts should be more than enough to mask your true thoughts. And even that's just a precaution."

"Anyway," Tonks adds, "It's only for a little while. We just need them to trust that we're harmless, so they'll leave us alone once the others create their diversion."

"How many Death Eaters do you think will be there?" asks Ron.

"Well, according to our map, there are three there right now.

"But who knows how many they'll contact for backup once they realize what's going on." Ron says grimly.

"Well, yes," admits Tonks, "Which is why we have our forces on call as well. We're going to protect our people in every way possible."

"I know," says Ron. "It's just – I know."

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The taxi lets Harry and Tonks out down by Honeydukes, and they amble down the street towards Dervish and Banges. In every way, they look the part of a young couple, perhaps recently graduated from Hogwarts, enjoying a morning stroll among the shops of Hogsmeade. Harry tries very hard to remember to smile and point to things in shop windows, and generally "just act normal," as Tonks had commanded – though, truly, he can't think of anything less normal than walking through Hogsmeade holding Tonks' hand.

"Why don't we go in here?" Tonks asks casually, as they approach Dervish and Banges. She squeezes his hand as if to ask, "Are you ready?" He squeezes it back.

"Good morning," greets the man behind the counter – his tone is friendly, but he eyes them sharply. Harry senses him watching them as they wander among the display shelves.

"Look at this bowl!" Harry fills his mind with thoughts of the merchandise, occasionally pointing things out to Tonks at random. "This in the living room, what do you think?"

He tries to banish all thoughts of Hufflepuff's cup. Search for it, he reminds himself, but don't think about it. He's not entirely sure that's actually possible.

Ron and Charlie show up not quite half an hour later – an uncle and nephew in for a quick browse. Harry recognizes their glances from this morning, but it's still unsettling to know that the person behind this vaguely familiar face is, in fact, his best friend. "Excuse me," Ron grunts, squeezing past Harry, ostensibly to investigate a shelf of dusty spellbooks behind him. He avoids eye contact, but makes a point of stepping lightly on Harry's foot to say hi. Harry bites back a smile.

Until the other team implements their diversion, there's nothing Harry can do but browse. No one is unaware of being monitored by the beady-eyed shopkeeper. Harry frowns thoughtfully at a tiny cauldron, and holds it up for Tonks' appraisal. She examines it, but shakes her head dismissively. Harry returns it to the shelf, wondering when they'll be able to start focusing on the item for which they came. His patience is wearing very thin.

Finally, after what feels like centuries, a clamor resounds from somewhere nearby – undoubtedly Kingsley's team. The shopkeeper perks up immediately, glancing suddenly at his wrist: his watchband has started glowing green. *It's his summons*, Harry realizes, heartbeat quickening. *It's actually happening*. The shopkeeper abandons his post at the cash register and hastily disappears.

At once, there is a palpable shift in attitude, as the character roles are abruptly abandoned. "All right," announces Tonks, all business. "When I saw it on Tuesday, it was on this shelf behind the register; obviously, they've moved it. We'll need to check every drawer, shelf, and cabinet in this room, so why don't we each start by taking a corner, and working our way into the middle."

"Yes, m'am," says Charlie, giving a little salute. He and Tonks claim their corners and methodically begin their search. Ron and Harry watch them uncertainly for a moment before following their lead.

"Alohomora," Harry says briskly, again and again. Cabinet doors yank open to reveal dishes, and gargoyle figurines, and basically everything Harry doesn't give a bloody damn about. No silver two-handled cup tucked away behind the antique clocks. Nothing in the drawers.

And so he repeats, "Alohomora."

A shock of movement: a pale figure bursts forth from an otherwise empty cabinet, sweeping past Harry, who barely glimpses its narrow, snakelike eyes. And then there's a gasp, and a muffled choking noise, like a swallowed scream.

It's Ron. Harry, heart pounding, dares himself to turn around.

In the center of the room is Hermione, barely standing, clutching her stomach. The front of her shirt is saturated with blood, and there's blood all over her hands, her face, her hair. She looks at Ron, pleadingly, and his face fades to white. He rushes to her immediately, and she collapses in his arms.

The room is perfectly, aching quiet.

Ron pushes a sticky strand of hair out of Hermione's face, and lets his hand linger on her cheek. "You're okay, Hermione," he insists hoarsely. Her eyes slide closed. "No! No, don't do that. You need to open them – open your eyes now. Okay?"

His eyes flick suddenly upwards to meet Harry's. "This isn't – no." His voice hitches. He looks helplessly back down at Hermione, his hands shaking violently.

Harry stares at them, nodding slowly. "Ron, I don't think that's actually-" He licks his lips. "I'd like to try something, but you need to – it would be better if you'd let go of her for a minute."

"I'm not letting go of her!"

"Okay, that's – that's fine." Harry closes his eyes briefly. Then, slowly, he approaches them, carefully positioning himself to look directly down at Hermione's face. Her eyes snap open, and she twists violently in Ron's arms – and then, suddenly, Ron is embracing the cloaked figure of Voldemort.

"Riddikulus!" Harry shouts quickly, before Ron can process what's happening. A pair of fluffy, pink bunny ears sprout from Voldemort's bald head, and his cloak is suddenly replaced by a fluffy white jumpsuit. Harry

levitates him back to the cabinet from whence he came, taking note of his puff-ball tail. He locks the cabinet door emphatically behind him, turning back to Ron.

Ron remains on the floor, staring dazedly at his knees. "You okay, mate?" Harry kneels beside him, resting a hand firmly on his arm. "It was just a boggart, okay? She's fine. Just a boggart." Ron nods slowly, not facing Harry.

Harry exhales softly, drawing himself up. He offers Ron a hand. "Can you stand up?"

Ron doesn't respond.

"Ron?"

Ron turns to face Harry, nodding shakily. He takes Harry's hand and lets Harry pull him up. He stands beside him, still pale, hands still trembling.

Tonks peeks out at them from behind a shelf. "You two all right over there?"

Harry looks at Ron, who smiles slightly. "We're fine," Harry calls back, "Any sign of the cup?"

"No, nothing yet."

"Nothing on my end either," contributes Charlie from his corner across the room.

"Well – keep at it, then," Tonks replies. Harry and Ron slowly resume their search.

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"Okay, wow. That's disgusting," Charlie announces.

"What is it?" asks Harry.

"It's like – yeah, okay, I can't even describe it. Come over here for a minute – you too, Ron."

"I don't – wow, what is that?" Harry murmurs.

"That's the question of the hour," Charlie says, "I guess – well, I opened this cabinet door, and there it was. It's like someone sealed the whole cabinet off

with human flesh. Here, touch it – it feels just like skin. It's extremely creepy."

Harry and Ron politely decline.

"All right," Charlie shrugs. "Well, you ladies might want to step back, because you know I've got to cut this thing open and see what's behind it. You think it's gross now..."

"It is gross now," Harry confirms.

"Are you guys even still looking for the horcrux," inquires Tonks, approaching them from her corner across the room. "Why are we congregating around Charlie?"

"Oh, it's only the most hideously bizarre and disgusting thing ever." Charlie looks almost proud. "This cabinet has got, like, this seal of human flesh, and I'm going to cut through it and see if the horcrux is behind it."

Tonks nods slowly, eyebrows furrowed. "Actually, it could – in fact, I think I know exactly..." Her voice breaks off as she reaches out to touch the flesh seal softly. She then gives it a firm press with her fingertips.

"Yeah, this isn't just a seal with a hollow hiding space behind it. I'm pretty sure this entire cabinet is filled with solid human flesh."

"But why would anyone do that?" asks Harry, looking a bit nauseated. "And how would anyone do that?"

"To hide something inside of it. It's a clever little spell, really. I've never actually seen it done before, but I am familiar with..." She breaks off, smiling slowly. "Brilliant," she declares, nodding at the cabinet of flesh. "You see, the flesh will only release its contents to the person to whom it belongs. It can't be cut through or burnt, or anything."

"Oh," remarks Charlie, disappointed.

"But," she continues, "If your genetic material is a match, all you have to do is put your hand on it – well, *in* it. It's a wonderful, nearly foolproof way of ensuring that an object never enters anyone's possession but your own."

Harry frowns. "So, basically, we're stuck. The horcrux is in there, and –why are you smiling?"

"Because, you know what's awesome at moments like this?" She cocks her head to the side, grinning. "Being a metamorphmagus."

Charlie gives her a high five. "See, I knew there was a reason we kept you around."

"If only I could say the same for you," she retorts, smiling sweetly.

Harry rubs his forehead. "But how will you know who to become? Do you know who did this?"

Tonks shrugs. "I can touch it and go from there. I'll improvise – it shouldn't be a problem."

She approaches the flesh seal and touches it daintily. Then, placing her entire hand on it, she scrunches up her face in concentration. The boys watch with interest as Tonks' smooth skin turns ashy and hairy, her posture slouches, and her hair fades to a wispy gray.

"Peter Pettigrew – really?" remarks Charlie. "That's odd. I haven't noticed him anywhere near this area, and I've been hovering over the maps like nobody's..." He trails off, watching queasily as Tonks-turned-Pettigrew plunges one grimy hand into the block of flesh. After a revolting minute of squelching and suction noises, the hand emerges, clutching a tarnished silver two-handled cup.

"That's it!" says Harry, nodding excitedly.

"I believe so," Tonks confirms, happily returning to her own body. "That was disgusting, by the way."

"You've looked better," agrees Charlie, "But it was worth it."

"Definitely worth it." Tonks smiles. "Hey, look who's back!"

The boys turn around in time to see Lupin limp in, followed by a sweaty Kingsley and a very bedraggled Hermione. Tonks is upon them immediately, arms flying around Lupin's chest.

"Well, hello," he greets, smiling down at her. Harry looks awkwardly away.

"Have you got the horcrux?" Hermione inquires breathlessly.

Harry smiles. "See for yourself." He gestures towards Charlie and Kingsley, who are examining it in the light, looking very pleased.

Hermione emits an excited little squeal, and catches Harry in a hug.

"I know, we're awesome." He beams at her. "So tell me, how did it go for you all? Were there a lot of them? I mean, obviously, you're all okay. Thankfully."

She nods. "Yeah, it was... it was intense. There were three of them – well, a fourth one ran in."

"Probably the shopkeeper," Harry posits.

"Probably," she agrees. "Anyway, I only had to deal with one of them, thankfully. I don't know which one, because they were all wearing cloaks and hoods. But yeah-" She grins. "It went really well. I just – well, you taught me a lot of defensive spells, Harry, and actually, I got to use this fantastic little hex that Ginny taught me last summer."

"You should tell Ron that. Whatever it was, he's probably been on the receiving end many, many times."

"I'm sure." Hermione smiles. "Where has he got off to, by the way?"

"Oh, you know," Harry shrugs, "Maybe the toilets or something."

Hermione chuckles. "Poor thing. He's probably been waiting to go this whole time."

Harry smiles obscurely, rubbing his neck. He had seen Ron slip away, and it wasn't to the toilets. He feels vaguely guilty for lying.

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Tucked away between two rows of shelves, Ron leans against a cauldron, breathing as quietly as possible. It's not that he's disinterested in hearing how the mission went for Hermione. It's just that he burst into tears as soon as she entered the room.

Chapter 7

"Yes, but it's so incredibly boring," Ron moans, rubbing his temples in a gesture of extraordinary suffering. "Once you're actually up there – you can't imagine, mate. And I don't understand it. It's a wedding, right? Nobody's died. It's not a bloody funeral. You'd think they'd try to keep it lively, but *no*. Apparently that's too much to ask."

"Apparently," Harry agrees gravely, before relieving a toothpick of its hunk of cheese.

Ron flops into the nearest chair with a mighty sigh. "I mean, I'm pretty sure I actually fell asleep up there. Nodding off the whole bloody time..." He frowns suddenly. "You don't think anyone noticed, do you?"

"Noticed what? When you nestled your head on George's shoulder halfway through the ceremony, or when you curled up in a fetal position at the priest's feet?" Harry smiles beatifically. "I don't know which was more precious."

"Ha ha."

"But don't worry," chimes Hermione, leaning forward to speak across Harry. "They were able to slip their wedding vows in between your snores, so it was okay."

"Oh, were they?"

"Just barely." She grins at him expectantly.

Ron doesn't grin back. Rather, he stretches his mouth at her weakly and quickly turns his full attention to his plate of hors d'oeuvres.

Hermione's smile falters slightly, and a flash of tension in her eyebrows betrays her frustration. She isn't quite sure what's gotten into Ron. He's been acting strangely ever since they arrived at Grimmauld Place for the wedding – or really, ever since they found the horcrux. She finds it rather unsettling; truly, she always feels a bit removed from herself when Ron is mad at her.

Not that he's necessarily mad at her. To be honest, she isn't sure. He isn't sulking or glaring or refusing to speak with her, but he isn't acting normally either. Something just feels off. She doesn't quite know what to make of a

Ron who backs away from a perfectly good verbal sparring match. With her. In favor of hors d'oeuvres!

Although Ron does love food, she considers. Could she be worried over nothing? She glances briefly at the boys, who are conversing animatedly and ignoring her. They're the best friends she's ever had, and she loves them dearly, but there's this core to Harry and Ron's friendship that she can't quite penetrate. Sometimes she feels like they never left first year: the wonderful and astonishing reality of these two boys wanting to be her friends, and the niggling fear that they might change their minds any day.

Her ruminations are interrupted by a tinny shriek, as one of Fleur's Beauxbatons friends trips on her heels and stumbles noisily to the ground. Momentarily stunned, the girl remains sprawled on the dance floor, legs in the air, allowing everyone ample time to appreciate her rather minimalist approach to undergarments. She's quite pretty, so naturally, a dozen or so of Bill's old school mates are immediately on the scene, gravely concerned, and within minutes, the girl is happily stomping away to the food table with the best looking of the lot.

Hermione watches this scene unfold through narrowed eyes. Girls who can't walk normally in heels shouldn't be allowed to wear them, she thinks crossly.

Ron and Harry, who possess a level of maturity normally associated with infant trolls, are reduced to fits of spastic giggles punctuated by explosive snorts. "Now that we've *all* seen her Golden Snitch..." Ron chokes out.

"Her Chamber of Secrets," Harry contributes with a mirthful little yelp. Ron slaps him an enthusiastic high five.

"Really? We're going there?" Hermione asks, eyebrows raised. Harry gives her a guilty grin, and even Ron smiles at her briefly before looking quickly away.

So maybe things are okay. Sort of.

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"So, you know what's disturbing?" remarks Ron, eyeing the dance floor with a pained expression on his face. "Teachers' personal lives. I'm learning so much that I never wanted to know."

Harry follows his gaze. "You mean Hagrid and Madame Maxine? Uh, where have you been?"

"Not *them* – but look behind them. McGonagall and Flitwick!"

Hermione laughs. "I think they're just dancing."

Ron snorts doubtfully. "Maybe," he says, "But take a look at Madame Hooch – I mean, she's practically *snogging* – is that another woman? Bloody – is she a *lesbian*?"

"Who's a lesbian?" Harry scans the dance floor, interest suddenly piqued.

"Huh," murmurs Hermione, considering this. "No, I'm not surprised."

"I wonder if any of the rest of them are gay. I can't believe I've never thought about this." Ron scratches at his chin. "Well, Lockhart was a total nancy, obviously."

Harry shifts uncomfortably.

"And maybe Sprout – I mean you never hear anything about her having a husband."

"That doesn't mean anything," interjects Hermione. "And so what if she is gay?"

"I'm not saying there's anything wrong with it," Ron insists. "I just think it's interesting."

"Funny, because I remember a time when you thought teachers' personal lives were disturbing." She regards him with gleaming eyes. "Yeah, when was that? All of two minutes ago?"

"It was at least five minutes ago," Ron replies indignantly.

"You know," Harry remarks suddenly. "I've got to – need to ask him something." He jumps up abruptly. "I'll be right back."

"Ask who something?" mutters Ron, several moments later.

"I don't know," replies Hermione. "Lupin, maybe? Looks like he's headed in that direction."

"Oh," says Ron, nodding. Hermione nods as well, finding herself suddenly at a loss for words. Which is ridiculous, because it's Ron.

But then, it's not *her* Ron, but this new acting-weirdly-maybe-mad-at-her-maybe-not version of Ron, so it's a bit different. And it's the first time they've been alone together since the horcrux.

She sneaks a glance at him; he's staring fixedly ahead.

"Funny that Tonks isn't here," he comments stiffly after a moment.

"I know!" she agrees, eagerly jumping upon this topic. "I thought she said she was coming."

"I thought so, too. Maybe something came up." He shrugs, and again, turns his attention to the dance floor. He bobs his head to the music. Hermione watches him silently, heart pounding curiously as his tongue flicks out to wet his lips.

Suddenly, Ron turns his face back towards her, and they both speak at the same time, their words crashing against each other.

"Sorry," says Hermione, blushing. "What did you say?"

"You go first," insists Ron.

"Okay." Hermione smiles, breathing in sharply. "Do you want to dance?"

Ron hesitates.

"But we don't have to if you don't want to," she adds, mortified. "It was just a, you know, a suggestion. I shouldn't have – oh God," she mutters. She grins falsely. "Right. So what were you going to say?"

Ron gapes at her. "Nothing. No, it's just- I just need to use the toilet, is all." He draws himself up suddenly and nods at her. "I'll be right back." He bolts for the toilets.

Hermione, a bit shell-shocked, leans back in her seat and sips her cider slowly to calm her churning stomach. She lets her eyelids fall closed. If only she had an invisibility cloak. What wouldn't she give, at this moment, to wrap herself up in something and disappear?

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"Lupin!" Harry catches him on his way out to the patio.

"Hello, Harry. I was just heading out for some fresh air. Care to join me?"

"That would be great," Harry replies breathlessly. "Listen, can I ask you something?"

Lupin regards him with interest. "Of course. What's on your mind?" He props open the glass patio door and gestures for Harry to proceed through.

"Yes, well." Harry takes a deep breath. "You know how you're..." he trails off.

"How I'm...awesome?" Lupin suggests, smiling wryly. "A werewolf? Attracted to men?"

"Yes!" Harry interjects, nodding vigorously, "That one."

"What would you like to know?" he asks gently.

Harry hesitates. "No one can hear us through that door, right?"

"Well – *muffliato*," Lupin says. "Now they can't."

Harry swallows. "Do you think I might be gay?"

"That's not for me to answer." Lupin regards him seriously. "Do you think you might be?"

Harry pauses, looking down. "I think so," he says softly. He raises his eyes to meet Lupin's briefly. "Maybe."

"Okay," says Lupin. "How do you feel about it?"

"Good," Harry nods. "But confused, I guess. I mean, a month ago, I was dating Ginny. And I was happy! I think I was happy. I mean, Ginny's awesome – she's really..." He smiles, catching a glimpse of her through the glass. She appears to be coaxing a provocatively dressed garden gnome into her brother's wedding cake.

"I really, really liked her," he concludes. "But there was something – I don't know." He shakes his head. "I never quite felt –" He pauses, collecting his thoughts. "I mean, with Ginny, it was nice – really nice when we were together, but – I don't know," he exhales. "I guess I didn't think about her as much when she wasn't, like, right in front of me. Which is *really* different from –" He gives an ironic little laugh. "I'm not making any sense, am I?"

"You're making perfect sense. It sounds like there's someone in particular who you think about all the time, who's making you realize that you can feel more deeply than you thought you could."

"Yes, exactly!" Harry replies enthusiastically.

Lupin nods thoughtfully. "I wonder..." he looks at Harry. "Perhaps part of the reason you were so fond of Ginny is that she reminded you of someone else."

Harry's brow furrows. "I don't think so..." His eyes widen suddenly with comprehension. "You mean *Ron*? Oh, no, no. It's not him – no. He's my best mate – I could never." He laughs. "Definitely not."

Lupin smiles crookedly. "I'm way off the mark, huh?"

"Way off," Harry confirms, smiling back at him. "You'll never guess who this person is."

"Never? Will you tell me, then? Or will I have to wait until you introduce him to me as your boyfriend?"

"Ha. Not likely to happen."

"No?" Lupin asks conversationally. "Funny, that's just what my friend James said at the beginning of seventh year when he fancied a certain redheaded girl named Lily. But, you know, I'm sure you're right. Not likely to happen."

"Yes, well," Harry smiles sadly. "I think this is probably a bit different. This person... and I... we're not even friends. Nowhere near it."

"Neither were James and Lily," Lupin replies.

They are interrupted suddenly by a tap at the glass door.

"Huh," remarks Harry, surprised.

"Her ears must have been burning. Mind if I...?"

"No, it's fine."

Lupin opens the patio door, and invites Ginny to join them outside.

"Sorry to bother you. I just wanted to let you know that they're about to do the cake, and I think Fleur's opening presents, too." She pauses, rubbing distractedly at her ear. "Hey, do you guys hear a buzzing noise?"

Lupin smiles slightly, and discreetly removes the muffliato spell.

"Huh. That's better. Anyway, I figured you wouldn't want to miss it. It's chocolate."

"Good thinking," Harry murmurs, stomach actually growling at the mere mention of cake. Ginny hears it and smiles. Harry smiles back at her.

"Well then. If you'll pardon me..." Lupin politely excuses himself from the patio. Through the glass, Harry and Ginny watch him proceed immediately in the direction of Bill and Fleur's giant wedding cake.

"He's all business when it comes to chocolate," Harry observes.

"Apparently." Ginny cocks her head to the side thoughtfully. "Do you think it's a werewolf thing? I mean, Fleur wanted the traditional vanilla, but Bill absolutely *insisted*... though, I guess he's always loved chocolate, so it's hard to say."

"Well, we'd better go make sure the pair of them don't demolish the entire thing before we get any, then."

"Right." Ginny laughs. They abandon the patio and work their way towards the crowd assembling at the dessert table.

"So, how are you?" Harry asks, feeling oddly nostalgic.

"Pretty good," she replies. "Busy."

"Busy, huh? Lots of new blokes, then?" he awkwardly probes.

"Oh, *loads*," she affirms. She laughs, tucking a stray hair behind her ear. "No, my plan is to stay single for awhile."

"Really?" Harry raises one skeptical eyebrow.

"Yes, really! I'm quite enjoying it, I'll have you know."

"I feel there's an insult in there somewhere..."

"Oh, keep looking – you'll find it." They glance sideways at each other, grinning.

"Good to see you again, Weasley," Harry remarks, delivering a light punch to her arm.

She opens her mouth to reply, but is happily diverted by the cutting of the wedding cake. "Oh, here we go," she murmurs, eyes twinkling, "Wait for it..."

A blast of overtly sexual Muggle rap music explodes from somewhere in the ceiling, startling Professor Flitwick three feet into the air. At once, a bearded garden gnome bursts forth from the cake, wearing only a leather thong and a good deal of icing. Ginny nods her head approvingly. The gnome honors Bill and Fleur with a quick bow, and then proceeds to perform a heavily sexualized dance demonstrating his desire to lick Fleur from her head to her toes. Fleur looks vaguely horrified.

The song concludes, and the gnome halts his dance mid-gyration, leaving a roomful of wedding guests in stunned silence. After a few moments, delighted laughter prevails, and Bill recovers sufficiently to begin cutting into the cake. Mrs. Weasley, mouth set in a humorless straight line, makes a beeline for Fred and George. Ginny smiles contentedly.

"Not bad," Harry says, nodding solemnly. "I have to say, having him fall on his back with his legs in the air was a nice touch."

"Oh, did you like that? That was a last-minute addition." She shrugs. "I don't know, I was just inspired."

As the guests happily tuck into their chocolate cake, Fleur takes a seat by the present table, smiling brightly. "It eez time to open ze presents!" she announces.

"More attention for Fleur!" Ginny exclaims under her breath. Harry laughs quietly.

Fleur begins with an enormous box, beautifully wrapped in heavy white paper. Handing the bow to Bill, who promptly deposits it on the table, she smiles with anticipation as she removes the lid.

Her smile dims as she observes the box's contents. "A gieent box of jokes and pranks," she remarks unenthusiastically. "How nice." Bill winks discreetly at Fred and George.

The next gift, a singing teapot from Kingsley Shacklebolt, is more to her liking, and she extends her approval to a self-stirring kitchen cauldron and a cooking spellbook as well. Ron, Harry, and Hermione's steak knives are received with enthusiasm from the groom, if not the bride. A rare bottle of exotic firewhiskey contributed by Alistair Wood is widely appreciated.

The pile of presents slowly dwindles. An infinitely expanding photo album from Ginny. A fancy box of chocolates from Lupin. Fleur flares her nostrils uncomfortably and pretends not to see a squeaking, wriggling present from Hagrid. She seems unimpressed by a rusty locket from Mundungus Fletcher.

"Stole it from this very house, no doubt," mutters Molly Weasley from somewhere behind Harry in the crowd.

"It does look exactly like the one we found when we were cleaning last summer," observes Ginny. "Remember?"

"Oh, I remember. What a great wedding present. An old locket she'll never wear that no one can open."

"With a huge random 'S' on it," Ginny adds, "So Fleur will know he picked it out especially for her."

"Oh my God," Harry says suddenly.

Ginny glances at him, alarmed, "Is everything okay?"

"Yes," he says slowly. He exhales, heart pounding. "Wow. Um, do you think Fleur would let me borrow that locket, if I asked?"

"Gee, I don't know. She's clearly very attached to it already." Ginny gestures at the floor underneath the table, where the locket has slipped, unnoticed.

"Wow. All right. I mean, that's funny, right, because I really think that's a -." He lets out an amazed little laugh. "Bloody- I mean, I've been looking for..."

"You've been looking for a big, hideous locket?"

"A big, hideous, Founders-era Slytherin locket," Harry murmurs, nodding excitedly. "Mmm, I would say I am, in fact, looking for one of those."

"You honestly think that locket belonged to Salazar Slytherin?" Ginny twists her mouth skeptically. "I mean, where would Mundungus Fletcher have gotten a Founders-era piece?"

"Here, probably. I bet it is the same one we found last summer." He nods slowly, his mind zooming in a thousand different directions. Why had the locket been at 12 Grimmauld Place? Had it been hidden there by the mysterious R.A.B.? And did that mean R.A.B. knew Sirius? Or Sirius' parents, or his brother?

The clamor of a hundred laughing, dancing wedding guests fades suddenly to a low buzz in Harry's mind. Sirius' brother: Regulus Black. Regulus A. Black, no doubt, who defected from the Death Eaters and was killed.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Ginny asks, prodding him and looking very concerned.

Harry looks at her. "You really think she'd let me take that locket?"

Ginny shrugs. "Honestly, I'd just swipe it off the floor, if I were you. She'll never even notice it's gone."

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Ron returns from the toilets to find Hermione in the exact seat where he'd left her, glassy-eyed and loosely gripping an empty cider cup.

"You look bored," he comments cheerfully, settling in beside her.

She glances briefly at him, smiles humorlessly to herself, and shakes her head.

"Did you miss me?" he persists.

"Not really."

Ron snorts. "Pretty harsh, Granger!"

"Is it?" Hermione raises her eyebrows and sips at her cup, seeming momentarily surprised to realize that it's empty.

"Do you want me to get you more cider?"

"Nope, I'm good, thanks."

Ron regards her through narrowed eyes. "Okay. What's with you?"

"What?" she asks.

"Why are you acting like that?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Hermione glances sideways at him briefly, twisting a lock of hair around two fingers.

"Don't give me that. You're acting weird, and you know it."

"Oh, am I?" Hermione turns to him, eyes flashing. "I'm sorry. I guess I just got a bit confused, what with you *ignoring* me on and off all week, and then fleeing for the *toilets* when I asked you -" She cuts herself off, shaking her head quickly. "And now you're being bizarrely pleasant, with no explanation, and not even the slightest acknowledgement that you've hardly had a word to say to me since we found the horcrux." She gives a bitter little laugh. "But *I'm* the one who's supposedly acting weird."

Ron gapes at her, wholly taken aback. "Is... uh, is this about the dance?"

"No!" Hermione blushes furiously. "It's about why you think you can completely ignore me, and then expect me to get over it immediately just because you decide to act human again!"

"I haven't been ignoring you!"

"Well, you've been acting weird!" She is startled to realize that her eyes have begun collecting tears. "What happened, Ron? What did I do?" She rubs at her cheeks with the heel of her hand, forbidding herself to cry.

Ron shakes his head. "You didn't do anything."

"Just tell me what in the world I did wrong, because as far as I see it, all I did was help stave off a couple of Death Eaters so you could find the bloody horcrux. Which is what I was supposed to do, right? So can you please tell me what I did to make you so angry?" Her voice hitches.

"Nothing!" insists Ron. "Bloody hell, Hermione, can you just-"

"Just what? Just pretend nothing's the matter? That would be your solution, wouldn't it-"

"I saw you dead, okay?" hisses Ron. "Okay? Are you satisfied?"

"That's ridiculous, Ron!"

"Well, there was a boggart in one of the bloody cabinets, and it took the form of you dying. Only I didn't realize it was a boggart right away."

Hermione looks stunned. "You thought I'd died?"

"See!" says Ron, face reddening. "I knew it would freak you out. That's why I didn't want to tell you."

"And that's why you've been acting so strange around me?" Her expression softens.

"I didn't realize I'd been acting strange," he mutters.

"Well, you can stop now." The corners of her mouth twitch. "I'm totally alive. See?" She takes his hand and presses it against her forehead, like he's her mum checking for a fever. She feels surprisingly warm, and indeed, very, very alive.

Okay?" she asks softly.

Ron gives her a crooked smile. "Yeah."

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"Home at last," murmurs Harry, shutting the door of the Muggle taxi behind him and gazing fondly upon the house. "Let's never leave again."

"At this rate we'll never need to," Hermione says happily. "Two horcruxes in one week!"

"Pretty bloody amazing," Ron concurs. "I still can't believe you found that locket at the wedding. That's some seriously nice work, mate."

"Some nice luck, you mean," Harry swinging his rucksack forward to fumble for his key. "Now let's just hope we're as lucky with the Ravenclaw one."

The door swings suddenly open before Harry's key is even in the hole, startling him backwards onto Hermione's foot.

"Sorry, Hermione," he murmurs, turning his attention to the figure in the doorway. "Tonks, what are you doing here?"

"Yes, please stop scaring us shitless every time we walk in the door," Ron requests. "And why weren't you at the wedding?"

"Yeah, why weren't you at the wedding?" Harry asks. "Lupin was there."

Tonks nods wearily. "Why don't you three come inside, and I'll answer all your questions."

They follow her into the living room, lining up their bags by the wall and settling in on the couch.

"All right," Tonks begins. "I have a bit of news for you, and I know you're not going to be happy about it – not right away." She smiles wryly.

"Is everyone okay?" Hermione asks quietly.

"Oh, everyone's fine," replies Tonks. "As far as I know, anyway. No, it's just – there's something we – the Order- need you to do."

"Another mission?" asks Ron, a bit wearily.

"Not exactly," says Tonks. "More like a -"

They are interrupted suddenly by the flush of the hall toilet.

"What was that?" asks Harry, sitting up alert in his seat. "Is someone else here?"

Tonks nods. "I guess you could say that's the point."

"Who is it?"

Tonks doesn't answer, nor does she need to. At that moment, a figure appears in the doorway, his bright blond hair unmistakable, even in the dim light.

"Is this a fucking joke?" mutters Ron. Hermione, while not quite so direct, nevertheless shoots Tonks an expression communicating basically the same sentiment. Harry just looks stunned.

Tonks sighs, smiling slightly. "Draco, why don't you come in here for a minute."

"What's he doing here?" Ron asks furiously. "This is Harry's house!"

Tonks nods calmly. "Beginning today, Draco will be hiding here with you three. You'll have to trust me when I say there have been some extenuating circumstances. I know you haven't always gotten along in the past, but I

expect you'll be able to put aside your differences and be adults about this. There are no other options."

"Seriously?" Ron asks, flabbergasted.

Hermione frowns. "Tonks, are you sure this is safe? I mean, it wasn't three weeks ago when he tried to-" She glances quickly at Malfoy, who has taken a seat in a chair across the room, as far away from them as possible. "What makes you think he's on our side now?"

"I can't believe you brought a Death Eater into our house," Ron says, shaking his head.

Tonks sighs. "He's not a Death Eater. And he would probably appreciate it if we could stop talking about him like he isn't right here in the room with us."

"If he's not a Death Eater, why is he wearing long sleeves in the middle of the summer," demands Ron. "Let's see his arms." He crosses the room to Draco's chair, looking down at him expectantly. Hermione and Harry follow.

Draco rolls his gray eyes and slowly, lazily, pushes up his sleeves. There's no hint of a Dark Mark on either arm. There's not even a freckle.

"Just because there's no Dark Mark doesn't mean he won't try to kill us," says Ron, unfazed. "He needs to leave."

"This isn't up for discussion, I'm afraid. You might as well try and get used to the idea. All of you." Tonks stands up and begins collecting her things. "Now, I've got to get back to headquarters. Can I trust you four not to maim each other after I leave?"

"Fine," Hermione says unhappily.

"You can trust *us*," adds Ron.

Harry looks at Draco. "Why in the world should we trust you?" he asks softly.

Draco stares back at him, eyes flashing. "How about because I have your bloody horcrux," he says.

Chapter 8

Many powerful words have been exchanged between himself and Malfoy over the years, but Harry never quite expected "horcrux" to be one of them. For a moment, he is actually struck dumb. Ron's jaw, meanwhile, appears to be sinking slowly downward, like a waterlogged ship.

"Who told you about the horcruxes?" Harry finally asks.

Draco gives a haughty little shrug. "Does it honestly matter who told me? I've got it," he says nonchalantly, "It's yours if you want it."

"If I want it," Harry murmurs, shaking his head amazedly. "Yes, I want it, if you've actually got it."

"Fine," replies Draco. He casually reaches over the arm of the chair and pulls a small bag onto his lap. He opens the flaps, reaches inside, and produces a tarnished silver candlestick with a long black candle.

"What makes you think that's it?" Ron asks suspiciously. "Doesn't look like anything special to me."

"Well, Weasel, if you don't want it, I won't force it on you."

"I never said I didn't want it!"

Hermione, meanwhile, is staring raptly at the candlestick's shaft. "Those are her initials right there," she says softly. "Rowena Ravenclaw. This is really it, isn't it?" She reaches out to touch the engraving with her fingers.

Draco jerks the candlestick suddenly away. "You can't touch it."

"Oh, excuse me," she snaps, rolling her eyes. "Wouldn't want to put my nasty Muggle-born hands all over it."

"Trust me – you wouldn't." Draco says darkly. He tosses the candlestick to Ron. "Here, Weasel, why don't you hang onto it."

Ron catches it easily, and opens his mouth to reply – but whatever scathing remark he had intended towards Draco is immediately replaced by a gasp.

"Ron! Are you okay?" Hermione's eyes widen with alarm. She whirls around to glare at Draco. "What did you do to him?"

"No, it's fine." Ron shakes his head, looking quite perturbed. "It's- it was testing me. Like, it was testing my blood." He removes one hand from the candlestick and stares incredulously at his fingertips, before looking back up at Draco.

Wordlessly, Draco holds up his own hand. The ends of his fingers are scarred light pink.

"Guess this really is the horcrux, then, if only purebloods can touch it. Sounds exactly like something You Know Who would do," Ron murmurs, handing it carefully back to Draco. "And don't you go anywhere near it," he adds, catching Hermione's eyes. "Harry, you probably shouldn't risk it, either."

"Any idea what would happen if someone with Muggle blood touched it?" Harry asks curiously.

"Something excruciatingly painful, I'm sure. You should try it." Draco yawns. "Listen, this has been really fun and all, but I'm about ready for bed. Where should I – is there, like, a Slytherin dormitory around here somewhere?"

"I sincerely hope not," Ron mutters, shuddering.

Harry rubs his forehead distractedly. "Um, well- Ron and I have taken over the master bedroom, and Hermione's in the guest room, so..."

"So, is there another bedroom, or what?"

Harry frowns. "No- well, yes, but it's kind of a mess still. And it doesn't actually have a bed- only a crib."

Draco's eyes widen. "Oh, so is that where -"

Harry cuts him off quickly. "So I guess you can just sleep right there on the couch, okay?"

"The couch?" Draco sniffs unhappily. "Really?"

"Really," confirms Ron, growing cheerful at Draco's discontent. "Oh, did you need a blanket? Why don't you take that nice, comfy red- yup, that's the one, with the big Gryffindor crest in the middle. There you go. Nice and warm."

"Lucky me," Draco says miserably.

"Indeed, you are a lucky bastard," Ron agrees, grinning. "Nighty night, Malfoy."

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"This totally sucks, though," Ron decrees, pulling on his pajama pants. "Bloody Malfoy. Worst bloody surprise of my life."

"Yeah," murmurs Harry, "Wow."

Ron flops backwards on the bed with a grimace. "And the worst part is, we can't even hex him, right, because we can't do magic."

"And because he brought us a horcrux," Harry points out. He sits at the end of the bed, staring distractedly at the bureau across the room. "Though, Merlin knows where he got it, or why -"

"Yeah, why *did* he – how did he even know about horcruxes? I don't know, Harry, there's something dodgy about this whole thing. I don't trust him."

Harry blinks. "Of course you don't. How could we trust him?" He sighs, crawling under the covers. "The Order seems to trust him, though."

"Yeah, well, all I know is I won't be getting any rest tonight," Ron replies gravely. "I'll be too busy worrying that he'll murder me in my sleep!"

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Half an hour later, Harry twists out of his sheets and swings his feet to the floor, careful not to wake the blissfully snoring redhead sprawled out beside him. Yawning, he jams his glasses over his nose, and pads softly to the door. It occurs to him that feasting on chocolate at midnight probably won't help him fall asleep, but altogether, the prospect seems much more agreeable than, well, not feasting on chocolate at midnight.

And then there's the matter of the living room, which just so happens to be directly on the way to the kitchen. Not that there's anything terribly interesting to be found in the living room (apart from the computer and the telly, Harry concedes). It's mostly just a jumble of lamps, books, and couches. And were someone to be currently sleeping on one of said couches – well, one might overlook such a person completely, in one's haste to be out of the uninspiring living room and into the ever-thrilling kitchen.

Though, were Harry remotely interested, he might pause on his way to the kitchen to observe the pale figure, defiantly blanketless, curled pensively on his side.

And if Harry was at all bothered, he might pause again on his way back from the kitchen, chocolate melting over his tongue, to observe the steady rise and fall of the sleeper's chest, the mouth slightly open, the fanned blond eyelashes grazing cheekbone.

But Harry doesn't care even slightly, so he hardly notices these things at all.

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"So clearly, we need to lay down some ground rules," Ron announces over breakfast, swallowing the last of his pumpkin juice with one mighty gulp. He sets his cup down on the table emphatically. "The first-

"Aren't you going to have any breakfast?" Hermione asks Draco, observing his empty plate.

"I don't eat breakfast."

"Really?" she says curiously. "You ate fine at Hogwarts."

"Excuse me," Ron says loudly. "The ground rules."

"Right. The ground rules." She nods, humoring him. "Go on, then."

Ron draws himself up importantly. "First ground rule," he reveals, "Don't be a prat." He glares warningly at Draco. Draco rolls his eyes.

"These rules are for all of us, right?" clarifies Harry, "Not just, you know, Malfoy."

"Sure," Ron says agreeably, still looking at Draco. "Second rule: no using the M-word."

"The M-word?" asks Harry, thinking of the Dursleys. "Magic?"

Ron glances at him impatiently. "C'mon, Harry, you know- the *M-word*. I can't say it, so-

"Mudblood," Hermione says quietly.

"Exactly," Ron replies. "That is *not* an okay word in this house, Malfoy."

"Really?" mutters Draco, shifting in his chair. "Wouldn't have guessed."

"Unless Hermione wants to, you know, reclaim it," Ron adds thoughtfully.

"No, I'm good, thanks," Hermione replies, well amused. "I do have another rule, though. We all have to spend a little bit of time every day researching how to destroy the horcruxes."

"Nice one," says Harry. "Also, no using magic until we're actually ready to destroy them. We've got to lay low."

Draco laughs humorlessly. "Trust me," he replies, "I'm trying to lay low, too."

"Good," says Ron. "Just- when in doubt, don't do anything that a Muggle wouldn't do."

"Spoken like a true Weasley," Draco can't resist retorting.

"Okay, here's another one," Harry says immediately. "No making fun of Ron's family."

"Never?" Draco looks stricken.

"Never."

"What about just once a day?"

"I don't think so. Once a month, *maybe*," Harry concedes.

"Give me once a week."

"That sounds fair," Hermione interjects, with an impish glance at Ron.

"Fine," Harry reluctantly agrees. "You can make fun of the Weasleys once a week, but you can't say anything about Ron's mum. And he gets to say his piece about your family, too."

"It's a deal," Draco declares, looking pleased with himself.

Ron nods. "Okay. So, that's about it, unless you lot can think of anything I've forgotten."

"No hogging the internet," Harry says.

"Unless you're doing research," amends Hermione.

"I don't even know what you're talking about," Draco assures them.

Hermione smiles slightly. "You know, that's probably for the best."

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"So, maybe we should begin by taking stock of what we have?" suggests Harry uncertainly.

"Good idea," Hermione agrees. "Let's have a look at them."

"Don't tell me you've already forgotten what they look like!"

"That's right, I've completely forgotten what they *are*, even! I mean, I'm not even sure I'll recognize them." She rolls her eyes. "Honestly, Ron. I just think that it wouldn't kill us to take a close look at the horcruxes themselves."

"Well, don't you get too close to them, especially that nasty candlestick one." Ron reminds her sternly.

"Speaking of." Draco sets the candlestick down on the table in front of them, yawning dispassionately.

"All right," Hermione says. "Good. You've got the others, right Harry?"

"Still in my rucksack, but yeah." He lugs the bag over, opens it in his lap, and removes Hufflepuff's cup. The locket rests inside of it, its chain dangling out of the cup's mouth.

"Not bad for a week's work!" Ron declares, nodding with approval at their load.

"But who knows how long it will take us to destroy them," Hermione replies grimly. She carefully lifts the locket out of the cup and examines it closely.

"What are you doing?" asks Ron, after a moment. "Looking for step by step instructions?"

Hermione ignores him. "We've got to figure out how to open this," she murmurs, prodding at the S-shaped lock with her finger. "I doubt we'll be able to destroy it otherwise."

Harry frowns thoughtfully. "What if we had, like, a basilisk fang, or something like it. That worked before on one of the horcruxes."

"Harry, these are all made of metal. Riddle's diary was just a book."

"Just a book?" gasps Ron, "*Just a book?* Who are you, and what have you done with Hermione?"

Hermione, eyes dancing, opens her mouth as if to reply, but quickly shuts it again. Ron cups his cheek with his hand and leans forward, elbow on the table, gazing at her quite mischievously. She raises her eyebrows and pulls a face at him.

Harry and Draco exchange a bewildered glance.

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Early evening brings the return of Tonks, who arrives at their doorstep looking apprehensive.

"Are we all still alive in there?" she asks, as soon as Harry opens the door. "Tell me you've managed not to – oh good," she sighs, catching a glimpse of Draco behind him. "So, you've sorted out your differences, then!" She beams at him expectantly.

"Um...well." Harry is at a loss for words. "It's..."

He is rescued by Hermione, who has wandered over to investigate. "Oh, it's you, Tonks," she greets, sounding relieved. "Come on in- can I get you some tea?"

"I'm all right," Tonks says, tripping over the doorstep a bit as she follows them inside. "I won't be long. I just wanted to – oh, before I forget, these are for you, from Remus."

"Excellent!" Ron declares, removing an enormous bar of chocolate from the bag in Tonks' hand. Harry and Hermione happily help themselves as well.

"Tell him we say thank you!" says Hermione, "Looks delicious."

"Oh, it is," confirms Ron, already halfway finished with his.

Draco lingers uncertainly by the doorway. "Don't you want yours?" asks Tonks, the corners of her mouth tugging slightly upwards. "There's one for each of you, of course.

Draco shrugs, but blushes slightly. He takes the chocolate bar from Tonks, mutters his thanks, and tucks it into his pocket.

"So," says Tonks, after a moment. "There are a couple of things we didn't get a chance to discuss yesterday, what will all the excitement over Draco moving in."

Both Draco and Ron snort loudly. Hermione looks from one to the other and giggles quietly.

"First things first," Tonks says, taking a seat at the kitchen table. The others fill in around her. "Harry, I know you weren't too keen before, but I've got to ask again." She looks at him meaningfully.

Harry looks back at her blankly. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"The thing we discussed. By owl post."

"Oh," says Harry, with dawning comprehension. "*That*. Yeah. I still don't think so, sorry."

"What is it? Hermione asks curiously.

"Mind if I?" Tonks asks.

Harry shrugs. "Go ahead."

Tonks nods. "Well, earlier this summer, Harry and I discussed the possibility of my becoming your Secret-Keeper."

"Like your parents had?" Ron asks.

"Exactly," Harry replies firmly. "And we all know how that turned out." Draco raises his eyebrows, visibly surprised to hear Harry talk so candidly about his parents' deaths.

Tonks looks troubled. "Harry, surely you don't think that I would ever betray you like Pettigrew did."

"No!" Harry exclaims. His expression softens. "No, I know that. It's just – if you were our Secret-Keeper, and Voldemort found out about it, he'd – God,

he'd torture you. You'd end up like-." He breaks off suddenly, glancing at Draco. He reckons that bringing up Neville's parents in front of Draco Malfoy would be a bit wrong.

Tonks gives a tight-lipped sort of smile. "And do you reckon Voldemort would be a gentleman otherwise? Harry, he knows who I am and whom I've been helping. If he finds me, I'm dead, whether I'm your Secret-Keeper or not. Of course, he won't find me," she adds hastily, noting the expressions on Ron and Hermione's faces. "He *won't*. I'm a metamorphmagus, for Merlin's sake."

"So what would it mean if you were our Secret-Keeper?" Ron asks slowly.

"Well," replies Tonks, "Obviously, it would mean that I'd be the only one who could track down your whereabouts, and unless I gave that information away, the best map on earth couldn't lead the Death Eaters to you. Which means, of course--"

"Which means we could do magic again," realizes Hermione. "Right? We wouldn't have to worry about Voldemort tracking us down – and we could really get started working on those horcruxes."

Harry frowns, considering this. "I don't know," he murmurs.

"Harry, it makes sense," Ron points out. "These horcruxes aren't going to destroy themselves, and Hermione can – I mean, we can do all the research we want, but we'll never know if we're on the right track or not unless we experiment a bit."

"I guess so..." Harry says uncertainly, absently rubbing his scar. "You really think it would be a good idea?"

Tonks nods seriously. "I do, Harry."

"Fine, then," he says.

Ron emits a mighty whoop, spraying flecks of chocolate on the table.

"That's horrible, Ron- clean that up." Hermione shakes her head.

"But at least I'll be able to clean it using magic," he replies, grinning. "Thank Merlin!"

"But no magic for you, Draco," Tonks says warningly. "It wouldn't be safe. We can't have Voldemort realizing you're alive, even if he can't track you down here."

"No, of course," Draco sighs. "Because what could be safer than living like a Squib with three Gryffindors who hate me and can do magic?"

"They don't hate you," Tonks says emphatically, though she looks vaguely alarmed. "Right, guys?"

Ron, Harry, and Hermione are silent for a moment.

"I don't hate him," Harry says finally, avoiding Draco's eyes.

"Me neither," adds Hermione.

"Eh," says Ron. Hermione's elbow finds its way to Ron's ribcage. "What? It's not like I'm going to do anything about it – unless he deserves it," he adds under his breath.

"How reassuring," mutters Draco.

"Well, I know I can count on you all to be mature about this," says Tonks, still glancing, worriedly from Ron to Draco. She rubs her temple, briefly. "Also, before I leave, there's one other thing I need to discuss with you. Do you remember me telling you about a string of recent Muggle deaths we've been investigating over at headquarters?"

"The ones that you haven't been able to trace to any of the known Death Eaters," Hermione recalls. "Have you worked out who's responsible?"

"We haven't yet," Tonks states grimly. "But we've come to understand a bit more about the victims. As it turns out, the killings weren't entirely random."

"What do you mean?" asks Harry.

"Well," replies Tonks, "In fact, the victims all had one thing in common. They were all Muggle family members of the upcoming class of Hogwarts first-years – if the school actually reopens, that is. Kids who haven't even gotten their letters yet."

"So, basically, they're trying to scare the Muggle-borns out of Hogwarts before they even get there!" Ron concludes angrily. Draco stares uncomfortably down at his hands.

Tonks nods soberly. "Unfortunately, it looks like that's the case. Which means, of course, that the families of the current Muggle-born students at Hogwarts are likely also to be at risk."

Ron and Harry's eyes shoot immediately to Hermione, who has gone deathly pale.

"Of course, we're taking every possible precaution," Tonks continues quickly. "Our goal is to relocate all Muggle-born students and their families to headquarters by the end of the week. Hermione, your parents arrived there safely this afternoon, along with your cat."

Hermione exhales heavily, burying half her face with both hands. "Thank God," she whispers.

Tonks mouth quirks into a half smile. "That cat seems quite protective of your parents, by the way."

"Yeah, well," Hermione says softly, "That was pretty much the point."

Tonks rakes her hand absently through her pink hair. "Oh, and Harry, your relatives have been contacted as well."

Harry looks startled. "You mean the Dursleys?"

"Yes, them." Tonks frowns. "They've been giving us a bit of trouble – don't seem too keen on coming with us at all."

"Of course they don't," replies Harry, with a snort. "I'm amazed they haven't had you all arrested."

"Oh – yes, well," Tonks nods vaguely, "They've certainly tried. You don't think you could talk some sense into them, Harry, could you? It is for their own protection, after all."

Harry shakes his head vehemently, looking highly amused. "No chance of that. They can't stand magic, and they definitely can't stand me." Draco glances up at him, surprised.

Tonks sighs. "Well, that's up to your uncle's discretion, I suppose. Of course, your aunt and cousin don't have a choice."

"Don't they?" asks Harry.

"Well, no – they're your only surviving blood relatives, Harry, and on your mother's side no less. There's powerful blood magic – you understand about that, right? We'll be wanting to keep an eye on them, if only because their being alive protects you." She shrugs. "We'll find a way to, er, convince them. I expect we'll have them in custody by tonight."

"Ooh," says Harry, smiling, "They'll love that."

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Claiming a late meeting with some of the Order down at headquarters, Tonks politely declines several enthusiastic invitations to join them for dinner. She bows out around sunset.

"Bye, Tonks!" calls Ron from the kitchen. "See you soon, then!"

"And send our love to Professor Lupin," pipes Hermione.

"Right, and feel free to pick on Charlie if you need to," Ron encourages.

"Oh, don't worry," Tonks murmurs, a bit evilly. "I most certainly will."

"Bye, Tonks!" Harry hugs her.

Draco walks with her to the door, pulling her aside once the others are out of earshot. "Can I ask you something?" he murmurs, shifting nervously. He doesn't wait for her to respond. "Listen - I need you to move my mother to your headquarters as well."

Tonks is visibly surprised. "With all the Muggle families? The Aunt Narcissa I remember wouldn't be too keen on that."

Draco twists his mouth darkly. "Yeah, well, better that than dead, right?"

"I reckon so," Tonks acknowledges, nodding slowly. "Are you that worried?"

"Well," Draco replies quite bluntly, "My father's in Azkaban, and I've disappeared off the face of the planet. If the Dark Lord wants to vent a little frustration about my family, where do you think he'll go?"

Tonks is silent for a moment, considering this.

"You're right, of course," she says finally. "But I'm not sure I can..." Her eyes flick upward to meet his. "I'll tell you what. I'll see what I can do."

Draco's shoulders sink with relief. "I would - I really appreciate that," he says, with the stilted awkwardness of someone not used to thanking people. He stares down at his feet.

"Hey," she says, patting him briefly on the shoulder before opening the door. "Don't think twice about it. We're cousins, right?"

"I guess so," he replies, with a tiny half-smile. He watches her disappear from the doorstep, takes a deep breath, and walks back into the house.

Chapter 9

Despite Ron's eagerness to resume using magic, several days pass before Tonks is prepared to conduct the Fidelius charm. She apparates to their doorstep after breakfast on Wednesday, a nondescript book tucked under her arm.

"So what do you say?" she greets them, casually depositing the book on the kitchen table. "Should we knock out the Fidelius? The sooner we do it, the sooner you lot can start using magic again. We just have to make sure there aren't any Muggles around, since I'll need to step outside, of course."

Ron runs to the window and groans with dismay: the Muggles next door have just begun filling up a plastic wading pool, and their two little girls are hopping in and out of the coils of the hose in their matching striped swimsuits. "Bloody Muggles – they'll be out there for hours, I expect," Ron speculates unhappily. The father, hose in hand, sees Ron watching and gives him a neighborly wave; Ron returns it halfheartedly, with an expression that Harry recognizes as more of a grimace than a smile.

"Bugger- that is bad timing," says Tonks, "Can't have them seeing me with my wand out. I reckon I'd be better off just coming back later tonight."

"Really?" Ron asks, his disappointment palpable.

"It's just a few hours, Ron," Hermione points out, rather unsympathetically. "And the time will probably pass quite quickly if we spend it doing research."

Ron, wholly uninspired by this prospect, sinks into a chair looking annoyed.

"Actually, that reminds me," Tonks says suddenly, summoning the book she had brought into her hand. "Here, Hermione, you'll like this."

Hermione examines it closely, reading the title aloud. "*Innovations in the Design and Structural Properties of Modern Cauldrons* – er, thanks, Tonks."

"Sounds like something Percy would like," mutters Ron.

"Oh, never mind what it's about," says Tonks dismissively. "It's the bookmark you'll be most interested in. I was thinking about what you said to me when we were at Hogwarts, about how you were worried you wouldn't have all the books you needed."

Harry and Ron exchange grins. "*Hermione* said that? Are you sure?" quips Ron.

"Quite. So, anyway," Tonks continues, with a flash of a smile at the boys, "I've been working with Filius- Professor Flitwick, and we've put together sort of a two-way portkey. The top of this bookmark will transport you directly to the library at Hogwarts, and the bottom will bring you back home."

"Wow, nice," says Ron, impressed despite himself.

Hermione lets out an ecstatic little squeal, and flings her arms around Tonks.

"I think she likes it," Harry observes.

"You can try it out now, if you'd like," Tonks offers, smiling. "Looks like the Muggles are still at it outside – I reckon it will be at least another hour before we can do the Fidelius."

"Or you could just use Potter's invisibility cloak," suggests Draco, speaking for the first time since Tonks' arrival. Harry and Ron stare at him, utterly flabbergasted.

"How do you know about that?" asks Harry. Draco shoots him a look suggesting that this is among the most ridiculous questions he has ever heard. "*Oh*- oh yeah," Harry mutters after a moment, unconsciously rubbing his nose.

"You know, that's actually a really good idea," Hermione acknowledges, with a disappointed glance at her portkey.

Tonks nods. "Invisibility cloak – that's right! In that case, we might as well get started now." She rummages briefly in the pocket of her trousers, and produces an object that looks to Harry like a Muggle compass. Tapping the center of it lightly with her wand, she stares at it for several seconds. "Right," she murmurs, "So, you lot need to stand in the exact center of the house, which happens to be...," she leads them slowly down the hall and into Harry's old bedroom, "right here."

Ron, Harry, Hermione, and Draco line up by the crib, regarding Tonks curiously as she continues to consult the compass-like device. She looks up at them. "Okay- a little bit to the left, then, and all facing each other, as close together as possible – you too, Draco." She puts her hand on her hip

impatiently when they hesitate. "Ron, seriously, suck it up. I'm not asking you to marry him – just stand a bit closer. Do you want this to work or not?"

She coaxes them closer until their feet are actually touching, before nodding with satisfaction. "Perfect. Now- mind if I summon that cloak, Harry?"

"Go right ahead," he replies, practically into Ron's mouth.

"Cheers, Harry. Now, if you'll just stay put, I'll cast the charm all around the perimeter of the house. Shouldn't take but a few minutes," she says brightly. "*Accio* invisibility cloak!"

The next several minutes are a study in awkwardness. Even Harry, Ron, and Hermione aren't accustomed to quite such close proximity, and they've certainly spent the better part of six years avoiding being even in the same room as Draco. Standing next to Draco is a particular trial for Harry, who finds himself alarmingly attuned to each point of contact between their bodies: feet, thighs, and upper arms. Even the ever-shifting expressions on Ron's face (so disturbingly close to Harry's own) aren't enough to distract him from the twitch of Malfoy's shoulder and the soapy smell that seems to cling to his hair.

It is Hermione whose nervous energy first channels itself into helpless giggles, but Ron and Harry quickly follow suit, and even Draco cracks a smile. Something about the ridiculousness of their current physical reality has the effect of large quantities of firewhisky. Like a rubber band stretched taut and released, the tension in the room evaporates.

"Hermione, are you getting shorter?" Ron asks, trying out her head for an armrest.

"No – about the same, actually," she replies sweetly, remarkably tolerant of the large, pale hand now dangling in front of her face. "You're probably confusing my height with Lavender's - not that the two of you spent any great amount of time standing up, from what I could tell."

"Hiyo," Harry contributes quietly, as Ron's ears turn apple-red.

"How is Lavender, by the way?" Hermione persists, eyes twinkling wickedly.

"Did you hear something, Harry?" Ron asks, drumming his fingers on Hermione's face.

"I *will* lick your hand," Hermione warns him.

"Really?" Harry wrinkles his nose. "I wouldn't."

"That's right. Let's all pick on Ron." He sighs heavily, withdrawing his arm from Hermione's head at last. "Well?" he demands, with a shrug directed at Draco. "I'm sure *you* have something to add."

Draco, though surprised to have his opinion solicited on the subject, is happy to contribute. "Well, Weasel, though there are many – *many* – things I could comment on right now, I think I'll use this opportunity to point out that the number of freckles you have is frightening from this distance. Offensive, even."

Harry and Hermione look immediately to Ron for his reaction, biting back grins.

Ron recovers surprisingly quickly. "Well, it's funny you noticed, Malfoy, because I wouldn't have expected you'd be able to see anything at all through those long, girlish eyelashes of yours. Will you flutter them for us?"

"I thought you'd never ask!"

"Wow- someone's been practicing," observes Hermione.

"And to great effect. I had no idea it would be so easy to make Potter blush."

"I am *not* blushing," Harry objects uselessly, feeling the blood rush to his face.

He is rescued by Tonks, who jauntily returns, looking quite satisfied. "All done! Consider yourselves very well hidden now."

Hermione and the boys fall rather awkwardly out of formation. "And we can begin using magic again?" she confirms. Tonks nods.

Ron groans with delight, and draws his wand carefully from his pocket. Stroking it fondly, he gazes mistily into the distance, clearly contemplating which spell to use first.

Hermione requires somewhat less time for deliberation. "Excellent," she briskly declares. "I'm off to do a bit of research, then. *Accio* bookmark!" A moment later, she's gone.

"All right, then- I'm off as well," Tonks informs the boys. Don't hesitate to owl me if you need anything."

"I think the only thing Ron needs is a bit of privacy. You and that wand want to get a room, then?" Harry suggests, eyebrows raised.

Draco sniggers appreciatively. A bit startled, Harry steals a momentary glance in his direction, before turning away, looking quite pleased with himself.

Tonks rolls her eyes, smiling good-naturedly. "Goodbye, boys."

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"*Accio* Mars bar!" yells the Weasel.

Draco, from his position on the couch, looks up in time to watch yet another Muggle candy bar whiz past his head.

"*Engorgio*," Weasley adds. "Ha!"

"Is that really necessary, Ron?" Potter murmurs, an amused lilt to his voice
"YUM."

Draco considers contributing to this exchange, but ultimately decides against it. To be honest, he still hasn't quite worked out to act around Weasley, Granger, and especially Potter. Technically, they're guarding his life, which means his familiar approach of biting hostility might, in this case, be contraindicated; and yet, they happen to be his sworn enemies, so gratitude and deference don't feel entirely natural either. Sarcastic banter feels like a nice compromise, but then, such banter often prompts laughter, and laughter suggests a burgeoning friendship – and the idea of becoming friends with Potter's set makes Draco's head spin.

"Oh, and *accio* Aero bar!" Another Muggle candy bar soars in from the kitchen, loop de loops around Draco's head, and finds Ron in the corridor.

Draco looks up from his book. "*Seriously*, Weasley?"

"Maybe we should give him one," Draco hears Potter suggest. A moment later, the Aero bar returns, landing with a purposeful thud on Draco's head.

"Don't you people eat *anything* besides chocolate?" Draco wonders aloud.

Draco hears one of them mutter something under his breath, causing the candy bar to politely unwrap itself, and hover expectantly above his mouth. He doesn't bother looking, but Draco senses them watching him in the doorway as he takes a tentative bite.

It is some consolation to Draco that, as unsure of himself as he feels with Potter and company, they clearly have no idea how to act around him either.

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"I think I'll take a nap," Ron announces, yawning and patting his distended, chocolate-filled stomach.

"Bully for you," says Harry. He wanders into the living room. "Hey, mind if I watch some telly?"

"Watch some what?" Draco barely glances up from his book.

"Television. The big, gray box."

"Oh," Draco replies, shrugging. "I wouldn't bother. I've been lying here all afternoon, and it hasn't done anything."

"Well, you haven't turned it on, have you?"

Draco turns the page and doesn't reply.

"Well, I'm turning it on now," Harry informs him crossly. "Move down, will you?"

"Why? There are, what, four other couches in here?"

"Yes, but you had to go and pick the one in front of the telly." He glares down at Draco. "And seeing as I own *all* of the furniture in here --"

"Fine," Draco murmurs silkily, drawing himself into a sitting position. Without giving Harry the satisfaction of even the slightest glance, he repositions himself on the far end of the couch, next to the armrest. Harry, looking somewhat disgruntled, moves to occupy the other end of the couch, as far from Draco as possible. "*Accio* remote," he says.

Draco gives a noticeable start when Harry turns on the power. "Who are they?" he asks, eyes narrowed suspiciously at the screen.

"I don't know. Muggle actors, I expect."

"Oh," Draco replies distastefully. "Muggles."

"No one's forcing you to watch."

Draco stretches languidly. "What if I want to?"

"Fine," replies Harry, staring moodily in the direction of the screen. Several minutes pass, in which the only sounds in the room are soft moans coming from the speakers.

"Potter, what is this?" Draco asks, after a moment.

Harry blinks, his eyes sliding into focus. "What- *oh*," he says, only just realizing what's on the screen. The majority of the blood in Harry's body rushes promptly to his cheeks. He's somehow managed to tune into a particularly raucous sex scene, involving a pair of American Muggles wearing only cowboy hats and boots. The woman's head is thrown back as she arrives at a deafening climax.

"Do they know we're watching them right now?" Draco asks, wholly absorbed in the drama onscreen.

"No," croaks Harry, shaking his head feverishly. "No, they're just actors. It's all-- none of it's-- it's just--" He fumbles for the remote, and changes the channel quickly to cooking show.

"I was watching that!" Draco protests, nonetheless leaning forward with interest as the featured chef makes a volcano out of a stack of onions.

"You know what? Why don't I leave you this," he tosses Draco the remote, "And you can watch whatever you want. I'm going to – I think I need a nap after all." Still blushing, he lifts himself off the couch and makes haste for the door.

He barely makes it three meters before colliding with Hermione, who has suddenly materialized in the doorway.

"Oops- sorry, Harry!" she exclaims, grasping his shoulders to steady herself. "I'm back from the library!"

"Yes, I noticed," remarks Harry.

"Well," she says, bouncing a little on the balls of her feet. "Aren't you going to ask me how it was?"

"How was it?" Harry obliges.

Hermione's face breaks into an enormous grin. "Very productive. I think I've figured out to destroy one of the horcruxes!"

"Seriously?" Harry asks, heart beating wildly. "I thought there weren't any books on horcruxes in the library."

"Yes, but there was plenty of information on removing dark curses from different kinds of objects in general, and the basic principles should hold. I actually think – well, I don't really want to get into it until Ron and Malfoy are down here—"

"I'm here," Draco immediately announces, peering over the back of the couch with interest.

"OI, RON!" hollers Harry, unwilling to wait for Ron to awaken in his own time.

A moment later, a tousled red head emerges from Harry's parents' bedroom. "What?" Ron asks, yawning. "Izzit dinnertime yet?"

"No, Hermione's figured out the horcruxes!"

"One of them," she corrects, flushing happily. "Well, almost two." She swings her rucksack off her back, and clutches it to her chest.

"Okay," Ron murmurs distractedly, rubbing his eyes. "That's nice. Well, I'll just be in here if you need me, then..."

"Ron, the horcruxes!"

"The horcruxes!" Ron exclaims, eyes snapping into focus. "That's brilliant! What did you find, Hermione?"

Hermione leads them to the kitchen table, calling over her shoulder for Draco to bring Ravenclaw's candlestick in from the living room. She, Harry, and Ron settle into chairs around the table, but Draco, after placing the candlestick rather near Ron, steps back and leans against the kitchen counter.

Hermione opens her rucksack and proceeds to remove several thick library books, which she stacks on the table with great satisfaction. "All of these books give examples of candlesticks that had curses removed from them,"

she informs them, "And in every case, the way they did it was by lighting the candle and burning it down."

"That's it?" asks Harry.

"Well," Hermione adds, "With a curse as complex as this one, we'll probably have to maintain a physical connection with the candlestick as the candle burns down, and there might be some complications..."

"Well, yeah," Ron points out, "But as long as it's me or Malfoy that does it, it shouldn't be a problem, right?"

Hermione hesitates. "Well, we can try that..."

Ron's eyes narrow. "It sounds like there's a 'but' in there."

"Yes – well, don't worry about it. Let's try it like you said and go from there. Harry, do you want to light it?"

Harry obliges, touching the wick of the candle lightly with his wand. "*Incendio*," he mutters. A tiny flame flickers momentarily at the top of the wick, before extinguishing itself.

"Wait, try again," Ron suggests, "I'll hold it this time." He wraps his hands firmly around the shaft of the candlestick, one resting on top of the other. "Okay, try it now."

Harry lights another flame, which lasts for several seconds this time, but nonetheless flickers out before the wax even has time to consider melting. The process is repeated with Draco, to similar effect.

Hermione bites her lip, nodding slowly. "I thought that might happen. This is such a powerful curse, and..."

"Is there a way to weaken it, then?" Harry asks anxiously.

"I don't know. I don't think so," Hermione rubs her cheek thoughtfully. "But there is a way for us to strengthen our powers against it, and hopefully be able to do some real damage." She places her hands, palms down, on the stack of books. "The general consensus in the literature is that a powerful dark curse can only be defeated if we work in line with the properties of the cursed object itself."

"What does that even mean?" asks Ron.

"I think it means we need to consider the symbolic qualities of the object – a candlestick in this case, and borrow power from those properties to help us expel the curse."

"Well," asks Harry slowly, eyebrows still knitted with confusion. "What are the, er, symbolic properties of candlesticks?"

"Wisdom, enlightenment, and insight," contributes Draco, "Right?"

"Well, yes," replies Hermione, looking up at him with mild surprise. "Exactly – and even more so, because this candlestick belonged to Ravenclaw." She looks down suddenly, and begins rooting around in her bag.

"That's really interesting," says Harry, "But I still don't see how that will help us – practically speaking."

"Well," Hermione says. She pulls a small container of murky yellow liquid out of her rucksack, and places it on the table.

Ron regards the liquid with suspicion. "What do we need Essence of Murtlap for?"

Hermione's cheeks redden, and she avoids Ron's eyes. "I think... I think I need to be the one to hold the candlestick. I'm not saying I'm wise, or that I'm, you know, smarter than anyone—"

"You are," Harry says, matter of factly.

She blushes all the more deeply. "No, I'm not. It's just- that is sort of the role I tend to take with you guys, which means I really think I need to have a hand in destroying this horcrux. I think it's the only way..." she trails off, catching sight of Harry and Ron's expressions.

"Have you gone *mental*?" asks Ron fervently.

"Yeah, Hermione, I don't think so," Harry says firmly. "I understand what you're trying to say, I really do, but there's a curse on the candlestick that's designed to hurt Muggle-borns. You saw what it did to Ron's hand, and he's a pureblood!"

"Yes, and that's why I brought the Essence of Murtlap!" Hermione insists. "I'll take my hands off the candlestick and put it in the Murtlap every second, if I need to. It heals just about everything, remember!"

"Yeah, but this is really powerful dark magic!" argues Ron, "What if it doesn't work? Remember Dumbledore's hand!"

"Of course I remember!" Hermione says, looking close to tears. "I just think we need to try it. If we can't destroy the horcruxes, trust me, my hands are the least of our worries!"

"Actually," Draco interjects calmly, "It's not a bad idea."

"Oh, like we're going to listen to you! You could care less if it hurts her!"

"No," replies Draco, with a hint of defiance, "I just think Granger's old enough to decide for herself if it's worth it, is all. And clearly, she's smarter than you."

Hermione blushes, but Ron continues to glare at him mutinously.

Draco shrugs. "Look, Weasley. I happen to know quite a bit about dark magic, and she's right. If you want to destroy the horcrux, she's probably your best bet. But if you'd rather just leave it..."

"That's not what I said! I just think Hermione's the last one who needs to touch that- that thing! It's evil!"

"I can't think of another way, Ron," Hermione says softly. "Can we just try it?"

Ron is at an utter loss for an answer.

It is Harry who finally makes the decision. "Just- just keep that Murtlap right by you, okay? And promise me you'll stop if you need to."

"I promise," Hermione whispers, her mouth trembling slightly before she draws it resolutely closed.

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"Are you ready?" asks Harry, catching Hermione's eyes. She nods determinedly. "Okay, then. *Incendio*." He lets his wand hover over the candle, a small flame stretching eagerly towards its wick.

Hermione takes a deep breath, and with steely resolve, carefully wraps both hands around the candlestick. Harry watches, heart pounding, as her face immediately contorts with pain.

"Light it now," Draco whispers urgently, nudging him. "The longer you wait, the longer she'll have to hold it." Harry nods, horrified, and quickly touches the wick with his wand.

For one pregnant moment, nothing happens; then, slowly, the black wax of the candle begins to melt and drip down the candle's shaft. "It's working!" Harry exclaims. Hermione nods, eyes squeezed closed, tears rolling quickly down her cheeks.

"I'm so- sorry!" she gasps suddenly, wrenching her hands from the candlestick. "I can't- I can't anymore..." She plunges them into the Murtlap, sighing with relief. "Okay," she murmurs, after a few moments. "I'm ready, let's- *oh no!*"

There is no need for her to explain the reason for her dismay; they've all noticed it, too. From the moment Hermione had removed her hands from the candlestick, the melted wax from the candle had begun to reform, stretching smoothly upwards and undoing all her work.

"What will we do?" she asks, a panicked sob creeping into her voice. "I'm not sure I can keep my hands there continuously, but if I take them off--"

Harry thinks quickly. "Could you put one hand on there, and keep switching them?" he asks.

"Maybe," she replies in a small voice. "We might as well try it."

She wraps her right hand around the base of the candlestick, and Harry promptly re-lights the wick. The wax begins to melt steadily downwards, though more slowly than before. Hermione's red face is a mess of tears, and she appears to be counting under her breath. Ron, looking unusually pale, is rubbing her back in slow circles and whispering words of encouragement in her ear.

"Have to switch," she croaks after several seconds, forcing her left hand to take a turn on the candlestick, while sinking her right hand into the Murtlap. An uncomfortable lump forms in Harry's throat as he watches her grip the candlestick's shaft with her left hand for as long as she can bear it. She switches them again without complaining, but Harry can't help but notice that her right hand hasn't fully healed by the time it is called upon to take its next turn.

The minutes pass exquisitely slowly. "Switch," Hermione gasps over and over again, the Essence of Murtlap healing her less and less thoroughly

every time. Harry notices that a few fat tears have begun their descent down Ron's cheeks as well; he wipes them hastily away with the heel of one hand, while continuing to rub Hermione's back and the nape of her neck with the other. The candle is only half gone, but if she stops now, she'll only have to do it all over again later.

Harry clutches the edge of the table and inhales raggedly, the lump in his throat thickening. Hermione has begun sobbing quietly, though Harry can tell she's trying hard not to make a sound. She switches her hands again, her fingers trembling so violently that she nearly spills the Murtlap. Harry's stomach twists with guilt. So this is Hermione's reward for being wise and insightful, among all of the other things she is. Harry might as well have cast the Cruciatus on her and been done with it.

"Just a couple more turns," Ron murmurs, pressing his forehead into her hair. "You're doing so great." Hermione nods wordlessly, tears running into her mouth.

The candle is almost entirely melted, the tear-like drips of black wax disappearing upon making contact with the silver shaft, rather than hardening against it. Harry watches the flame sink gradually downward, moving in aching slow motion, until it finally burns out. For a moment, the candlestick seems to glow from within, before turning back to dull, tarnished silver and falling on its side with a loud clatter. Hermione prods it once more with her finger.

"I think we did it," she says, smiling wearily at Harry.

"You did it," Harry murmurs, putting forth his best effort at returning her smile. The sight of Hermione's hands, burnt and bleeding nearly beyond recognition, inspires heavy, unrelenting waves of guilt. She doesn't protest when Ron submerges them in the Essence of Murtlap, and manages to guide her into the living room with one hand supporting the underside of the container.

Harry remains at the table, staring dazedly at the old, tarnished candlestick that was once a horcrux. A hand rests lightly on his shoulder, and he realizes with a jolt that he isn't alone in the room.

"I'll contact Nymphadora and tell her we need a healer," Draco says matter of factly. Then, as quickly as if it was never there at all, the hand is gone.

Chapter 10

"Absolutely not. You heard what Tonks said – we're taking the day off."

"Oh, come off it, Ron," Hermione glowers up at him, one heavily bandaged hand on her hip, and the other clutching a massive, brown book. "I hardly think Tonks would have a problem with me reading."

"Oh, you can read," Ron allows, "But it has to be for pleasure. You have to take a break, Hermione! Harry, am I right?"

"Sorry, Hermione, but yeah, that's pretty much what Tonks--"

"But this is for pleasure!" she insists, chin wrinkling stubbornly. "And I'll be reading it outside. It will be extremely relaxing."

"I'm sorry," remarks Ron, plucking the book from her hands, "but *Developments in Disenchantment: Modern Methods for Cracking Ancient Curses* does not qualify as pleasure reading. Go find something that's less blatantly about destroying the horcruxes."

"Fine," she snaps, snatching the book back from him and storming down the corridor.

"She's cute, isn't she?" Ron says, smiling fondly.

Draco joins them in the kitchen a moment later, setting a towel and his own book down on the table before foraging for breakfast.

"*Quidditch Through the Ages*," Ron observes, nodding his approval. "See, that's literature."

"I love that book," remarks Harry, settling in at the table with a bowl of cereal. He slides it closer and studies the back cover. "I miss Quidditch," he says after a moment, with a hint of a sigh.

"Me too," says Draco.

Ron nods fervently. "I know."

Hermione, who has returned in time to witness this fit of nostalgia, lingers in the doorway, torn between irritation and amusement. Ron glances up at her. "Okay, let's see what you've come up with." She holds up the book for inspection. "*The Twelve Uses of Dragons' Blood*- and that's the lightest

reading you could find?" He shakes his head. "I don't know, Hermione- I was thinking something more along the lines of--"

"It's by Dumbledore!" she reminds him, her voice tinged with exasperation.

"Yeah, and he's just known for writing cheerful, beachy novels, isn't he?" He shakes his head sternly at her. "I'll let it slide this time, but if I catch you taking notes..."

"*Ron*," Hermione says pointedly, holding up hands that are far too thickly bandaged to properly hold a quill.

Ron opens his mouth, but doesn't reply, unsettled as usual by the sight of her bandages.

Hermione's expression softens at once. "Oh, Ron, don't - I'm fine," she insists, touching his arm lightly. "They don't even hurt anymore." Ron nods, and they exchange a prolonged, wordless glance. His ears and the back of his neck are quite pink.

Harry clears his throat. "All right, well, I think I'm just going to head on out there, then..."

"Not without sun-blocking potion," Hermione says, unlocking her gaze from Ron's with a start. "There's a bottle on the counter for you to use – all three of you." She looks them over, shaking her head with amazement. "You lot are literally the palest three people I've ever met."

"Don't you need some, too? I can help you put it on," offers Ron.

"I guess so – if you don't mind, thank you," Hermione replies, her casual tone rather offset by her ever-deepening blush. "Just my face, then."

"But won't you get burnt when you take off your sweater?" he asks hopefully.

Hermione regards him with unveiled amusement. "Oh, I think I'll be leaving it on, actually. It's a bit breezy out there."

"I wouldn't push your luck, Weasley," Draco advises, happily anointing himself with the potion. He tosses the bottle in Harry's direction, gathers his book and towel, and dismisses himself with an elegant little shrug. "Guess I'll see you out there."

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It's quite cozy lying atop a soft, yellow blanket, spread out across the springy grass of the front lawn. "There is extra room, Malfoy, if you want to join us," Hermione offers stiffly, feeling vaguely guilty that he's shunted off to the side on his own towel.

"Not necessary," he replies archly, although he isn't quite able to conceal his surprise at being asked.

"Suit yourself," she replies, rolling onto her stomach and folding open the cover of her book. Ron, stretched out and supine beside her, yawns heartily and closes his eyes. Harry, propped up on one elbow, glances briefly at Draco before turning back to the comic book laid open beside him. A light breeze tickles through the heavy warmth, ruffling his hair and the book's pages.

The morning's peaceful stillness is promptly interrupted by a blitz of shrieks and giggles from next door.

"Bloody Muggles," groans Ron. "They never rest."

"Hush, Ron- what if they hear you!"

Harry looks up from his comic. "But the Fidelius works on Muggles, right?"

"Well, yes," Hermione concedes, "But these Muggles already knew we were here."

"So you think it wouldn't affect them?" Harry asks doubtfully. "I don't know..."

The conversation is effectively ended when the elder of the two neighbor girls walks decisively over to the edge of Ron, Harry, and Hermione's blanket. "Hi," she says, beaming down at them.

Ron opens one eye. "Hullo," he mutters.

"Are you sleeping?"

"Yes."

"He is not," says Hermione firmly. "How do you do? I'm Hermione." Carefully shutting her book, she hoists herself into a sitting position.

"What happened to your hands?" the girl asks, staring at Hermione's bandages with unabashed interest.

"Oh, well, I had a bit of an accident in the kitchen," Hermione explains vaguely.

"I've got a boo-boo as well," the girl confides, pointing proudly at a band-aid stretched across her thigh, "On my femur."

"It's quite big," Hermione says respectfully. "How did you get it?"

"Emma bit me," she explains happily, with a careless gesture at her younger sister. Emma, hearing her name, ambles shyly toward them, peering at Hermione from behind her sister's back.

"Hi, Emma," greets Hermione. Emma regards her impassively, one finger in her mouth. Hermione turns her attention once more to the older sister. "And what's your name?"

"Katherine Marie Neals," she replies formally. "Are they all your boyfriends?"

Hermione blushes slightly. "No- they're my friends, though. This is Ron, and that's Harry, and that's Mal-- Draco."

"Draco?" Katherine exclaims. "That's your name?"

"What about it?" Draco asks crossly.

"So, it looks like you're all dressed for swimming," Hermione changes the subject.

"We're swimming *and* using the sprinkler today," Katherine informs them grandly. "Mum's setting it up."

"I want him to swim with us!" Emma whispers, tugging at the ruffles on her sister's swimsuit. She points her saliva-wet finger at Harry.

"Emma! I think you love that boy!"

Emma blushes magnificently and crouches down behind Katherine's legs. Harry bites back a smile, looking quite flattered.

"Do you want to swim with us?" Katherine asks them.

"I wish I could," Hermione says, holding up her bandaged hands with a wry smile.

"And I'm allergic," Draco says regretfully.

"Oh, to water?" Hermione raises her eyebrows. "Shower much, do you?" Draco merely smirks and shrugs.

"I'm up for a swim," volunteers Harry, to Emma's unconcealed delight.

Ron snorts quietly. "Finally, a girl he can relate to – of course, she's five."

"Well, I think it's sweet," Hermione murmurs loftily, "I find it very attractive when a guy is good with children."

"Hmph," says Ron, "Who said I'm not good with children? I happen to be extremely childish."

"I don't think anyone would dare deny that," Hermione acknowledges, grinning into her book.

"I'll have a swim!" Ron announces suddenly, startling Katherine a full meter backwards.

Emma and Katherine's mum, dutifully filling up the plastic wading pool, looks on with quiet amusement.

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"Look at them. Not a muscle between them," Hermione observes affectionately, as Harry and Ron strip down to their shorts.

"Not like me," Draco remarks, puffing up his chest and patting it grandly.

"Oh, I'm sure," she replies.

A brief transaction of tentative smiles occurs between them, followed by a hanging, uncertain silence. Both Hermione and Draco turn awkwardly back to their books. Hermione reads until the end of the chapter, before shifting onto her back and laying the book to rest on her stomach.

"Hey, Granger," Draco mutters after a moment.

"Yes?" she replies, turning towards him. His eyes are fixed determinedly upwards; he appears to be deeply interested in the shifting clouds.

"I suppose I should apologize for calling you a Mudblood. I do feel slightly bad about that."

"Oh!" she murmurs, surprised. "You do?"

He chances a quick sideways glance at her, a hint of a blush rising in his cheeks. She has sat up quite abruptly, and is staring at him with contemplative interest.

"I'm sorry, too," she replies finally, "for slapping you in the face. Third year. Actually," she reconsiders, "I'm not sorry at all. But I probably wouldn't do it again, unless – unless you deserved it." She seems quite unsettled.

A piercing shriek tugs Hermione's attention back to Harry, Ron, and their new Muggle companions.

"KATE!" howls a thoroughly drenched Emma, strands of dark blond hair clinging slickly to her face. She stomps her sandaled foot with untempered wrath, but quickly retreats to Harry, flinging her arms around his legs. Katherine, having allied herself with Ron, returns to him, holding a now-empty plastic bucket triumphantly aloft. Ron acknowledges her success with an enthusiastic high five and a hip-bumping sort of victory dance.

"He is ridiculous," Hermione proclaims, shaking her head incredulously.

Draco nods. "I've always thought so. Watch: Potter will enact his revenge any moment now, I'm sure."

Sure enough, within minutes, the steady arc of water from the sprinkler abruptly stops. Harry spots Hermione watching him and winks.

"You don't think he's stopped the water with magic, do you?" Hermione asks, mildly alarmed. "He wouldn't do that in front of the Muggles..."

"Hard to say," murmurs Draco, straining for a better look. "Oh, it's fine, he just has his foot on it - the green snake thing."

"He's standing on the hose?" Hermione watches with interest. "I wonder what he's – *oh*, okay."

Ron, having leaned close to the sprinkler head to investigate the malfunction, has just received a heavy blast of water in his face.

Draco watches as Harry, beaming, scoops Emma up and places her atop his shoulders, where she lifts her arms in a celebratory "V" formation. Watching Ron attempt to mop off his wet face with his equally wet hands, Harry makes an undoubtedly smug comment that Draco can't quite hear, and throws his head back, laughing merrily.

"What are you smiling about?" Hermione asks, with a trace of amusement.

Draco starts, blushing faintly. "I don't know," he lies, "Nothing."

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The afternoon winds wetly to a close. Katherine and Emma, despite explosive protests, are bundled in towels and called away to dinner. Hermione and the boys follow suit shortly thereafter, Harry opting for a shower and a change of clothes rather than a simple drying charm.

Harry showers and dresses quickly, but by the time he emerges from his parents' room, Hermione, Ron, and Draco have all gone missing. Assuming their disappearance to be food-related, he sets off toward the kitchen, pausing to investigate a wide band of light streaming from the hall bathroom's open door. Peeking inside, he finds Draco leaning closely into the mirror and nodding appreciatively at his reflection.

"You look pleased with yourself," comments Harry, fingers grazing the doorframe.

Draco seems momentarily startled, but ultimately unperturbed by his arrival. "I was just admiring my new freckles. I've got at least two, right there," he points to his nose, "Can you see them? Here, look—"

In one swift movement, Draco stretches towards him, until their faces are only centimeters apart. Harry stares uncomfortably at his nose.

"See them?"

"Er, I think so..." Harry's eyes flick upward, and for a moment, he finds himself looking, quite unexpectedly, into Draco's eyes. Startled, he takes a sudden step backwards, feeling a rising heat in his cheeks that has precious little to do with sunburn.

"Nice, aren't they?"

"I'm surprised you think so," he replies, too loudly. "You never seemed particularly fond of Ron's."

"Yes, but that was before I found out I could get them," Draco explains. He taps the tip of his nose twice with his index finger, looking very smug and satisfied. "I really think they suit me."

"They're okay," Harry says stiffly, eyes pointedly focused somewhere beyond Draco's left shoulder. Draco stares at him for a moment, a hint of a smile pulling from the corners of his mouth.

Harry drums his fingers awkwardly along the doorframe. "All right, well," he declares suddenly, "I think I hear Ron and Hermione in the kitchen, so..."

"Okay," Draco replies with a shrug.

"Right, well, see you later, then. Enjoy the freckles."

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"Well, why don't you ask me, and see what I'd say?"

Hermione leans against the kitchen cabinets, her hands resting lightly on the edge of the counter. She looks Ron over, all long limbs and freckles and pale eyelashes, and skin gone a bit pink from being in the sun.

"Well, okay. Do you want to go on a date with me?"

"All right," she says, quite formally. "What did you have in mind?"

He rubs the back of his neck, looking inordinately pleased and a bit stunned. "I –" he exhales nervously. "Wow. Okay. Well, what about Midsummer's Eve tomorrow night, the bonfire?"

"I'm not sure it counts as a date if we were planning on going already," she points out, but she is smiling, beaming actually.

Ron grins back at her. "I'll make it feel like a date."

"Okay," she replies, feeling strangely out of breath. Ron opens his mouth, but then promptly shuts it again, staring down at her. He looks both self-assured and sheepish, and he's Ron, and he's just asked her out on a date. He's like a book, she reflects, whose familiar paragraphs reveal something new in the subtext upon every reread - but then her books generally don't

make her feel quite so miserable and confused and storm-tossed with longing. And excited: electrically, indecently excited. A date. She isn't sure if her body wants to laugh or throw up.

"Hermione," Ron says, voice cracking slightly, and then he touches her cheek suddenly, softly, with the tips of his fingers. Her heart pounds wildly, and she feels something twist below her navel, rather like a portkey, but then not entirely. Not at all, actually. He brushes aside the strand of hair that never stays in her ponytail, and then his thumb is on her cheekbone, and his other hand is, inexplicably, holding her book. *The Twelve Uses of Dragons' Blood*. She's not sure he even realizes.

He leans in ever closer towards her, and her eyes slide shut, and the room is white with silence, and then –

"Oh my God, I – wow. I'm sorry. I'm --" Harry looks thoroughly miserable. "I'm just gonna go. Sorry," he repeats, a bit hysterically, turning on his heel and closing the kitchen door abruptly behind him.

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"Someone's in a hurry," observes Draco, as he is nearly plowed over by a very distracted Harry Potter.

"Oh!" Harry says in surprise, placing both hands straight ahead to steady himself. Draco glances down at his chest and back up at Harry again, raising his eyebrows. He watches with interest as Harry, following his gaze, turns an astonishingly deep shade of red.

"Oh God," he stammers, "That's your--"

"My chest, yes," supplies Draco.

Harry removes his hands at once.

"Are you all right?" Draco asks.

"Yes," Harry replies, sighing heavily. "I just--" He shakes his head slowly, and walks up behind one of the couches, resting his elbows on top of it. He buries his head in his hands. "I hate today," he murmurs finally, his voice a bit muffled.

"What's there to hate about it? You got to fondle my chest, didn't you? Best day of your life, really."

Harry makes a choked sort of noise that may or may not contain a trace of a laugh. Draco walks over next to him and leans backwards against the couch. He looks down at the rumpled head of black hair beside him.

"Well?" he asks, "Are you going to tell me what's the matter, or am I going to have to go into the kitchen and ask Granger and Weasley?"

Harry draws his head up with a yank. "Don't go in there," he advises, shaking his head fervently. Sighing, he pulls himself reluctantly into a full standing position, and turns around to lean his back against the couch.

"So, I take it you caught them snogging. What's the big deal, really?"

"Well, they hadn't started yet, but..." Harry glances sideways at Draco with a tiny, wry smile. "Okay. Imagine if you walked into your dormitory, and found Crabbe and Goyle in the corner together, *just* about to--"

"Impossible," declares Draco, "They're completely asexual."

"I'm really glad to hear that," Harry admits. "But, okay, say you caught, like, Zabini with Millicent Bulstrode."

"Nope. Huge lesbian."

"Your parents, then!" Harry says exasperatedly. "You get the idea, right? They're my two best mates! And it's not like I didn't see this coming or anything, but it's weird, isn't it?"

"I don't know," replies Draco. "Could have been weirder. You could have got snogged by Pansy Parkinson, for instance."

"Huh." Harry is rendered momentarily speechless. "I suppose that does put things into perspective," he concedes finally, with a flash of a smile. "I take it that happened to you?"

"I try not to think about it."

Harry nods sympathetically. "I'd try not to either. Although," he murmurs, turning his head partway toward Draco, "I'm a bit surprised to hear - I don't know." He turns abruptly away. "I guess I thought you fancied her."

"*Pansy?*" Draco laughs. "Good God, no. I'm - well. Let's just say the people I fancy have very little in common with Pansy Parkinson."

"Fair enough," Harry says. He pauses before adding, quite softly, "Who do you fancy, then?"

Draco turns toward Harry, carefully studying his profile: the stubborn mouth, the chin, the thick eyelashes that graze the lenses of his glasses.

"What makes you think I fancy anyone?" Draco says at last, pulling away from the couch quite suddenly. He exits the living room without looking back.

Chapter 11

The sun is barely beginning to spill in through the living room windows when a soft tapping sound nudges Draco out of sleep. Languidly, he stretches, his gray eyes still a bit dreamy and unfocused. Rubbing them tenderly with the tips of his fingers, he pulls himself up on his knees and peers over the back of the couch.

The noise is coming from Hermione, who is sitting oddly cross-legged in the swiveling computer chair. She stares raptly at the glowing screen. Her newly unbandaged right hand carefully cups the bit of oval plastic off to the side, though she frequently lifts her fingers to tap against it, or removes them entirely to skate them along the grid of raised squares in front of her. It is all beyond Draco's rather limited grasp of Muggle technology. Occasionally, she pauses thoughtfully and takes a long sip from her mug.

"What are you doing?" he asks her. She starts noticeably and removes her hand from the plastic oval with a jolt, swiveling around to face him.

"Malfoy, you scared me!" She rakes her hands absently through her curls, scooping them into a ponytail and then promptly releasing them. "Well, good morning. I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No, not really," Draco lies.

"Oh, good." She sighs, looking relieved. "Sorry for the noise. I was just checking on one thing here, but I'm actually about to take the Portkey back to Hogwarts."

"Which one are you working on?" Draco asks, yawning.

Hermione smiles slightly. "Hufflepuff's cup - I've nearly figured it out."

"Have you?" Draco is impressed, despite himself.

"Well, I think so. I just need – well, maybe one or two more books," she says, "But the real reason I'm going to Hogwarts is to borrow a few things from Slughorn's supply closet."

"For what?" Draco, stretching lazily, slides off the couch. "Some sort of potion, then, I take it?" He walks over to her and peers over her shoulder at the computer screen. "What's a quaich?"

"Oh, that," Hermione glances briefly at the computer screen. "That's – well, that's what I think the horcrux..." She scratches her chin distractedly, and then taps her lip with the tip of her finger. "You know," she remarks suddenly, "You're good at potions, aren't you?"

"A bit," Draco replies, oddly pleased that she remembered.

" Maybe you could take a look at what I've come up with. In theory, it should work, but I've never created my own recipe before – well it's not my own, exactly, more like combining a few others, but still. It probably wouldn't hurt to have a second opinion before I go for the supplies."

"Okay," agrees Draco, "But why don't I also- I could come with you. I'm fantastic at stealing supplies from Slughorn, actually."

"Borrowing, not stealing," Hermione reminds him, somewhat uncertainly. She frowns. "I don't know. It's one thing if I get caught, but you're supposed to be dead. If someone saw you..."

"Why don't we take Potter's cloak, then? I don't see how he could mind it if we come back ready to destroy another horcrux."

"That is true," Hermione concedes. "Well, I guess- I don't really see why you couldn't come. Why don't you get dressed, and I'll find the cloak, and we'll leave from the kitchen as soon as you're ready. And I suppose I should leave some sort of note..."

"Excellent," declares Draco, turning to gather his clothes. He carries them jauntily to the hall bathroom, too pleased with himself to hear Hermione mutter a quiet spell, her wand pointed firmly at the computer.

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"Quiet down here, isn't it," Ron yawningly observes, "Did we wake up before them?"

Harry rubs his eyes, knocking his glasses slightly askew. "I don't know. I guess so." Readjusting them, he opens the refrigerator with a lazy flick of his wand, and summons a pat of butter for his toast. Ron, skilled Keeper that he is, intercepts the butter easily, rubbing it onto his own toast with savage delight.

He takes a hearty bite. "I love waking up before Hermione. She always gets so surprised." He smiles fondly, crumbs tucked along the edges of his mouth.

"I think she's usually just surprised to see what we've managed to pull together for breakfast," Harry replies, watching Ron lick remnants of the butter off his fingers. "Surprised and horrified. By the way, you're disgusting."

"I know," Ron agrees, beaming.

"Talking of breakfast," Harry murmurs after a thoughtful moment. "We don't have any Mars bars left, do we?"

"Sadly, no." Ron sighs. "It'll have to be Aero again. Or is today the day we try the Yorkie?"

"I think today might be the day," acknowledges Harry.

Ron happily summons two bars from the cabinet, tossing one to Harry, who peels back the wrapper and breaks off one segment.

"Anyway, it's quite late for her, isn't it?" Ron says between mouthfuls, "Usually she's down for breakfast by ten, unless she's reading in her room or showering, and she's not. I checked."

"Oh, you check in on her showering?" Harry asks, eyebrows tugging upward.

"No-- Merlin! I said she's *not* showering!" Ron's face, Harry notes with interest, has suddenly adopted the color scheme of the Gryffindor common room.

"Oh, okay," Harry replies placidly, taking an experimental bite of toast and chocolate together. "You would know." He sets his plate down on the table, observing that Hufflepuff's cup has been placed there as a sort of centerpiece. He reaches for it instinctively, and finds inside its mouth a folded sheet of parchment. Swallowing another chunk of chocolate, he opens the parchment curiously and reads it to himself.

"Well," he remarks suddenly, "Looks like we didn't wake up before Hermione after all. She and Malfoy have taken the Portkey to Hogwarts already." He hands the note to Ron, who is looking over the table at him with surprise.

"Seriously?" He scans the note, shaking his head slowly. "What'd she bring Malfoy along for?" Wrinkling his nose unpleasantly, he tosses the note back inside the cup.

Harry shrugs. "I don't know. She needed help, I guess, and we were still asleep." He stares moodily at the shining, two-handled cup in the center of the table. "We're really letting her do all the work, aren't we?"

"Well, she does like that stuff, Harry," Ron points out, "Research and all. Weird girl." He scratches his chin abstractedly. "Though I reckon we have got a bit lazy, maybe..."

"I'm the one, really," Harry says miserably. "Letting her do all the work. This was supposed to be my job."

Ron rests his head on his hands and regards him seriously. "Our job, you mean. We set out to do this together."

Harry is uncomfortable. "And so I've gone ahead and left it all to Hermione! Even Draco is doing more than I am!"

"*Draco?*" asks Ron, giving Harry a curious look.

"Malfoy," Harry corrects, blushing. "What does it matter? The important thing is I'm going to start doing my fair share. Starting now."

"Now?" Ron raises his eyebrows doubtfully. "You're only halfway through with your Yorkie! *Delicious*, by the way."

"I know," Harry sighs, "It's too good not to finish. But as soon we're done, what do you say we work on the cup for a bit, see if we can't- you know. Maybe we can destroy it before they even get back."

"I don't know, Harry. How will we know where to begin?"

"We'll just- I don't know. We'll just try stuff." Harry's eyes are blazing with determination. "I mean, we're both wizards, and we've got wands. We might as well experiment, right?" He pauses, half a smile haunting the corners of his mouth. "Wow, that came out sounding dirty, didn't it?"

"Oh, no, not at all. Two wizards experimenting with each other's wands... maybe a pearly white Patronus shooting out the end... I mean, how is that dirty?"

"I... yeah," says Harry. He shakes his head, smiling. "Right. Anyway. The cup."

"The cup," Ron repeats.

"I guess we should just, you know..." Harry points his wand determinedly at the cup. "*Confringo!*" he cries, wand quivering slightly in his hand. The folded note from Hermione promptly shoots into the air and explodes, but the cup remains entirely unscathed. "Huh," Harry murmurs, perplexed. "That didn't work at all."

"Maybe we should try melting it," suggests Ron. He jabs his wand into the center of the cup. "*Incendio!*" A few small flames appear in the cup's mouth, flickering towards the edges.

Harry stares distractedly at the dancing flames for several moments. "You don't actually think it's going to heat up enough to melt it, do you?"

"No," Ron sighs, "not really." He cups his hands around the horcrux. "It doesn't even feel warm."

"This is stupid," Harry declares, drumming his fingers impatiently.

Ron takes another bite of chocolate and doesn't reply. They both stare unhappily at the cup, chins cupped in hands.

"Maybe we should try getting the locket open instead," Harry says finally. He summons it onto the table in front of them. "Okay, let's – well. Do you remember what we tried that summer when we found this at Grimmauld Place?"

"We tried everything," Ron says glumly. "I mean, it's got to be sealed by some really insane dark magic. We'll never get it open."

Harry studies the locket closely, letting the chain dangle over his wrist. He rubs his fingers along its front and back, and then around its edges. An S-shaped clasp on the side holds the locket firmly together. He sighs. "I don't know. Maybe if we both did *Alohomora* at the same time..." He shrugs doubtfully.

"Maybe," replies Ron, looking equally unconvinced. They nonetheless ready their wands and synchronize the charm with a count of three. The locket thumps twice on the table, but the clasp doesn't budge. Harry buries his head in his arms and lets out a muffled moan.

"You sound like Myrtle," Ron informs him crossly. Harry, not bothering to lift his head, makes a rude hand gesture in Ron's general direction.

Then, suddenly, Harry slams his hands down on the table and lifts his head at once. "The Chamber of Secrets!" he breathes.

Ron looks at him as if he's just gone mental.

Harry nods eagerly. "The entrance, remember? Parseltongue – what if I – the *clasp*--"

"Huh," says Ron. He blinks. "Yeah, no, that's actually not a bad idea!" He grasps excitedly at the edge of the table. "Well, go on, then."

Harry exhales at once and nods, mouth set firmly in a straight line. "Okay, here I go, I'm," and then his tongue thrusts suddenly upward, and he is speaking in Parseltongue. The S-shape clasp slides and wriggles in a way that is very unlike metal, and the locket snaps open at once. Ron yelps excitedly, and runs round the table to peer over Harry's shoulder.

The locket rests now in the palm of Harry's hand, its two oval sides joined in the middle by a tiny hinge. "No picture inside," observes Ron.

"No, just --" He frowns, peering down at the smooth surfaces, twin pools of silvery-white. "I mean, it almost looks like a pensieve. Do you think it's safe to touch it?"

"Oh, *yeah*," replies Ron, "I'm sure it is. You Know Who being such a safety-conscious bloke and all."

Harry laughs. "Right, okay, probably not safe, but eventually we're going to have to – I guess. Maybe if we touched it with a wand..."

"Sounds reasonable," says Ron – and then, bravely, "I'll do it." Calmly, carefully, he skims the locket's pristine surface with the tip of his wand. Harry watches with bated breath. The pensieve-like substance shudders slightly and becomes perfectly clear: a tiny oval window revealing nothing. Oddly, the surface of the locket's other side clears suddenly as well.

"So, I guess me and Hermione are supposed to destroy this one," Ron says, nodding resolutely.

"What do you mean?" asks Harry.

"Well, it has our faces right there on either side, right? Seems pretty straightforward..."

"No," Harry says bemusedly, "I don't see them at all. The surface looks totally clear to me."

"Really?"

"Yeah, but maybe if I touched it with my wand..." He proceeds to do so, and Ron watches over his shoulder.

"Do you see anything?" Ron inquires. "Now I just see, I mean it's blank now, like, I guess, glass or something."

"Yeah," Harry nods slowly. "I see myself, and..."

"Huh. Well, maybe it just shows the face of whoever's wand touched it... and then the other side showed *Hermione* because--" He cuts himself off, suddenly, blushing furiously.

"Because of what, do you think?" Harry asks softly, after a moment. He is staring, not at Ron, but at the locket in his hand.

Ron shrugs. "Well, maybe it's because *lockets* – I mean, I don't really know, but Ginny's got one that belonged to our grandmother, and it's got pictures of her and Grandpa in it, so I reckon maybe it's, you know. One side is you, and the other side shows the person you- like your wife, or the person you fancy. And I guess I fancy Hermione," he admits, with the slightest of smiles, "So she showed up on the other side of the locket for me. Do you see anyone in yours?"

"No." Harry slams the locket onto the table, a bit more abruptly than he intended to. "Anyway, who knows what it means," he adds, voice jumping slightly. "I think – we should probably do some research, before we," he swallows, "you know, do anything."

And then, avoiding Ron's curious gaze, he buries his head in his arms and is silent.

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Harry eventually retreats to his parents' room with the locket and a book, while Ron elects to spend the next hour or so staring dully at his reflection in the oven door, waiting for Hermione and Draco to return. Morning fades into

afternoon, and the house in Godric's Hollow remains perfectly silent and still. Ron nearly swoons with boredom. By the time Hermione and Draco finally materialize in the kitchen doorway, it's nearly two-thirty.

They arrive looking dangerously pleased with themselves, and Draco shrugs off Hermione's rucksack immediately. "Where should I put this?" he asks.

"Just on one of the chairs, I think," she decides, "And we should also – where's Harry?"

Ron frowns. "Bedroom," he says, shrugging.

Draco glances from him to Hermione. "I'll go get him." Hermione looks up at him and smiles.

"Hey," Hermione says softly, after Draco leaves. She sits in the chair beside Ron and puts her elbows on the table, cupping her chin in her hands and leaning toward him.

"Hey," Ron can't help but smile back at her, shyly.

"How was your morning?"

"Boring," he admits, "You were gone."

She blushes. "I know. I think we solved a horcrux, though. Anyway," she murmurs, with a flicker of a smile, "I'm excited for tonight."

Ron feels the heat rise in his cheeks, and his stomach twists and yanks with swelling joy. He turns his head towards her, taking in the doe-brown eyes, the lips that meet softly in a curved line. She slides her hands back along her cheeks, her mouth stretching clownishly outward for one terrifically unflattering moment. Ron aches to kiss her. It's all he can do simply to touch his fist to his lips and whisper, "Me too."

Draco returns just then, Harry trailing a few feet behind him.

"So, I hear you've got the cup all figured out," Harry says, smiling at Hermione.

"Well," she replies, straightening in her chair, "I think so. I hope so."

Harry and Draco settle into the remaining two seats at the table. Harry reaches for the cup, taking it by the handles and studying the initials

engraved on the inside with interest. "Okay," he says, looking up at her. "What do you think we have to do?"

"Well," Hermione begins, her arms crossed, hands cupping her elbows, "I think we need to make a certain kind of potion, and then drink it. Out of the cup."

"And how did you come up with that?" asks Harry, rotating the cup in his hands.

Hermione pauses, apparently contemplating how to begin. "Well, I guess I started by thinking about the horcrux as a cup, as the actual object, you know, like we did for the candlestick... and I was also trying to think about what it meant that it was *Hufflepuff's* cup. What does Hufflepuff stand for, right?"

"Hardworking, loyal..." Harry ventures, nodding.

"Exactly. So I thought- well, loyalty and friendship, and then I remembered- well, I had to look it up on the internet to be sure, but—"

"There's stuff about this horcrux on the internet?" Ron asks dubiously.

"No, not exactly," admits Hermione, "But I did find some information on something called a quaich, which is a Scottish – like, a Scottish friendship cup. I suppose I half remembered it from a weekend holiday I took with my parents a few years ago. Here, you can take a look for yourself; I printed this up..."

Ron studies it first, and then passes it to Harry, who looks up at Hermione with a start. "Hermione, we don't have a printer."

"Well, obviously not," she replies, quite flippantly, "But you can store the information in your wand and transfer it to paper."

"Really?" Harry murmurs.

"Yes, of course – I mean, I guess it's something all Muggleborns kind of pick up from each other once we're... anyway, did you actually get a chance to read what the sheet said? And the picture – take a look at it. Don't you think it--"

"Looks exactly like the horcrux?" Harry interjects. "Yes, actually. It really does."

"So what does it mean, if Hufflepuff's cup is actually one of those, uh..." Ron rubs his nose, trying to remember.

"It's a quaich," Hermione supplies.

"A quaich," he agrees, nodding. "Sounds like Quidditch, sort of, doesn't it? Anyway, how do you know- what makes you think we're supposed to drink a potion out of it?"

"Because it's a cup," pipes Draco, nodding with satisfaction.

"There's precedent for using potions to remove curses from cups. The best way to understand it, I suppose, is that the curse gets pulled from the cup into the potion and then you drink it and it's gone. Anyway, Malfoy and I have come up with a recipe for a potion that should work, assuming I've understood the properties of each ingredient correctly." An anxious half-smile flits across her face as she tucks her hair behind her ears. "It's a disgusting potion, really. It involves a lot of blood..."

"Human blood?" Harry asks nervously.

"A bit," is her tentative reply. "And a lot of dragon's blood. And some other things, obviously--"

"Dragon's blood?" Ron inquires. "This wouldn't happen to be something you came across during your pleasure reading yesterday, would it?"

"Perhaps," Hermione murmurs, twisting a curl around her finger and looking generally wicked.

"Ugh, that is so like you."

"Is it?" She grins impishly. "Anyway, what I'd like to do is get this potion mixed before we leave for the bonfire, since dragon-based potions normally have to sit overnight. I've got all – well, most of the ingredients in here..." She then opens the flap of her rucksack and removes a succession of small crystal bottles, depositing them all carefully on the table.

Harry reaches for the largest bottle, filled to the brim with a heavy red liquid, somewhat thicker than human blood. "So," he remarks, "Twelve uses for this stuff?"

"Twelve discovered so far," Hermione replies cheerfully. "Everything from healing bruises to kitchen cleaning."

"Okay, well," he says, "Which of the twelve is it today, for our potion?"

"The seventh," Hermione recalls, arranging the remaining crystal bottles into a neat line on the table. "Dragons' blood, when consumed, has the effect of intensifying human emotions and experiences. So, if you were to just drink it plain, whatever you happened to be experiencing at the time would become much more powerful and profound."

"That's why-"

"Which is why some wizards-"

Draco and Ron, talking excitedly over each other, pause and regard each other with irritation.

"I suppose people use it as a drug, do they?" guesses Harry, glancing back and forth between Ron and Draco.

"Exactly," confirms Draco.

"*Huge* in the sixties," adds Ron.

"That's interesting," Harry nods and rubs his forehead, looking vaguely confused. "Sorry, I'm not sure I understand yet how that will help us destroy the horcrux, though."

"Well, we won't be drinking straight dragon blood," Hermione clarifies. "There are about four or five other ingredients, in addition to the other blood – though we don't have to add *that* until tomorrow..."

"The other blood?" Ron asks, eyebrows raised.

"Well, that's sort of the thing," she replies. "I think – if I've worked this through correctly, I think we'll each need to contribute a drop or so of our own blood as the final ingredient."

"And *drink* it?" Ron looks thoroughly revolted at the prospect.

"I know, it's really disgusting," Hermione grants, "But the blood is the point – drinking the blood of your dearest friends out of a quaich is quite an evocative ritual. And by combining it with dragons' blood, it should make the potion all the more powerful – hopefully powerful enough that it will neutralize any damaging effects of the horcrux. Of course, it's possible- actually, I'd say it's probable that the dragons' blood will have the additional

effect of acting as a sort of conduit for any sensations or emotions concretized in our own blood."

"Sorry, what?" asks Harry, abjectly bewildered.

"Sorry," Hermione replies sheepishly, "I'm not explaining this well. What I mean is that, once we drink the potion, I think the dragon's blood will make it so we basically experience each other's emotions. Although probably just the negative emotions, I'd expect, given the influence of the horcrux."

"Sounds weird," mutters Ron.

"Kind of interesting, though, don't you think?" remarks Draco.

"Do you think we'll have time to mix it before the bonfire tonight?" Harry wants to know.

"Well," says Hermione, removing the stoppers from the crystal bottles one by one. Carefully, she empties each into Hufflepuff's cup, stirring the mixture slowly counterclockwise with her wand. The bubbling liquid inside turns from red to deep purple, laced with streaks of gold. "Yes, I think," she pronounces, "Seeing as it's done."

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In the hour before they set out for the bonfire, Hermione withdraws to her room to prepare, with fluttering heart. She stands contemplatively before her closet, though she's already picked out her outfit: a soft blue sundress with delicate short sleeves. Truly, the dress picked itself – she doesn't own anything else like it. She slips it on over her bra and underwear, and pulls at the curls that have buried themselves beneath the dress's collar. Tucking them carefully behind her ears, she smiles shyly at herself in the mirror.

Hermione recognizes these moments: dressing with intention. She's done this twice before already – two dates. But always before, there was something to prove – that she was a girl, for example, or that she didn't care who was attached to Ron's face.

Tonight feels different, of course. Tonight isn't about proving anything; it's just a date, an actual date with the actual boy she wants to be on a date with. Or maybe it's more than just a date. Maybe that's why she's pacing and twitching and fussing with her curls, with a buzzing sort of energy she's never seen in herself before. Her excitement is shockingly, alarmingly physical: she feels it in her stomach, her feet, her chest, her throat, and in

that mysterious region Ron and Harry might call her "Chamber of Secrets". It's overwhelming, to be honest. It's overwhelming, and it's undignified, and she simply must pull herself together before she sees Ron. But she feels oddly certain that the very sight of him will unravel her all over again.

Dusk comes too soon, and not soon enough, and Hermione tries to be casual as she walks to the kitchen. Ron is alone at the table, looking unusually scrubbed and clean, pale yet pink. He is staring intently at the bubbling purple potion in the center of the table, chin in his hand, legs stretched out straight under the table.

"Hi," she says.

He looks up at her, and she has a sense of something in him jumping, startled, though he doesn't jump at all. "Hi," he says, and stands up. Blushing, he scratches the back of his neck. "Wow, you look-"

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She looks – how can he even describe it? She looks like the air feels at dusk on Midsummer's Eve. She stands before him, all in blue, and it is too much to believe that she is actually willing to talk to him, much less agree to go on a date with him. Tonight. Right now.

"So, um," he says, because the silence is too electric to tolerate, "I've just been – I don't know where Harry is, or, you know, Malfoy, or... Merlin, I'm," he swallows nervously, "Yeah, so. But we should really go soon, really."

"Really," Hermione agrees, smiling sweetly.

"I'm sorry. I'm acting like a complete... I don't know what's wrong with me. It's like I'm five years old." He sits back down again, arms pretzeled on the table, forehead nestled into the crook of his elbow.

"Five-year-old Ron," she murmurs, claiming the seat next to him.. She shakes her head. "I can only imagine..."

Two blue eyes emerge briefly from the pile of freckled arms on the table. "Um, yeah, I was adorable."

"Oh, I don't doubt that." She glances sidelong at him, and he watches her lashes tap her cheekbone in one perfect blink. It's useless even trying to come up with something to say, Ron realizes.

Luckily, Harry and then Draco emerge from the living room momentarily, and Ron is soon swept away in the general movement toward the bonfire.

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The bonfire is constructed in a field at the edge of Godric's Hollow, used mainly throughout the rest of the year by the local teenagers for marijuana-related purposes. It is here that the boys and Hermione set out for at last, dressed so convincingly as Muggles that Draco is certain his own father wouldn't recognize him on the street.

"There," Harry announces, pointing at a flash of orange, yanking skyward. "That's it, do you reckon?"

"Definitely," agrees Hermione.

"I can't believe how many people are here."

"Is that - okay, I need to know where that woman got the elf pastry," Draco is actually sort of bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"I think Muggles call it funnel cake," Hermione murmurs vaguely, staring curiously after the woman in question. "Huh. I wonder why she's wearing a witch's hat."

"Is she?" Draco remarks, surprised. He strains to catch another glimpse of her. "I actually didn't notice."

"I mean, that's a blatant violation of the Statute of Secrecy," Hermione continues, frowning indignantly.

"Well, those blokes are even worse- they've got their wands out and everything," Ron observes.

A pause; a flick of a glance between Ron and Harry; a grin; a snicker. The long-suffering Hermione and Draco exchange a weary glance.

The bonfire glows electric orange, with flames that shiver and twist violently against the dark of the sky. Swarming around it are hundreds of people, seemingly every Muggle in Godric's Hollow. The distinctive smell of fire mingles with the scents of meat and popcorn and something alluringly sweet that might be the funnel cakes. All around, Muggles converge in clusters and disperse, weave through the crowd to the food stands, and perch on the many bales of hay surrounding the fire. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Draco

stand on the edge of a noisy troupe of pre-teen girls, whose ill-concealed glances at the boys are firmly repelled by a very menacing glare from Hermione.

Oddly enough, Hermione realizes a moment later, several of the girls are dressed distinctly like witches. In fact, a quick scan of the crowd reveals that nearly half the Muggles present appear to be dressed in capes, pointed hats, and shaggy black wigs, many of them proudly gripping plastic black wands and kitchen brooms. Their costumes, she observes, are grossly inaccurate – they dress with roughly the skill of Ludo Bagman trying to pass for a Muggle. But, still.

"Hey, take a look at how-"

"How they're all dressed like witches," Harry finishes, nodding amazedly. "Yeah, I just noticed that."

Ron nods and grins at a particularly flamboyantly dressed Muggle in a full silver-spangled cape, who backs away rather suspiciously upon catching his eye. "That is so sweet. Look at how they envision us. I mean, capes, fake warts and everything."

"I hope those are fake," Hermione adds, looking concerned.

"So, uh, good thing we were so painstakingly careful about dressing like Muggles," Draco reflects.

"Anyway," Ron announces, "We should pick a meeting place for us all to come back to at midnight or so, in case we, I don't know, get separated somehow." He glances significantly at Hermione, whose blush is only partially concealed by the darkness.

Harry takes the hint. "Well, I'm kind of hungry, I guess. Malfoy, you wanted funnel cake, right? Why don't we get on the queue now before they run out of them?"

"You think they'll run out?" asks Draco, immediately perturbed.

As soon as Hermione glances momentarily away, Ron grins broadly and gives Harry and Draco an appreciative thumbs up.

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"So," Ron murmurs, smiling crookedly down at her.

"So," she replies.

"So, we ditched *them*," Ron informs her unnecessarily, "Guess that means it's our date." He rubs his neck, head cocked slightly to the side.

She smiles. "I guess so."

"Cool," he says, nodding happily. They proceed to stand dumbly, grinning at each other, until Ron finally inhales sharply and asks, "So, what do we do?"

"I don't know," Hermione replies contentedly, not really minding the awkwardness. "We could walk around..."

"We could," Ron confirms. "Let's do that, let's walk around."

"Okay," she replies, feeling so bizarrely giddy that she has to hug herself – until it occurs to her that Ron might want to hold her hand. Promptly, she lets her arms fall to her sides, where they hang twitchily, longing to be held.

But Ron's hands don't inch towards her own as he falls into place beside her; rather, they curl into loose fists and swing softly by his sides. Hermione finds that she doesn't really mind. She has such a strong sense of tonight ending perfectly that nothing in the meantime can really bother her.

"Is that the queue for the toilet?" she wonders, as they pass an unhappy line of uncomfortably shifting adults and children blatantly clutching at their crotches. "Oh my gosh, there are just three Port-o-Potties."

"That sucks," Ron declares fervently. "You don't have to go, do you? I mean, I don't mind waiting..."

"I mind waiting," Hermione replies grimly. "I don't really have to go. It's not worth it."

"You could jump the queue," Ron suggests, "You could apparate right into the stall."

Hermione arches her eyebrows at him. "Bit of a surprise for the person who's in there now, I suspect."

"Especially if you sat on their lap," Ron speculates happily.

"You're so weird," she informs him.

And suddenly, there are Ron's fingers, firmly intertwined with her own.

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Draco and Harry, having successfully obtained funnel cakes, find an unoccupied bale of hay to sit upon near the fire. Their timing is fortuitous; they are able to grab one of the coveted spots adjacent to a taller bale of hay, against which they can lean their backs. There they sit, next to each other with their legs stretched straight out, the fire glowing in Harry's peripheral vision and warming the left side of his body. The occasional spark or ash drifts towards him and lands on his arm, which horrifies Draco, no matter how many times Harry assures him it doesn't hurt.

"No, seriously, I don't even feel it."

"Just like a bloody Gryffindor to say that."

Draco nibbles his funnel cake slowly and rather daintily, taking obvious pains to avoid leaving a white sugar dusting on his black shirt. He is equally fastidious about the sugar that collects in the corners of his mouth, tongue flicking out to collect it after nearly every bite. Harry finds this unexpectedly intriguing. Having demolished his own funnel cake in four giant bites, he occupies himself with bending and tearing his cardboard plate, all the while catching deliberate glimpses of Draco's pink tongue out of the corner of this eye.

"I don't think I've had elf pastry in ten years," Draco remarks, almost wistfully.

"I don't think I've ever had it," replies Harry, "Til now, obviously. It's really delicious, though."

"Yeah," agrees Draco. Then, he flicks his eyes sideways and snorts quietly. "You and the Weasel love your junk food, don't you?"

"Do we? That's funny, coming from someone who was basically tongue-snogging his funnel cake a moment ago."

"Jealous, Potter?" He turns his head towards Harry with a calculated smirk and eyebrow-raise. Harry snorts and turns his face pointedly away. But when he sneaks a sideways glance back toward Draco, he is startled to find that Draco is still looking at him. His eyes seem to catch on Draco's for a moment, and it is with considerable effort and slight breathlessness that he is able to release their hold.

"Jealous? Ha. No," Harry says a moment too late, rolling his eyes a bit too vigorously.

Draco calmly slides his finger through the powdered sugar left on his plate and licks it clean.

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It is as if there is wire that runs from Hermione's hand, all the way through her midsection and ending just below. If not a wire, then a string. Something down there pulls taut.

"Should we find somewhere to sit?" suggests Ron.

Hermione nods vaguely.

"Or, I mean, we could just stay here if that's what you want. Either is fine with me." He watches her face carefully. "Or do you want to, uh, try to find Harry and Malfoy?"

"No, let's not," she says emphatically.

He laughs loudly and suddenly. "Good," he declares, "That's good."

"Good," she replies, catching his eye and smiling wickedly.

He inhales sharply. "Okay, well..." he lets her hand drop from his. And then he brings his hands slowly to rest on her waist. "Is this okay?"

"Yes," she exclaims, and her laughter comes breathlessly. She rests her hands on his shoulders, but they find their way to the back of his neck.

The feeling of Ron's lips on hers is somehow both the most obvious and the most astonishing thing that has ever happened to her.

Chapter 12

Harry wakes up, and is mystified to find a rumpled pile of blankets on the bed beside him; this, as opposed to the usual sprawled and snoring monstrosity that is Ron in the morning. Ron awake first. It doesn't quite compute.

"Is it Christmas?" Harry wonders.

With dawning awareness that it isn't, he wanders puzzledly down the hallway. A cacophony of clanging sounds explodes from the kitchen.

"Ron?" he asks uneasily, pushing lightly on the door.

"Is that Harry? Is that my very best mate?" Ron's face, in the bright light of the kitchen, is a disturbing portrait of manic delight.

"You're still in a good mood, then," Harry observes, surveying the countertops with equal parts amusement and horror.

"I'm making breakfast!" is Ron's blissful reply.

"Where are the Mars bars?" Harry wonders mournfully. He leans his back against the cabinets, his arms resting in a slick pool of egg whites on the counter. He briefly considers moving them, but, in fact, it appears to be one of the cleaner parts of the countertop.

"So, are you going to tell me why you're so – actually, *okay*, I'm just going to move this into the living room so Hermione doesn't kill you." A projectile pancake has come dangerously close to landing in the dragon's blood potion.

"I would have still eaten it," Ron assures him.

"I know," replies Harry, shaking his head sadly. "But I don't think that's the point."

Carrying the horcrux into the living room, Harry is startled to find a pair of gray eyes peeking surreptitiously over the back of the couch.

"Good morning," Harry greets, nodding uncertainly.

The eyes disappear in a flash, and Draco emerges a moment later from his nest on the couch. Propping himself up gracefully on the armrest, he glances shiftily at the kitchen door. "What in Salazar's name is he doing in there?"

"Making breakfast, supposedly. And I'm rescuing the horcrux from pancakes," he explains, setting it down carefully on the table. The liquid inside gives a momentary shudder.

"Harry James Potter, your presence is requested immediately in the kitchen for sausage-related purposes," Ron hollers cheerfully.

Draco's mouth twists into a wicked smirk.

"All right, yes, I get it. Mine and Ron's sausage-related purposes." Harry nods good-naturedly. "Go on."

"Did I say anything?" Draco wonders, all innocence. "Such a filthy mind."

"*Accio* Harry!" demands a jolly voice from the kitchen.

Harry shrugs. "I guess I've been summoned."

"Apparently." Draco nods. "Save me a sausage, Potter."

Harry proceeds to trip over absolutely nothing.

Hermione wanders downstairs at last, an owl perched on her shoulder and a letter clutched in her hand. "Good morning, Malfoy," she greets perfunctorily as she continues toward the kitchen doorway. "Guys, we've had a letter from Tonks, and you'll never guess who she had deliver – *breakfast*?"

"Hedwig!" Harry exclaims, opening his arms to invite the owl into an awkward, stiff-winged embrace.

Hermione surveys the table with amazement. "You made this?"

Ron's smile is both shy and proud. The sticky squalor of the kitchen had been conquered moments earlier, leaving gleaming counters and a table stacked high with pancakes, bacon, sausage, eggs, toast, and pumpkin juice. Hermione's stomach growls appreciatively.

"So, what was in the letter from Tonks?" asks Harry, settling in next to Hermione with Hedwig perched lovingly on his shoulder.

Hermione nods and finishes chewing a mouthful of buttered toast. "Right, that. She's stopping by this afternoon, around two or two-thirty."

"And she's giving us a heads up, rather than breaking right in," Ron observes. "Such progress." He helps himself to another pancake, which he submerges in a veritable ocean of syrup.

Draco grimaces as he watches Ron retrieve one bite of pancake from the sticky depths of his plate, sprinkle it with *extra sugar*, and plunge it into his waiting mouth. "Weasel, you have got to be the most—"

"Brilliant chef? Why, thank you, Malfoy!" Ron is absolutely beaming.

Draco frowns and takes a hearty bite of his sausage.

Harry looks pointedly away. "So, uh, Hermione, is the potion ready, do you reckon? It'd be nice to be able to do another horcrux before Tonks gets here."

"It should be," she informs him. "We still need to add our blood," she wrinkles her nose slightly, "And then I guess we just decide who's going to drink it."

"I'll do it," Ron offers immediately.

Harry shakes his head. "No. I need to be the one this time. Dumbledore gave this task to me—"

"But he told you to let us help you," Hermione reminds him.

"He said I could tell you about the horcruxes," Harry corrects. "He never said I should palm off all the dirty work on you."

"Harry, you know it's not like that," Hermione says, sighing.

"Okay, I have an idea," announces Ron. "We've got to drink the blood potion, right? And it's probably going to be pretty foul. So, I'm thinking that if we all drink some, we each only have to drink a couple of mouthfuls, I reckon."

"That won't work." Harry shakes his head vigorously. "No. We've got to have at least one person not drinking, just in case there are some weird effects we don't know about. Really, it would be best to have two people not drinking, don't you think?"

Hermione nods. "I completely agree with that. Which means- well, okay, let's think this through." She rubs her chin. "Okay, say we decide that two of

us are going to drink it, and the other two will make sure that nothing goes awry. So-

"Well, obviously, Hermione gets a pass on this one," Harry declares.

Hermione's eyes narrow. "And why is that?"

"Because you're a girl," explains Harry, nodding earnestly, "And girls are useless. All that estrogen..." He trails off, a smile twitching in the corners of his mouth. Ron and Draco are grinning.

Hermione smiles despite herself, but nevertheless persists, "But seriously, why wouldn't I-"

"Because you did the last one entirely by yourself, and then you went and worked out this one, and, I mean, really. It's just unfair."

"And emasculating," notes Ron. Hermione rolls her eyes.

Ron changes tactics. "Well, all I know is that if I'm poisoned, you're the one I want figuring out how to fix it."

"Actually, Weasel makes a decent point," Draco pipes up. "It makes sense to have the person who made the potion observing its effects and ready to intervene, if need be."

"Well, I certainly didn't put the potion together all by myself," Hermione notes modestly. She and Draco exchange small smiles.

"Yeah, well, there we go," says Harry. "The ones who know the most about the potion should stand by, and, uh, Ron and I should drink it."

"You, mate, are a sensible fellow," commends Ron.

"It is sensible," Hermione agrees, "But let's make sure we consider the properties of the object, remember? Hufflepuff's cup. So, friendship, loyalty..." She smiles, almost sadly, at Ron and Harry. "It really should be you two," she admits.

"Cheers," says Harry, raising his cup at Ron and taking his first tentative sip. Ron nods resolutely, closes his eyes, and follows suit. The potion has a sharp, almost metallic flavor that Ron finds somehow compelling, despite

nearly gagging at first. It takes only two or three mouthfuls for him to understand everything he's ever been told about drinking dragon's blood.

Ron has been drunk exactly once before, courtesy of Fred and George and a bottle of firewhisky. What he feels now is, in a sense, the exact opposite. There's still that floaty, transporting feeling, but without the lightheartedness; rather, he is transported to a kind of detached sadness. He observes with interest as it hits him in waves. Many sadnesses. They all seem to have distinct shapes.

Harry's sadness is the first to catch in Ron's throat; it is the closest to the surface, and also the deepest. Layer upon layer of loss: wrapped in guilt, laced with regret, tinged with confusion and also longing. It settles in Ron's stomach, heavy and hard.

Harry, for his part, is too used to his own sadness even to notice it. He sips the potion slowly but steadily, and is first struck by a wrenching, aching feeling in his chest, almost like embarrassment. Shame, maybe. Inadequacy. Ron's sadness. Some of it, Harry realizes with a pang, seems to come from Ron's being best friends with him.

Hermione's sadness creeps to the surface slowly, but with startling clarity. Ron's emotions, and probably his own, Harry senses, are muddled, knotted, and half-realized; but Hermione's sadness is sharply understood. Hers takes the shape of loneliness: brittle childhood friendships ruined by resentment, and worse, a quiet sense of exclusion from the impenetrable dyad of Ron and himself. And underneath it all, a sense of being suspended between two worlds. The growing distance between herself and her parents. For Hermione, Harry realizes, the choice to attend Hogwarts had always been bittersweet.

And at last, Draco's - the most deeply defended of sadnesses. Denied, kept at arm's length, but unquestionably there. Harry finds himself riveted. There's a sense of being different, of feeling different from other boys. A secret, fiercely guarded; a dimly understood desire for something forbidden. A diffuse sense of shame. A lonely childhood, much like Hermione's. Much like his own, he realizes with a start.

There is a sudden clang, and Harry and Ron return to themselves with a jolt. A carefree, lazy feeling blooms inside Harry. He and Ron catch each other's eyes, smiling crookedly.

"How are you two feeling?" Hermione asks tentatively. Harry and Ron nod slowly.

"Fine."

"Totally fine." Harry grins.

"Did we do it?" Ron asks.

Hermione nods happily. "It looks that way. When you took the last sip of potion, the horcrux sort of floated off the table, glowed for a minute, and dropped itself back down."

"The clanging noise," Harry murmurs.

"Exactly. And now the cup looks sort of dull and empty, like the candlestick, so I think it worked. I feel really good about it. Actually, I feel really good in general for some reason."

"For some reason," Ron repeats, smiling significantly.

"Well, yes, there's *that*," she blushes, "But also- I don't know. I feel... I don't really know how to explain it, but it's as if- I feel lighter somehow. Like a burden has been lifted."

Draco cocks his head to the side. "Right, I know what you mean." Harry and Ron nod happily in agreement.

Hermione regards them curiously. "Tell me everything you experienced while drinking that potion." Harry and Ron clumsily endeavor to explain the dark, floaty feeling, the slow waves of sadness, and the sudden, airy relief.

"Doubles your joys and divides your sorrows," Hermione murmurs, smiling slightly. "It's a Muggle proverb about friendship."

At two-o'clock sharp, the peephole reveals not only Tonks, but another familiar freckled face.

"Wotcher," she greets, as Hermione swings the door open for them. "Hope it's okay that I brought Charlie."

"Mum insisted that I pop in and check up on you lot," Charlie explains. "Hey, do I smell bacon?"

"That's from this morning. I made breakfast," Ron informs him, with evident effort to sound casual.

"Did you?" murmurs Charlie, clasping him on the back- and then, under his breath, the same words, but an entirely different question, "Did you...?" His eyes flick sideways to Hermione, who looks away quietly, smiling.

Ron beams and nods, almost imperceptibly.

"Well done, you!" Charlie acclaims, before glancing briefly at Hermione and adding hastily, "On a fantastic breakfast."

"Thank you, oh master of subtlety," Tonks declares, with a bit of an eyeroll for punctuation. "Shall we get to business? First, obviously, I'd like to check in and see where you are with the horcruxes."

"Just finished our second," Harry cannot help but sound pleased with himself, "All that's left is the locket, and Ron and I already figured out how to open it."

"You did what?" exclaims Hermione, "When were you planning on mentioning that?"

"Now, apparently," Ron replies cheerfully.

"But it's fantastic news! I figured it would take us weeks to get it open. Hermione shakes her head amazedly. "How did you do it?"

"Actually, I'd like to hear how you did all of them," pipes Tonks. Harry, Ron, and Hermione proceed to give her the play by play, with the occasional contribution from Draco. Tonks and Charlie prove to be a wonderfully receptive audience, with Tonks nodding earnestly all throughout, and Charlie peppering them with questions about the dragon's blood potion.

An hour falls away. Draco surprises everyone by insisting on the formality of serving afternoon tea. Eventually, everyone drifts into the living room, as Charlie and Tonks begin delivering the news from headquarters.

"Everyone's doing quite well, actually. Draco, your mum is doing just fine- fit and happy."

"Happy?" Draco murmurs skeptically.

"Actually, she and Harry's aunt Petunia have struck up quite the unlikely friendship." She pauses for a moment to allow Harry and Draco to gape at her. "Yes, you heard me right. A Muggle, friends with a Malfoy."

"That's horrible," gasps Draco.

Harry looks vaguely disconcerted. "That's so weird."

Tonks shrugs. "They actually seem to have a lot in common. War's funny like that. It brings about the most unexpected friendships." She grins at Harry and Draco, who reluctantly smile back, catching each other's eye.

"Any word on my parents?" Hermione asks softly.

"Oh, they're fine. Arthur Weasley has been keeping them busy," she notes with a chuckle.

"Dad's got them teaching him Muggle dentistry," Charlie sighs, "In exhaustive detail. It's kind of his new thing."

"Oh good, something useful," says Ron.

"Hey," asks Hermione, "Do we know anything else about the Muggle murders?"

Tonks and Charlie both sigh, exchanging glances. "No," Charlie says, "Still no sign of the culprit. He's not on our maps."

"Which means..." Hermione's brow furrows.

Tonks nods. "It could be Voldemort himself. He isn't exactly human, so he wouldn't register on the map."

"Is that what you think?"

"I don't know." Tonks sighs again.

A look of determination settles across Hermione's features. "Tonks, we can help with this."

"Thank you, Hermione, really," Tonks says. "But no, we need you lot focusing on the horcruxes. We'll take care of this." She reaches distractedly for a pillow that's tucked next to her on the couch. "It's going to be fine." She pauses. "What's this pillow doing here? Draco, you're not still sleeping on the couch?"

"Um," says Harry. Draco doesn't respond.

"Come now," Tonks says, "Seriously? After all this time? You have an extra bedroom."

"Oh, no no, that's Harry's bedroom," Ron explains, "From, like, when he was a baby, and... you know." No one responds. "It all happened in there, right? We don't... we don't really go in there, if we can avoid it."

Tonks sighs. "I mean, I get that, yeah. But, okay, why don't we change things around in there, so it won't seem so spooky. Harry, do you mind? Draco can't keep sleeping on the couch."

"Why not?" mutters Ron under his breath.

Harry looks ashamed. "Um, I just didn't really think about it." He glances sidelong at Draco. "Did you want a room?"

"I don't care," contributes Draco.

"Okay, well, I care. I'm making an executive decision here." Tonks nods resolutely, while Charlie simply shrugs. "If it's all the same to you, we'll take care of this right now. I'll transfigure the crib into a bed, and then you four can take care of setting it up as a proper bedroom."

"Right, actually though, I'm going to need to borrow Ron," Charlie pipes up, "I'm under firm orders to sit and stare over your shoulder while you compose a nice long letter for mum."

"You're kidding," says Ron.

"Guess you should have owled her sooner. Now she's all worked up over how her ickle Ron is getting by." Ron blushes deeply and mutters that he'll write the letter.

Hermione looks thoughtful. "Harry, Draco- do you think you could get by without me? I'm only asking because- Tonks, I know you want us to focus on the horcruxes, but I think if I could only have another look at that map, I might be able to help figure this out."

"Well, that certainly couldn't hurt," Tonks acknowledges with a nod, "I mean, yeah, that would be great - as long as Harry and Draco feel they can get by without you."

Harry and Draco glance briefly at each other. "Sure," says Harry, with a shrug.

Tonks barely flicks her wrist, and the crib is transfigured into a bed. She leaves Harry and Draco to sort through the many piles of toys, baby clothes, pictures, and papers that are half piled and half scattered around the room. Draco sits primly on the edge of his new bed, his arms crossed.

Harry, kneeling beside the bureau, awkwardly picks up a pair of infant-sized trousers. "What do I do with these?"

Draco shrugs. "Throw it away."

"All of them? But they're sort of all right, aren't they? Look at this shirt."

"Potter, something tells me it just isn't going to fit anymore."

"Well yeah, but- shouldn't we try to give these away somehow? Do you know anyone with a baby?"

"I try not to." Draco shudders delicately.

"Okay, whatever. I'll just put all of this in the box for now, and we can decide later what to do with it." Tonks had left them with a cardboard box, which she had promised to shrink once it had been filled. "What about these books?"

"Why are you asking me?"

Harry regards him through narrowed eyes. "Because you're supposed to be helping me, aren't you?"

"I suppose," Draco acknowledges, nonetheless leaning back onto the bed, yawning.

Harry sighs and carries on alone, quietly levitating his childhood possessions and allowing them to settle into the cardboard box. After a few minutes of silence, Draco pulls himself back up into a sitting position, looking down at Harry. "What are you doing?" he asks.

Harry glances up at him. "I found an old photo album."

"You're looking at your own baby pictures?"

"It isn't exactly something I've had ample opportunity to do in the past," snaps Harry.

Draco looks thoughtful. "You know, we all grew up looking at baby pictures of you – not Granger, I suppose, but in the wizarding world. You were in all the papers. Certain pictures. I remember they used to print one where you were being held by your mother, outside somewhere, where it was really sunny."

Harry smiles sadly. "I think that one was taken right outside this house. Look." He hoists himself off the ground and carries the album over to the bed, handing it to Draco. "That's the one, right?"

"Huh. Yeah." Draco nods with recognition at the picture before turning the page of the album. Harry looks on over his shoulder. "All these pictures," Draco murmurs after a moment. "You could make money from these."

"Great idea," remarks Harry dryly, "Shall we post an ad in the Prophet? 'Potter baby photos available to highest bidder. Come pick them up at this address.'"

Draco rolls his eyes. "When you're not in hiding anymore. Obviously." He turns the page.

"When I'm not in hiding." Harry glances at Draco momentarily, his chin resting on his fist. "So you think I'll survive this."

Draco pauses, looking up from the album to meet Harry's eyes. "You don't think so?"

"I don't know," Harry says softly. Draco turns away. A silence stretches across several moments.

Draco's fingers trace the edge of the photo album. "You look a lot like your father," he remarks, almost gruffly. He clears his throat.

"Right, everyone says so. But I have my mum's eyes."

"Do you?" asks Draco, shrugging haughtily. "The color and shape of them is like hers. But you have your father's eyes, really. Look at those glasses." A tiny smile flashes in the corner of his mouth. "You're both blind."

"Huh." Harry glances at Draco, surprised. "No one's ever put it like that before."

Draco turns to Harry with a smirk that untwists, against his will, to reveal a bright smile. He is extravagantly pleased with himself. Harry grins back at him, his heart pounding.

Draco snaps the album shut. "So, are we done in here?" He nudges Harry's arm with his elbow.

"Are we?" says Harry.

Chapter 13

"I just feel like we're missing something obvious," sighs Hermione, rubbing her eyes. She is sitting cross-legged, Tonks' map stretched out in front of her on the bed. "Everyone with a dark mark is on this map?"

"That's my understanding." Tonks shrugs, straddling a wooden desk chair backwards as she watches Hermione. She leans her chin on the back of the chair. Lazily, she musses the ends of her hair, which change from pink to green beneath her fingers.

"And it's always worked before? There haven't been gaps?" Hermione shakes her head and tucks a curl behind her ear. Her eyes continue scanning the map as she speaks.

"As far as I know." Tonks yawns widely, drumming her fingers on the back of the chair.

Hermione looks up at her suddenly. "Are you okay, Tonks?"

Tonks raises her eyebrows at Hermione. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know- you seem sort of distracted, maybe." Tonks cocks her head to the side and regards Hermione impassively.

"I'm sorry," Hermione blushes. "I really didn't mean to intrude."

"No, not at all. It's just, you're very perceptive." She laughs. "I'm fine, really. I'm just stressed and, you know, confused about these Muggle deaths."

"Of course," replies Hermione, nodding fervently.

"And I guess there's stuff with Remus," she adds.

"Oh," Hermione says softly, taken by surprise. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Tonks scratches her pink head, looking slightly embarrassed. "It's not a big deal," she murmurs, facing downward. "I know he loves me..."

Hermione nods again, gazing warmly at Tonks.

"I just wonder—," Tonks cuts herself off abruptly at the sound of approaching footsteps and the low tones of bickering Weasley voices

growing louder. "Bugger," she mutters, explaining quickly, "I can't talk about Remus in front of him. He gets weird."

"Hey," greets Charlie, moments later, leaning his stocky body against the doorframe. "How's it going in here?" He smiles gently at Tonks.

"Oh," thinks Hermione, glancing from Tonks to Charlie.

"We're stumped," says Tonks, smoothly. "Can't figure it out." Hermione regards her with interest, and even admiration. No one could have guessed their conversation had ever strayed from map-related business.

Ron arrives momentarily, mirroring his brother's stance – a pale tableau of redheads against the doorframe. Hermione smiles, feeling a swell of warmth in her chest. Ron breaks away from the door and plops next to Hermione on the edge of the bed.

"Did you get your letter written?"

Ron scowls, but good-naturedly. "Yes." He shakes his head. "*Mum.*"

"And of course you had nothing interesting to report," she teases, grinning at him.

He raises his eyebrows. "Maybe some things were *too* interesting to report."

Hermione realizes with a start that both Charlie and Tonks are watching them with unabashed interest and amusement. She blushes deeply, and artlessly changes the subject.

"Tonks, Charlie- would you like to stay for supper?"

Declining Hermione's invitation with professed regret, Tonks and Charlie leave shortly, bound for headquarters. Dinner that evening is nonetheless a lively affair. To round out a day of extravagant meals, and to celebrate their progress on the horcruxes, Hermione and Harry prepare a feast of potatoes and grilled steak; Ron, meanwhile, under the guise of helping, lurks around the kitchen, pilfering samples.

They eat at the dining room table using the Potters' wedding china, drinking wine, and feeling impressively civilized and adult. Ron groans with delight as he cuts into his steak. "Medium rare... medium rare..." he chants hopefully.

"YES!" he declares, smacking both hands down on the table and flinging his head back in apparent ecstasy.

"Potter, this is good." Draco bestows a look of begrudging respect on Harry, who had grilled the steaks.

Raising their glasses to the successful destruction of two horcruxes, they prove to be similarly efficient in demolishing their giant steaks. They clear their plates long before anyone considers leaving the table, happily sipping and accepting refills of wine.

"What I want to know," declares Draco, with flourish, "Is whether you two were planning on sharing what happened after the bonfire. As if it isn't obvious," he adds with a smirk.

"Please, no!" Harry covers his ears.

"You really want to know? Well," Ron begins, grinning, "We walked down to the far end of the field...past the toilets..."

"I'm not listening. I can't hear you."

"And then, once we were sure we were *completely* alone..." He pauses. Harry glances up at him expectantly.

"Oh, but you're not listening, are you?" Ron murmurs.

"I'm not!" Harry protests, sheepishly.

"And then I ripped off all my clothes, and Hermione-"

"That's enough," pronounces Hermione, wagging her fork sternly and trying not to smile, "That didn't happen, by the way." She turns to Draco, "Did you guys make any progress on the bedroom?"

"*Did we make any progress in the bedroom?*" Harry's shocked face appears, suddenly, to be a perfect medium rare.

"*On the bedroom,*" repeats Hermione, shaking her head as Ron bursts out laughing.

"We made excellent progress in the bedroom," Draco replies, his face deadpan. Harry swallows a sip of wine too quickly, sending a sudden rush of heat to his throat and chest.

"Good," says Hermione, giving Harry an odd look before turning back to Draco. "Tonks is right. We should have done it ages ago."

They linger at the table until their bums get sore. Then, Ron scourgifies the dishes, while Draco grumbles over the counters, wiping them down with a sponge. Harry and Hermione, accomplished chefs that they are, get to relax in front of the telly.

Later, as Hermione is reading in bed, she hears a knock at her bedroom door. "Come in," she says. She shuts her book around a bookmark and sets it aside on the night table.

"Hi," says Ron, softly. He is wearing red pajama pants and a faded Hogwarts t-shirt. Hermione smiles up at him from the bed, and he walks over. "Can I join you?"

She nods, smiling widely, and moves to one side of the bed to make room. Lifting the duvet, Ron asks, unnecessarily, "Are you under there?" He tucks himself in next to her, tugging fussily at the duvet until it covers him up to his chin. Hermione rolls over to face him. "Hi," she says.

He rolls on his side to face her as well. For several moments, they regard each other silently in the dim light of Hermione's book lamp. Hermione giggles softly, and Ron smiles. He gropes under the duvet until he finds her hand, and then he takes it in his own. Their fingers lace together, and she curves her knees up to meet his.

"So," he asks, sighing contentedly, "How was your evening?"

"How was my evening," murmurs Hermione. "Let's see. I made dinner. And then we—"

"I know what you did," Ron says, releasing her hand momentarily to poke her in the knee. Then, he weaves his fingers back through hers, asking, "But how was it?"

"Good," Hermione says, smiling gently at him. "Really good now. Is Harry asleep?"

"Actually, yes, for once. We should give him wine more often."

"I worry about him."

"Nope," commands Ron, "No worrying tonight. Here." He places his hand gently on her waist. "Does this help?"

"Sort of," Hermione bites her lip. "Maybe if you—"

He kisses her softly.

"That helped," she says.

It's past two in the morning by the time Ron slips back into bed next to Harry. Nonetheless, Hermione is awake at eight, nursing a cup of coffee and working her way through a stack of library books. The boys trickle into the kitchen by eleven, Harry and Ron looking puffy-eyed and endearingly disheveled. Draco, tidy as ever, nonetheless has dark crescents beneath his gray eyes. Ron claims the seat next to Hermione at the table and immediately mashes his face into her shoulder. "So sleepy," she murmurs, ruffling his hair without looking up from her book.

Draco pours a cup of coffee, while Harry forages for chocolate in the cabinets. Sliding two Galaxy bars from the back of the top shelf, he places one gently in the nest of red hair that appears to be growing out of Hermione's shoulder. Ron gropes around on his head and, feeling the smoothness of the wrapper, wordlessly unlatches himself from Hermione and encircles Harry's neck with a sudden, heavy hug. Harry allows Ron to sort of hang from his neck as he unwraps his own chocolate and devours it in two bites.

"What are you reading about?" he asks Hermione, licking the remains of his Galaxy bar out of the corners of his lips.

"Well," Hermione sighs, "I'm trying to figure out the locket, but I haven't gotten anywhere."

Harry nods, shaking Ron off onto the chair next to Hermione, before settling in across from them. "Okay. I'll have a crack at it, too." Draco, he notices, is already quietly thumbing through one of Hermione's books as he sips his coffee.

Moments later, with a mighty sigh, Ron lifts his heavy head from the table and opens a book of his own. Minutes turn into an hour, and then two hours, as they work their way through a pile of books on curse-breaking. A silence

persists, punctuated only by turning pages, cracking knuckles, and Ron's occasional moan of boredom.

"Anything?" Harry asks, eventually, shutting his book with a snap.
"Anyone?"

"Not really," says Draco.

"Nothing useful." Hermione frowns.

"Are we stopping for a bit?" Ron asks hopefully.

Hermione shakes her head. "You can, but I'm not stopping. We have to do this. I just wish I could – maybe if there was a book especially about jewelry..." Already, she is lost again to her research.

"Well," murmurs Harry, suddenly inspired, "What about the necklace that got Katie Bell. Someone must've gotten the curse out of it, one of the teachers, but I can't remember which one..."

"Harry, that's right! Maybe that's our starting point." Hermione shuts her book suddenly, excitement lighting her sleepy eyes. "Flitwick, was it? I don't remember!"

Draco quietly stands up, pushes his chair in, and excuses himself.

"What's with him?" remarks Ron.

Hermione bites her lip and murmurs vaguely, "Maybe we shouldn't have mentioned Katie Bell..."

Ron shrugs. "Maybe he shouldn't have done it."

Harry stands up, suddenly, rubbing his forehead. "I should probably-" He nods helplessly at Hermione and Ron, before following after Draco.

He finds Draco sitting on the steps to the backyard, staring straight ahead, his expression inscrutable. Hedwig, just returned from a hunt, has perched herself on his arm; Draco is absentmindedly stroking her head.

As Harry approaches, Hedwig hoots happily and abandons Draco in favor of Harry's shoulder. Draco looks up at Harry, who smiles at him tentatively.

Draco lifts the corners of his mouth in return, but the smile does not reach his eyes.

"Mind if I sit?" asks Harry.

Draco shrugs, leaning back on his hands. "It's your place. You can do what you want."

"Well, I thought I'd be polite," Harry replies, feeling stung.

Draco scoots to make room for him, looking pointedly in the other direction. "Sorry," he mutters.

"It's okay." Harry takes his seat beside Draco on the steps. There is an uncomfortable silence that spans several moments.

Harry finally speaks, feeling oddly nervous. "I- I reckon you're upset that I mentioned Katie Bell."

"I don't care." Draco flushes slightly, but his expression doesn't shift.

"Okay." Harry pauses, before adding, "But if you were... I just... I mean, it's no hard feelings, is all. It turned out okay, didn't it, and I know you wouldn't- not now."

Draco stares at his hands. "How do you know what I would do?"

Harry is silent for a moment. "Would you do it?" he asks, finally, his voice soft. "If you could - do you think you would kill someone?"

"I don't know. Now? I guess- probably not."

"Do you think you would have then?"

Draco exhales, still not meeting Harry's eyes. He remembers Snape's words clearly – that, for some reason still unknown to either of them, Dumbledore had wanted Harry to believe that Draco would not have committed murder.

Draco glances at Harry, who is looking straight ahead. "No," he says, at last, not certain whether he is telling the truth.

"Yeah. I thought you wouldn't have, in the end."

Several minutes pass in silence, before Draco stands up slowly, dusting off his trousers. "I'm going back inside." He glances briefly down at Harry.

"Anyway, thanks," he mutters, after an awkward interval, resting his hand momentarily on Harry's shoulder.

"Sure – anytime," Harry manages, a stunned blush blooming across his cheeks.

To Ron's surprise, it is Hermione who interrupts their reading with a question out of nowhere.

"Ron, I was wondering- were Tonks and Charlie at school together?"

"Tonks and Charlie? Yeah, I reckon so." He stretches his arms out over his head, grateful for an excuse to put his reading aside. "Don't think they were best mates or anything. Why do you want to know?"

"I'm just curious... So, you don't think they were friends?"

"Not until they joined the Order." He shrugs. "No, Charlie was, like, ace at Quidditch, remember. He was all sorts of popular, had loads of girlfriends. And Tonks- I don't know. I reckon she studied a lot, or something."

"Well, she's an auror now, so I guess that studying paid off, didn't it?" Hermione replies, somewhat crossly.

"No, no – that came out wrong," Ron says shaking his head. "I just meant that she wasn't into Quidditch. And wasn't she, like, a Hufflepuff?" He tugs one of Hermione's curls affectionately. "It wasn't the studying. The studying was probably very sexy."

"Oh, hush," she says, smiling despite herself.

"Why so curious about them? Did Tonks say something about Charlie?"

"Oh, no. I just wondered- it seemed like there was something between them. I don't know."

"Mmmm, I don't know. She seems pretty into Remus, doesn't she?"

"I suppose." Hermione's forehead furrows. "Anyway, we ought to get back to research now, I expect."

"But Charlie's love life- I mean, that's important, isn't it?"

"Research. Seriously." But she is smiling.

Ron groans, sinking his head down onto his book with a dull thud.

The days run together, rainy mornings barely distinguishable from rainy afternoons, as they work their way through Hermione's collection of books. Twice, and with increasing desperation, Hermione returns to the Hogwarts library in search of any book that might contain the slightest hint about the locket. The sheer number of books now piled into the kitchen and living room is staggering.

Harry has taken to sitting in a particular chair beneath the window, where he can watch drops of rain streak down the glass while he flips listlessly through the pages. Ron and Hermione, for the most part, have claimed the couch in front of the telly; Ron occasionally catches glimpses of his own sleepy face reflected in its blank gray surface.

Draco has been reading in Harry's old bedroom, his room, with the door open just a crack. He's close enough to the living room that he can sometimes hear Weasley sighing, but it feels right to remain a little bit separate. Because he is a little separate, it feels prudent to remind himself. Harry, Ron, and Hermione are best mates, and always have been. And Draco – he knows they've moved beyond being enemies – he's stopped worrying they're going to hex them, that is. But sometimes the history among them seems insurmountable. Cursing Katie Bell, poisoning Weasley – for awhile, he almost convinced himself that these were actions from another lifetime, done by some other Draco. But really. It isn't as though anyone's forgotten about anything.

Draco emerges every once in awhile to trade in one set of useless books for another. "Nothing?" someone, usually Hermione, might ask him, as he sets a pile down on the coffee table.

"Nothing," he confirms. And now, for the most part, they've given up on asking.

"This is stupid. There's nothing here. There's no point," Harry remarks bitterly, after a day of general frustration, capped by an hour of stunning tedium.

"What's our choice, though?" Hermione says glumly.

Over a week has passed since their steak dinner, or the Last Supper, as Harry has come to think of it. The thrill of accomplishment, the wine, the banter at the table – it feels like another era. It's been eight days since then – hardly an outrageous amount of time to pass between destroying horcruxes. But they had such a nice momentum before, and now he feels entirely stuck. No ideas. No leads. Nothing.

Night falls slowly. Eventually, Ron yawningly unfolds his long body and leaves his station on the couch, its cushion retaining the imprint of his backside. He bids Harry and Hermione a sleepy goodnight, bending briefly to kiss Hermione on the forehead. Harry looks awkwardly away.

He then sinks deeper into his chair, the silence rising around him. The words of his book slide slowly, almost rhythmically, in front of his tired eyes. He yawns, pushes up his glasses, and carries on.

"I've about given up," murmurs Hermione with a sigh. Harry looks up at her.

"But we can't actually give up," he says, wanting nothing more than to snap his book shut, forever.

"Not on the locket." Hermione rubs her eyes, and lays her book gently on the coffee table. "But I don't think we're going to find anything in a book. Any book." And as soon as she says it, she looks stunned. Hermione Granger, abandoned by books. Or abandoning books.

This, heard through the crack of his bedroom door, is enough to make Draco look up from his book with a start.

"But the problem is," he hears Hermione continue, "I don't have a clue where to go from here."

"None of us have a clue," Harry says.

Hermione makes a frustrated little grunt. "It's just – it's disheartening, isn't it? The others came so easily."

"Yeah. I reckon we got spoiled, a bit. But look at it this way," he adds, "We got ourselves ahead of schedule, so we're still on track. More than on track." But Harry's own discouragement is poorly concealed.

"I suppose," Hermione murmurs, sounding unconvinced. She pauses, and then adds softly, "I have to admit, I was beginning to hope we might destroy them all by your birthday."

"By my birthday?"

Her voice sounds slightly choked. "I was thinking we might face him while you still had your mother's protection."

There is a long silence while Harry considers this.

"Hermione," he begins, finally. But he pauses, seemingly unsure of what to say.

And then he says two words that, for Draco, change absolutely everything.

"You can't think – it would be nice, I mean, yeah. But to rush into a confrontation, with no preparation? With Voldemort? We've got to have some kind of plan before we face him. And my mother's protection." Here, his voice catches. "It's not like it's going to help you three."

You three. Weasley and Granger, but also himself.

Up until now, Draco realizes, he hasn't quite allowed himself to take any of this entirely seriously. This summer, this surreal couple of weeks spent in the company of his former sworn enemies – what could he do but bump along, try to muddle through? It's impossible to know how to carry himself, how to speak, how to interact, how to be.

Draco wakes up each morning, and each morning he reminds himself that he's not in the Slytherin dormitory, he's not with his parents, he's not at home. He's not in a place he ever imagined he'd be welcome. But he's also not dead.

So he tries to be friendly to Granger and civil to Weasley, and he tries, he actually does try, to help them with their horcruxes. Mostly, he tries to dissociate himself from his past.

And this thing with Potter? Because there is a thing, something between them. Draco can hardly deny that he has been – flirtatious, to say the least. A week ago, he might have said he just enjoys seeing Potter blush and squirm. And though he'd never admit it out loud, he finds Harry Potter to be entirely cute when he's blushing and squirming. And when he's not.

But now, somehow, he is one of "you three," a group distinguished by Potter's general reluctance to see its members get killed. Draco has never been one of anyone's "you three" before, except maybe his mother's. But he's aware of a sort of pounding feeling in his chest, a jittery excitement in his limbs, an ineffable mix of joy and wistfulness.

Well, it's different from how he feels about his mother, anyway.

It's going to take a bit of work, he realizes, to act normal. If there is such a thing, between him and Potter.

Chapter 14

Wandering blearily into the kitchen the next morning, Harry is startled by a thump at the window. His fingers curve instinctively around his wand – but a second glance reveals only Hedwig, dangling a little brown package by a string in her beak, and smacking it against the glass. Harry's fists relax, and he slides open the window to let her in.

Once inside, Hedwig deposits the package in Harry's hand, and then, happy to be relieved of her burden, flies a lap around the living room. The package is from Charlie Weasley; Harry opens it to find a letter from Mrs. Weasley addressed to all of them and a shorter note from Charlie, commenting simply, "Mum's muffins are delicious!" Underneath, Mrs. Weasley has enclosed a dozen homemade blueberry, raspberry, and chocolate muffins.

Harry opens the letter and helps himself to a chocolate muffin, which he tucks into a napkin and carries into the living room. The letter, which includes no less than two full pages of Mrs. Weasley's small handwriting, touches upon all the expected points: gushing thanks for Ron's recent letter, a bit of news from home, and many anxious inquiries about their general health and safety. Harry smiles to himself, hearing Mrs. Weasley's voice in his head as he reads, and feeling oddly calmed and comforted by it. She has also enclosed a picture from the wedding, which features the beaming bride flamboyantly posed with her hands in the air, partially obscuring the groom's face with her bouquet.

Harry turns the picture over and finds a note written in familiar handwriting: "That's the most you can see of Bill's face in any of the pictures. No, really. Male photographer. –G." He snickers.

"Something funny?" Harry glances up as Draco settles in beside him on the couch. "Good morning," Draco adds.

Harry passes him the picture and remembers to offer him a muffin.

"Maybe later," he says to the muffin, yawning. "Oh," he remarks, "It's that French girl. And a Weasley, I suppose," he adds, spotting Bill in the picture, after a moment.

"Yeah, that's Ron's oldest brother Bill- you can kind of make him out behind the flowers. He was the groom," Harry explains.

Draco smirks, and murmurs, "Good luck to him" – earning another snicker from Harry.

There is a short silence.

"So," Draco asks, after a moment of staring blankly in the direction of the telly, "Granger and Weasley aren't awake yet?"

"Oh," says Harry, "They're awake. I heard Ron leaving our room a few hours ago, but I fell back asleep."

"But they're not out here," Draco observes. Harry gives him a wry, sideways glance. "Oh," says Draco, adding a few gratuitous syllables and grimacing slightly.

"I know," says Harry, leaning back on the couch with a sigh.

Draco watches Harry's chest rise and fall, his arms hanging heavily by his sides. The sleeve of Harry's gray t-shirt has ridden slightly up his arm, and Draco imagines tugging it back into place.

As if reading his mind, Harry stretches and then pulls his sleeve down. Draco looks away quickly, feeling a blush spread across his cheeks.

Ron and Hermione emerge after a few minutes, lips slightly swollen and cheeks flushed. "Oh, we're all awake," Hermione says brightly, "Good morning!"

Harry and Draco exchange knowing glances.

"What is that?" Ron asks shrewdly, honing in immediately on a crumb of chocolate muffin left inside Harry's crumpled napkin. Not bothering to wait for an answer, he takes it onto his finger and licks it off.

"It's dung," Harry says, his voice deadpan.

"It is not. It's my mum's chocolate muffins," Ron informs him, licking his lips. His eyes narrow. "You've been hiding them from me?"

"Oh, excuse me, should I have knocked on the door and announced their arrival this morning? Because it *seemed* like you were occupied, but-"

"ALL RIGHT," says Ron, laboring to hide a smile. Hermione has gone bright red.

"Anyway, they're in the kitchen," Harry says, "And they're delicious. *And* there's a letter, if you want to read it."

Harry holds up the letter, which is addressed to "Harry, Hermione, Draco, and My Darling Son Ron," and includes a concerned inquiry about Ron's hygiene in the first paragraph. "I'll read that later," Ron mutters, snatching it out of Harry's hands. "Accio muffins!"

"Any pumpkin ones?" Draco asks, looking over the selection.

"Oh no, Ron doesn't like pumpkin muffins," Hermione giggles, looking at Ron.

"Go ahead and tell it," says Ron, sighing with resignation. The endless humiliation of being a Weasley.

"Well, when Ron was little, he once ate an entire batch of pumpkin muffins in one sitting, because his brothers told him it was the only way to keep his hair from going white," she begins.

"It was right after a visit from Grandpa," explains Ron, his mouth full of muffin. "Anyway, I chucked up orange for the whole weekend."

Harry laughs. "I'm going to go out on a limb and guess Fred and George were the brothers in question?"

"Oh God, *them*," Draco says, so knowingly that everyone looks at him rather curiously.

Proceeding to put away an impressive quantity of muffins, they avoid discussing the locket until each crumb has been excavated from the corners of their mouths.

"So," Hermione finally says, "Should we..."

"NO," says Ron.

"The locket," she says firmly.

"Right," Harry agrees.

"Well," she begins, "Harry and I were talking... and we think it's time to change tactics."

She looks expectantly at Harry, who grins and says, "Oh, I want to hear you say it."

"If it makes you that happy," she rolls her eyes. "Well. Since there doesn't seem to be anything helpful in the books, we were thinking we should put them aside."

There is a moment of stunned silence as Ron and Draco consider this statement.

"No more books?" Ron repeats tentatively.

"For now," Hermione adds hastily. "But yes."

Ron closes his eyes and tilts his head upwards, his face the very picture of perfect joy and contentment.

"All right," Hermione says dryly. "This isn't going to be easy, you know."

"I know," agrees Ron, beaming.

"So now we just have to figure out how to destroy the locket," concludes Harry, "Based on intuition, I guess?"

"Well," Hermione says, "Let's start with what we know. For one thing, it's a locket."

The boys regard her blankly.

"So, that means something. Come on - this isn't the first time we've been through this. The key to defeating each horcrux so far has been to understand the properties of the object, right?"

"Right," says Draco. Harry and Ron nod uncertainly.

"Well. What does a locket signify?"

"Marriage?" Ron suggests, after a moments' hesitation.

Hermione nods. "That's sort of what I thought. Love, romance. It's worn against your heart."

"Okay, so, what? We put it on and snog?" Ron asks.

"Oh, please do," says Harry, "Right in front of us."

"And then there's the inside of the locket," Hermione continues, ignoring both of them, "The way it looks almost like a pensieve."

"But what does that have to do with love?" Harry pushes up his glasses.

"Nothing, necessarily. Except - " She blushes deeply.

"The pictures that come up when your wand touches the liquid gunk, right? Because mine," Ron's voice softens, and he looks at Hermione, "Shows you."

After three hours of discussing theories, testing spells on the locket itself, and giving ample grief to Ron and Hermione, the best and only practical idea they have developed is: go into the locket like a pensieve, keep your wand out, and see what happens.

"But it's too big of a risk," says Hermione. "We have no idea what we're up against – and honestly, it's probably going to be the worst of all of them."

"Why?" Asks Harry, simply.

"Because," says Hermione, sounding slightly exasperated, "It's Slytherin's locket. With the others, with Hufflepuff's cup and Ravenclaw's candlestick, he could curse them, sure. And I'm not saying they were easy curses to deal with." She flexes her hands, which are still slightly scarred from the candlestick. "But Slytherin? Voldemort understands Slytherin."

"So...," says Harry.

"So, this horcrux is probably going to be better integrated into the object than the others. And the nuances of the magic he used might be totally beyond our understanding."

"Well," says Draco, "I'm a Slytherin." Could this be Dumbledore's mysterious reason for wanting him to help with the horcruxes?

He realizes, after a moment, that the others are regarding him expectantly.

"I'm not saying I have a clue about the locket," he says quickly, "But I could tell you what I know about Slytherins. The way we think."

"Please do," Hermione says, nodding hopefully. Draco observes with some surprise that Potter and even Weasley seem to be watching, earnestly and intently, with no apparent intention of contributing their own opinions about Slytherins.

"Okay," Draco begins, feeling immediately self-conscious at being the object of such focused attention. "Well, what I think. Um." He pauses, organizing his thoughts. "I think of us as survivors. In that we'll do whatever it takes." He glances at the others, and even Hermione looks quizzical. He changes his approach. "Okay. Say you're faced with an enemy, someone terrifying and overwhelming, and it's likely that you'll die."

"Wonder what that would be like," Harry says flatly.

Draco continues. "Well, this is when you really see the differences between the four houses. Because- and there are exceptions, but. Okay. Hufflepuff. What are they going to do? They'll deny the situation, probably, as long as possible, but when it's standing right in front of them, they face it head on. Ravenclaw- they'll be perfectly cautious, plan very carefully. Mentally, they need to be one step ahead of the enemy, though, or they're scared shitless."

"And Gryffindor?" asks Hermione, regarding him with interest.

"Well, obviously, you know better than me. But what I think? You plan some. And you go with the flow, some. But the main thing is that you face the problem head on, right away, without waiting for it to come to you. And you don't seem to mind risking your necks."

"All right. And Slytherin?"

"Slytherins are completely different. We – we tend to be less direct and more planful, like Ravenclaw. But it's different. Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw ask the question, 'How can I defeat the enemy?' And in that way, it's very straightforward. But Slytherins ask the question, 'How can I survive?' And that can mean – anything. It can mean biding your time. Or finding a strong ally. Or even joining the bad guy."

"Hold on a tick," Ron can't resist interjecting, "So what you're saying is that *Slytherins* sometimes join the *bad guy*?"

Draco smiles slightly. "Yeah, well, the point is that we do whatever is necessary, if it helps us survive. Or if it helps protect the people we care about."

"I never thought of Slytherins as really caring about anyone but themselves," Ron points out, "No offense."

"See, you're wrong," Draco replies, gray eyes flashing. "For one thing, Slytherins are incredibly loyal to their families, more so than you could

imagine. That's why ancestry and bloodlines are so important to some of us. It has to do with honoring your family and your family's lineage."

"And the prejudice against Muggleborns?" Harry asks softly

Draco sighs. "I don't know. It's just - it doesn't make perfect sense." He glances at Hermione. "People fear what they don't know. Some Slytherins do see Muggleborns as a threat against their families, or against the integrity of their bloodlines."

"And you?" asks Hermione.

"Not anymore."

They are silent for a moment; and then, Hermione asks, "Well, what about love?"

"Romantic love?" clarifies Draco.

Hermione nods. "I guess I'm thinking about the locket."

"Slytherins," Draco says, "Are capable of loving very passionately."

Harry looks pointedly away, an odd lump rising in his throat.

"But not Voldemort," muses Hermione.

"Yes, that's true," Draco agrees. "He doesn't believe in it. And those who follow him are supposed to relinquish all other ties, to be able to walk away from their families and partners, and devote themselves entirely to him."

Hermione nods slowly. "It's hard to make sense of it. He doesn't believe in love, ridicules it even – and yet, expects – and receives – passionate devotion from his followers."

"Especially Bellatrix," mutters Harry.

"Right," says Hermione, thoughtfully, "And also. It's interesting how his followers will risk their lives for him, and then risk their families' lives. He takes the very things that Draco said are the most important, defining characteristics of these people as Slytherins, and he turns them on their heads."

"And he wasn't exactly looking out for his own family," Harry points out. "Seeing as he killed his father."

"Well, yes," says Hermione. "He's so driven to survive, to never die, but he doesn't trouble himself with any protectiveness toward others. Especially his family. And he allows others to love him deeply – relies on it, even – but he, himself, has never loved anyone."

Harry leans back in his chair. "But how does this help us with the locket?"

"I don't know." Hermione sighs. "I suppose this just makes it even more complicated. He's all contradiction. I don't have a clue what to expect."

There is a protracted, mooney silence, as they all consider this.

And then, suddenly, Draco rises to his feet. "You know what?" he says. "Let me do this." And, for the first time in weeks, he readies his wand.

The other three, of course, present a string of objections: he shouldn't go in alone – he should wait until they have more thoroughly prepared – he shouldn't be using magic, and therefore shouldn't go in at all. But Draco overrides everything by saying, to their general astonishment, that he believes Dumbledore had assigned this task especially to him. Which isn't entirely a lie – rather, it's one way to interpret a very vague truth.

Ultimately, they yield to Draco's resolve, with the caveat that one of them will follow him into the horcrux if he doesn't re-emerge after ten minutes.

"And you're not to try and break it on your own," emphasizes Hermione.

"This is just to collect information."

"And don't use magic unless you absolutely have to," adds Harry.

"I don't think they'll be able to trace me inside a horcrux."

"I know," Harry says, "But just in case." He sighs.

Draco, not used to being fussed over by anyone but his parents, is surprised to find that it's not entirely unpleasant. Feeling a bit like a hero, he taps his wand on the surface of the liquid on left side of the locket. He notes with mild surprise that only the left side reveals a picture of his face; the right side shows someone with much darker hair...

Taking a deep breath, Draco dips his finger tentatively into the liquid, watching the image of his own face distort as it swirls around his fingertip. He has a moment to wonder why nothing seems to be happening – and

then, suddenly, he finds himself in a heap on the floor in an empty room with bright white walls.

His heart pounding, Draco checks for his wand – thankfully, he is still clenching it tightly in one hand. Slowly, he stands up and dusts himself off. He then walks carefully around the perimeter of the room, tracing the walls with his fingertips. They look and feel like regular walls, if a bit bare. It's a rather small room, and there isn't a door.

There is no one to fight and nothing to do. In some ways this is good; for one thing, his heart has resumed its normal pace. But then, with no clear enemy or obstacle, it's hard to imagine how they will proceed in destroying the horcrux. What are their options? Painting the walls?

After a few minutes of staring at blank, white walls, Draco concludes that he has seen all that there is to see. He closes his eyes tightly and fills his mind with images of the house in Godric's Hollow, of Hermione and Weasley, of Potter – and he prepares to be transported.

Opening his eyes, he is startled to find that he is still surrounded by whiteness. He tries again, but nothing happens. Then, he tries it holding his wand. Then, trying not to panic, he tries to apparate. Nothing.

Draco looks around the room with a dawning sense of horror. He's stuck inside a locket. And in a minute and a half, he will be joined by one of the other three, and they will both be stuck. They'll die in here. He'll never see his mother again. He'll never eat another elf pastry. Never play Quidditch again. Never know what might have happened with –

Harry Potter. Here, suddenly, in this room that is no longer blank. But it's a version of Potter that Draco only recognizes from photographs, a Potter with no glasses, no scar, and a mouth only half full of teeth. He is fifteen months old, standing up in the crib that has since been transfigured into Draco's own bed. Potter's mother is leaning up against the crib, her green eyes filled with terror, begging, "Not Harry! Not Harry! Please – I'll do anything –"

And then, coming from behind Draco, a chilling, high-pitched voice, all too familiar, saying coldly, "Stand aside. Stand aside, girl. Draco turns around, shaking, but the Dark Lord looks through him, can't see him. No one can. Potter's mother, trembling, shakes her head and keeps her feet firmly planted on the carpet. There is a bright green light and the crisply enunciated words, "*Avada Kedavra*." Potter's mother screams – and then crumples to the ground at once.

Draco watches, stunned, as the baby Potter crouches in his crib to look at his mother. His face spells only confusion. He is gripping a little yellow blanket in one wet fist, the other hand clamped around the bar of his crib. He looks questioningly up at Voldemort, who sweeps forward toward him, laughing mercilessly. Potter whimpers softly – and then he begins to sob.

Then, in a voice like jagged ice, again: *Avada Kedavra.*

And even though Draco knows this story, knows what happens next, he cannot keep himself from screaming, over and over, "POTTER, POTTER, POTTER, POTTER – HARRY!!!" A salty tear slides into the corner of his mouth.

I'm okay! Draco, is that you? says a voice in his head.

Harry? From the crib, the baby is howling, both hands on his forehead.

I think I'm in your memory. I see your father. And there's a baby. It's you, right? It has to be. Are you watching this, too?

No, I'm – I'm seeing something else. It's suddenly hard for Draco to breathe. *I think I'm in your memory.*

When? How old am I?

Draco pauses. *I just watched your mother die.*

Are you okay? asks Harry, his voice soft in Draco's head.

But abruptly, the scene changes. Harry's old bedroom disappears, and is replaced by a tidy sitting room with Muggle décor. An enormous, mannish woman with a bit of a moustache lumbers across the room, a stout bulldog trotting at her heels. She clasps her beefy hands together, muttering, "Where is that boy?"

Suddenly, the dog runs toward a pink floral couch in the middle of the room, and begins barking frantically. "What have you found, Ripper?" the woman asks, her voice dangerously sweet. The dog whines, and tries to shove his oversized head underneath the couch. "Is there something under there?"

She closes the distance between herself and the couch with two giant steps, and then stuns Draco by lifting the couch on its end with one hand. Lying stiffly on the floor is Harry, age five or six, his eyes clenched shut behind crooked glasses.

"UP!" barks the woman. Harry twitches, but ignores her. Grunting furiously, the woman takes Harry by the elbow and yanks him to his feet. Draco watches Harry's hands shoot down with lightning speed to hike up his oversized pants before they slip down. Seeker reflexes. But the woman laughs cruelly and says, "Don't bother," yanking them down again. She then flings Harry over her knee and spansks him repeatedly, while his whole face lights up red. The moustached woman simply grins and asks Ripper to go fetch her a stick, before turning again to Harry. "So, you thought you'd get away with stealing Dudley's candy, did you?"

Draco! Are you there?

I'm here. Sorry. I got a new memory. Ripper is trotting across the room with a heavy stick. Harry's eyes widen, and he twists and squirms, to no avail, under the woman's iron grip.

Another of mine?

Yes.

Something bad?

Um. Yes.

Yours are bad, too. I'm on my third.

What is it? Draco finds himself curious.

Someone's breaking into your house. Harry's voice trembles in Draco's head. Trying to kill your father, I think.

Draco is suddenly very aware of the sound of his own heartbeat. *I had forgotten about that, he thinks. I was four years old. It was terrifying. Some of my father's old associates weren't too pleased with him for claiming to be under the Imperius, after the Dark Lord fell.*

Draco watches the Muggle woman beat the child Harry across the shins with a stick, as the bulldog looks on, salivating. Harry isn't crying. His eyes are shut, and his jaw is clenched tight. He looks as if he is trying to transport himself away.

What is this? says the Harry in his head. *Do you think it's the horcrux? How can we make it stop?*

I don't know. The memories didn't start until you got here, I guess. Before that, I was just in a blank, white room, and I couldn't get back.

You tried to get back to Godric's Hollow?

I tried a couple of times, but nothing worked.

A pause. *Maybe you were only stuck because the horcrux needed both of us.* The thought of what this might mean hangs in the air, unspoken.

Should we try to get back? Harry says, finally. *Maybe if we both do it at the same time.*

It's worth a try. Count of three? Closing his eyes tight, Draco reaches out with his mind, trying to wrap his thoughts around the bed in Harry's parents' house. But the bed makes him think of Harry's crib. Which makes him think of Harry's mother's crumpled body on the floor. Which makes him think of Harry's wide eyes looking up at Voldemort.

Are you still here? asks Harry.

Still here. It didn't work.

Didn't work for me either. I keep getting distracted by your memories. Harry pauses. *I never knew any of this happened to you.*

The scene changes again. This time, Draco recognizes his surroundings – he's in the Forbidden Forest. Behind him, he hears heavy panting and leaves crunching beneath shoes. He turns around to look. It's Hagrid's beast of a dog, tongue hanging out of his wet mouth. And then Harry, age eleven, emerging from the thick trees. And a step behind him –

That's me! Draco thinks, incredulously.

What? asks Harry, in his head.

Draco remembers this. Detention, their first year. Walking through the Forbidden Forest with Harry. He had been utterly terrified at the time. But now – it's amazing, glimpsing this again. Draco's eleven-year-old self watches Harry carefully. When Harry glances over his shoulder to check on him, first-year Draco sneers; and yet, when Harry turns back around, Draco hurries to catch up to him.

It takes Draco's breath away, watching this. He isn't sure why.

He watches the scene unfold, seeing and then remembering that the leaves and branches are covered with splashes of silvery unicorn blood. And then- "Look," says first-year Harry. Both Dracos follow Harry's eyes to see the unicorn itself, legs splayed out strangely, its fur shockingly white.

And then. A slithering sound. Movement in a bush. And next, something horrible, something hooded, slinking toward the unicorn, bending over it, drinking its blood.

Draco watches as his eleven-year-old self freeze and then tremble, and he remembers the terror he felt. And then he watches himself run away, as fast as he can, the dog bounding behind him, leaving Harry alone. Then, suddenly, Harry falls to the ground, clutching his forehead and wincing in a way that makes Draco feel smacked with shame.

You keep disappearing! complains Harry.

It takes Draco a moment to realize he's not talking about the forest. *I'm sorry. It was another memory. I get caught up.*

It's okay. Me too. I think that's the problem. Us getting distracted.

Maybe, says Draco, considering this. *Or...*

Or what? Harry asks eagerly.

Well. How to phrase this without saying too much. *Do you remember what I said about Voldemort, and the whole idea of being able to walk away from the people you – want to protect.* Draco is clumsy in his avoidance of the word "love."

Sort of. I don't know what you mean.

I mean, Draco's ideas are still half-formed, *I wonder if we're stuck here because.* He pauses. *I think the thing that's holding us here is each other.*

I'm sorry. I don't mean to be thick, but...

Sorry. I think... I think that in order to get out of here, we have to, his heart pounds, *We have to not care what happens to each other. Not care about what's happening in each other's memories. Just totally walk away.*

Harry is quiet for a moment; and then, *It does make sense. Because, thinking about Voldemort, he's threatened when people give a crap about*

each other. He can't trust you if you can't walk away from everyone but him. And he doesn't even believe in –

But Harry stops abruptly, hung up on a particular word.

Well, Draco thinks, Shall we try it? I won't give a crap about you if you won't give a crap about me.

Couldn't hurt.

Draco, standing among the trees of the Forbidden Forest, closes his eyes. He plugs his ears with his fingers. He empties his mind of everything related to Harry Potter, and allows only visions of his own escape to filter in. The kitchen table at the house in Godric's Hollow. The feeling of tile underneath his feet. The brightly colored dishes stacked haphazardly in the cabinets. He feels a slight tug, and he realizes with relief that he is being sent back home. He wonders how Harry is getting on.

Feeling a jolt, Draco's eyes snap suddenly open. He is still surrounded by trees. He's still in Harry's memory.

Are you still here? asks Harry's voice, in his mind.

You have to not care about that!

I know. But I do. And so do you, I guess, or you wouldn't be here.

Never mind that. Let's try again.

This time, Draco allows himself to think only of the locket. The snakelike clasp. The engraved letter "S." The long, linked chain. The liquid portal through which he came, revealing his face when he touched it with his wand. Revealing Harry's face on the other side...

Grunting with frustration, Draco opens his eyes again. This time, he is surrounded by blank, white, walls – and then, a moment later: some kind of graveyard, Death Eaters assembling.

What happened? he ventures to ask.

I got out, Harry replies promptly, *But you weren't out yet, so I came back.*

Draco doesn't know what to say.

Let's try again, says Harry. You don't have to think about the house. It's not like apparating. It's easiest if you just empty your mind for a minute. I made a loud buzzing noise, until I couldn't think of anything else, and that helped.

Okay.

Ready?

Draco shuts his eyes and makes a loud and continuous buzzing sound with his tongue, feeling like a giant prat. He's annoying himself, even. He squeezes his eyes shut even tighter. And then he opens them.

Draco is being hugged.

He blinks. He is being hugged by Hermione Granger.

"Oh, thank God," she says, releasing him, only to envelop a bewildered looking Harry. "You're both okay."

"We got out of the horcrux," Draco realizes. "How long were we gone?"

"A little over an hour," says Weasley, whom Draco only now notices is sitting on the other side of the table. "It was really creepy. So, your bodies were still right here, but you were, like, totally frozen, but your *faces* were like – " He closes his eyes, but twists and contorts his face. "Like that."

"Weird," says Harry. Draco looks at him.

"Well, why don't we all sit down, and you can tell us what it was like in there. And I'll put on some tea." Hermione looks as though she's gearing up to fuss over them in a major way, and Draco doesn't much mind. "And you two are hungry, I expect."

"I'm hungry," pipes Ron.

They settle in on the couches with tea and the last of the muffins. Draco and Harry look at each other, unsure of where to begin.

"Well, the good news," Harry says to start, "Is that we know what's in there, and we know how to get out, if we need to. So, that's helpful for next time."

"Next time?" Hermione inquires.

Draco and Harry look at her.

"The horcrux broke as soon as you both came out. You didn't know? Here, look." She passes the locket to Harry, who then passes it to Draco. He looks at the open locket in his hands. The liquid appears to have emptied, leaving only the slightly concave, tarnished metal surface that once lay beneath it.

There is nothing left for Harry and Draco to do but exchange weak smiles and a quick high five.

Chapter 15

"He's still sleeping?" asks Hermione, as Ron steps into the hallway, easing the bedroom door shut behind him.

"Out cold. I haven't seen him like that since History of Magic."

"Do you think we should... I mean, Merlin knows he needs the sleep, but Tonks and Charlie should be here any moment." Anxiously, she checks her watch. "And Draco's door is still closed..."

"That horcrux really knocked them out, huh."

Hermione nods, biting her lip.

"Hey," Ron says, his voice gentle. He catches her under the arms and hugs her tightly. "They're fine. The horcrux is broken. Tonks and Charlie will get here when they get here, and the world won't end if they see Harry and Malfoy in their pajamas." Hermione nods, her head buried in Ron's chest.

"What are you so worried about?" asks Ron, after a moment, tugging idly on one of her curls.

"I don't know," she says softly. "Just thinking about what's next, I guess. The snake. I think I liked it when we weren't dealing with anything alive."

"Well," says Ron, giving her a quick kiss on the head, "Here's what I think. Let's go line up the horcruxes on the kitchen table, and spend the morning showing off how awesome we are to my brother and Tonks. And then let's take a little bit of a break, because we've earned one. And *then*," he lifts his head, drawing back slightly to look her in the eyes, "We'll start working on a plan for the snake. And we'll come up with something so totally badass that he won't stand a chance. We'll break him just like we broke the rest of them. Okay?"

"Okay." Hermione looks up at him and smiles.

"Good," Ron declares gruffly, bending down to kiss her.

Naturally, Harry chooses this precise moment to shuffle out from the bedroom in his slippers, choking on a yawn as he notices them embracing in the hallway.

"Oh – Harry, you're up!" squeaks Hermione, pulling away from Ron with a start.

"I should. Er. I'm going to go get dressed now. Before Tonks and Charlie get here. Good morning!" Harry gives a twitchy nod, makes an abrupt about face, and retreats to his room.

Hermione's face has gone bright red. "Oops," Ron mutters.

But when they catch eyes, they are both lost to giggles.

As it turns out, Draco is also awake, and is nursing his second cup of coffee by the time Tonks and Charlie arrive.

"Wotcher!" Tonks says brightly, when Hermione answers the door. Her voice is perfectly cheerful, but Hermione immediately notices that her usually electric pink hair is a listless, dull rose. Charlie greets Hermione with a fist bump in the entryway, saying, "I hear you lot finished your third horcrux. Nice work, then."

They congregate in the kitchen, and proceed to ravage a basket of homemade pastries brought from headquarters; Charlie and Tonks gratefully accept mugs of coffee. The broken horcruxes are then presented for inspection, and Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Draco are amply praised.

"I'm so impressed. Really," says Tonks. "I can't even tell you."

"It's the first good news we've had all week," adds Charlie.

Harry pauses, mid-bite. "Is everyone okay?"

"Oh yeah. Yeah. Sorry," says Charlie, "Didn't mean to spook you. Everyone's fine now."

"Now?" asks Hermione, narrowing her eyes.

Tonks and Charlie exchange glances. "Well," says Tonks, finally, "Kingsley Shacklebolt had a bit of a run-in with a pair of Death Eaters. Macnair, I believe, and Rastaban Lestrangle. But he's fine now," she adds quickly, noting the looks of horror on their faces. "He's in St. Mungo's right now, and looks to be recovering well. So I guess yours is really the second good news, isn't it?"

"What happened?" Harry asks quietly.

"Well. We're still trying to get to the bottom of these Muggle deaths that keep happening – happened again, if you didn't know, near Aberdeen." Tonks shakes her head wearily, "So, we had noticed some suspicious activity there on our maps, and Kingsley was investigating the situation. Macnair and Lestrange managed to take him by surprise, and they performed the *Cruciatus* on him." Hermione gasps. "But fortunately," continues Tonks, "We were tracking Kingsley on the maps at the time, and it looks like we were able to intervene in time to prevent any permanent damage."

"What about Macnair and Lestrange?" asks Ron, visibly shaken.

"They got away," says Charlie, glumly. "Listen, though. There's nothing to worry about now. Kingsley's fine. Everyone's fine. Hermione, your parents say hi, and they miss you. Lucky for them, there are loads of other Muggles hiding out in headquarters, so they get a bit of a break from Dad every now and again."

"Oh, and Draco," Tonks chimes in, "Your mum sent something for you. Let me..." She pauses, rifling through her bag. "Here you go. She bought you a big stack of Muggle clothes. It's sweet, really. She seems to be coming around to Muggles, in her way."

Draco accepts the stack of starched shirts and trousers, nodding incredulously.

"And also," murmurs Tonks, glancing briefly at Charlie with a kind of wicked twinkle in her eye, "I wanted to talk to you lot about – OOPS! Oh dear. And all over Harry! It isn't still very hot, is it?"

Harry, dripping with coffee, looks down at himself, a bit stunned. "No, just wet."

"That won't take but a minute to clean," Hermione assures him, whipping out her wand.

"Actually, I think he should take a proper shower," Tonks interjects quickly, "To get the smell out. Don't you?"

"Definitely," replies Charlie.

"Oh... okay," murmurs Hermione, looking confused.

Harry shrugs and heads for the bathroom. Tonks pauses for a minute, ears perked. Then, when the sound of running water carries into the kitchen, she lowers her voice conspiratorially.

"So," she says, "Harry's birthday is in just about a week. Have you thought at all about what you want to do?"

"And here I thought you were just being clumsy," Ron laughs, "Well played! But yeah, we've talked about it a little, me and Hermione."

"But we haven't really come up with any really good present ideas," Hermione adds, glancing hopefully at Tonks. "You don't have anything in mind, do you?"

"Well, no, not for a present. But I was thinking of wrangling everyone and bringing them down for a surprise birthday brunch – well, not *everyone*. Just the Weasleys, Remus, and Hagrid, probably. Oh, and me. You don't think he'd want his aunt there, do you?"

Ron and Hermione exchange a grimace. "I doubt it," says Ron, "But the brunch idea is excellent."

"Great – then it's settled."

"And let us know if you start coming up with ideas for presents," Ron adds, scratching his head. "Not a clue what to get him. He's got all the sweets he wants here. I'm sure he doesn't want another book. And it's not like we can get him Quidditch stuff, seeing as there's no Quidditch here. I don't know. I'm stumped." Ron sighs. "And it's his coming of age, too."

"So it's got to be really special," concludes Hermione, cupping her chin in her hand, and staring pensively at the wall.

"Well," Draco says tentatively.

Ron looks up at him, gaping, a crumb of pastry trembling in the corner of his mouth. "*You* have an idea?"

"Yes, *I* have an idea. Maybe."

"Well, let's hear it," Charlie says, nodding encouragingly.

Draco shrugs, blushing slightly. "It probably wouldn't work, so don't get your hopes up," he warns, "But I was thinking. Directly above my bed, if you look up, there's actually a door cut out of the ceiling. I assume it's an attic."

"Oh yes, there should be one there," agrees Hermione, "Wizarding houses usually have the entrance to the attic above the center of the house."

The others turn to stare at her. "I never knew that," says Tonks.

"Oh, well, I read it in a book. Anyway - you were saying, Draco."

"Well, I haven't entirely thought it through yet, and there are a couple of things I can't figure out, but - oh hi, Harry. All showered?"

Ron whips abruptly around to face Harry, who regards all of them with vague suspicion. "Why are you all looking at me like that?"

"Don't know what you're talking about," Charlie says.

"Anyone want another pastry?" Tonks asks brightly.

All throughout the next week, Harry is aware of a whisper of a secret, crackling all around him. He walks past the computer, and Hermione hurriedly closes a browser window; he walks past the couch, and she snaps a book shut. Ron's been waking up before nine, seemingly voluntarily. And it doesn't take Harry long to realize that, every time he's speaking to one of the three of them - Hermione, Ron, or Draco - the other two manage to slip off somewhere together. On Sunday, he'd actually caught Ron and Hermione slinking out of Draco's room, carrying wands.

"What were you two doing in there?" he had asked them.

"Oh," Ron had said. "Snogging."

An obvious lie. For all that they seem resigned to being teased about it, Ron and Hermione wouldn't actually admit they had been snogging if they had got caught clamped to each other's mouths.

"Are you guys going to tell me what's going on?" Harry had asked, which had earned him a series of the feeblest, most unconvincing blank looks imaginable.

On Tuesday, Harry had walked into the kitchen to hear Hermione saying, "The hardest part really is finding a way to expand the space. After that, I mean – " But she had stopped talking abruptly; Ron, eyes bulging as he noticed Harry entering the kitchen, had shoved an entire croissant in her mouth.

So Harry had given them each a long, withering look, before retreating to the living room in dignified silence.

On the morning of his seventeenth birthday, Harry wakes up slowly, his bed striped with sunlight coming through the blinds. Ron's already up and about somewhere, but he's left an indentation of his head in the pillow. Harry yawns, feels around for his glasses, and slides lazily out of bed. Catching a glance of himself in the mirror, his first concern is to paw at his hair until gravity reclaims its dubious hold; then, smiling self-consciously at his reflection, he allows himself to consider, briefly, the sense of possibility that comes with a birthday.

It's strange. Underneath his rumpled gray shirt, his heart is pounding.

He feels awkward as he walks into the living room, as if a camera is tracking his movements. The room is empty, he realizes, but for Draco, who is stretched sideways on the couch, watching some sort of American talk show on the telly.

"Good morning," Harry says, sitting on the arm of the couch, and feeling oddly shy.

Draco promptly sits up; he tucks his legs up to make room on the couch for Harry, who slides obligingly onto the seat.

"Happy birthday," he says, turning to smirk at him. "Feel any older?"

"Oh, definitely. And wiser."

"We can hope," Draco replies, with a hint of his old drawl – earning him a prompt whack on the foot from Harry's fist. On the telly, a bloke in an undershirt is waiting for the results of a paternity test.

"Where have Ron and Hermione got off to?" Harry asks, after a moment.

"Getting your birthday cake."

"Oh, really?" Harry asks, suspiciously.

Draco raises his eyebrows. "It's your birthday, isn't it?"

"They're not even going to try to be stealthy about it? After an entire week of secrecy and lies?"

"Oh, they asked me to cover for them - but you wouldn't have believed me, and I couldn't be bothered."

"Fair enough," Harry concedes, smiling.

He is startled, at once, by a loud knock at the door. Glancing at Draco with narrowed eyes, he suddenly observes that Draco is already scrubbed and dressed for the day. "All right. Who are we expecting?" he asks.

Draco shrugs, grinning. "Why don't I get the door. You can get dressed," he offers, grazing his fingers briefly across Harry's elbow, "And then you can see for yourself."

Something flutters inside Harry's chest, and it is with considerable effort that he refrains from gazing at the point of momentary contact between Draco's fingers and his elbow. Pushing up his glasses as he slides off the couch, he manages to bite back a grin until the door of his bedroom shuts behind him.

Moments later, peering through the cracked door of the kitchen with some trepidation:

"Harry!" Ginny is the first to notice him. "Happy birthday!" She hugs him, and, over her shoulder, Harry is secretly pleased to catch a disgruntled look flash across Draco's features. Ginny takes his hand and leads him to the seat at the head of the kitchen table. There is a gold paper crown resting on his plate, a small tornado of confetti swirling above his chair, and a full spread of French toast, pastries, bacon, sausage, and pumpkin juice. Harry has just a moment to take in the dozen familiar faces grinning at him beneath cone-shaped party hats, before he is enveloped in a sudden hug, his cheek mashed tightly against Mrs. Weasley's bosom.

"*Mum*," says Ginny, mortified.

Harry, once released from Mrs. Weasley's loving iron grip, looks dazedly from Hagrid to Bill to Ron and Hermione, who have just arrived carrying a

giant chocolate cake. Fred and George, he observes, are dressed in matching tuxedos, complete with black bowties. George, catching Harry's eye, gives his bowtie a sharp tug.

"I'm afraid it's nothing personal," says Charlie, shaking his head and leaning toward Harry. "They haven't taken them off since Bill's wedding."

"And we've been absolute witch magnets and champions of seduction ever since," explains Fred.

"Wow, champions?" says Ginny, "And who, pray tell, have you managed to seduce?"

"Loads of women."

"Loads?"

"Well, we're making reasonable headway with the Muggle who works at the suit cleaner's."

"Ah. I thought so," Ginny concludes, sweetly.

Draco, eyes darting among the redheads, looks slightly overwhelmed.

Meanwhile, Harry finds himself trapped in a conversation with Fleur. "And now everyone iz asking us, when air we going to have a bebe?" She laughs. "Everyone iz wanting to know, because zey air convinced our bebe would be vairy beautiful, non? But I am not wanting to turn into a fat cow!" Harry shakes his head quickly, and tries to swallow his mouthful of sausage.

"Um - "

"Oh, 'Arry, you flatter me! My Bill, he is always telling me that I must be watching out for the young boys who air always falling in love with me. You, 'Arry, air still underage, non?"

"It's his seventeenth birthday today, dear," Bill reminds her.

"Iz it? Well," she looks at Harry appraisingly. "You are looking so vairy young still, almost like a little boy."

Ron smirks audibly, but his smile fades fast when Fleur turns toward him, wondering aloud whether he has gained weight.

By the end of the meal, Harry has shared lengthy birthday conversations with so many of his guests that his food has gone cold. Lupin, however, slips a bar of chocolate into his hand under the table. Harry catches his eye and smiles gratefully. Lupin, he notices, has been almost silent throughout the meal, and he has giant circles beneath his eyes. Harry tries to remember if there has been a full moon recently. Needless to say, whatever the nature of Lupin's turmoil, Harry is pleased to note that he looks much livelier after the chocolate cake is served.

After the last bites of icing are scraped from the plates, there is a sudden frenzy of meaningful glances exchanged among the group. Harry endures it patiently, pretending to be absorbed by something in the bottom of his cup. Finally, Tonks clears her throat.

"Harry, I believe it's time for your birthday present."

Harry nods happily, and leans back in his chair – but all at once, everyone gets up from the table. Underneath the commotion of fourteen chairs being pushed in, Harry mutters to Ron, "What's going on?"

Ron grins. "You'll see."

There is a general movement in the direction of Draco's room. Harry looks questioningly at Charlie, who shrugs. The room, small to begin with, is cramped beyond endurance with the addition of over a dozen bodies, including Hagrid's. The group crowds onto Draco's bed, lines up against the wall, and hovers in the doorway. Harry stands aimlessly in the middle of the room, a bit overwhelmed by the attention.

"Give him the you-know-what first," prompts Ron, bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet with excitement. An unwieldy bundle is passed overhand from Hermione to Lupin to Ginny to Mr. Weasley, and, finally, to Harry.

"Should I open it?" he asks shyly.

"YES!" exclaim the twins in unison. "Of freaking course," adds Fred.

Harry unwraps the bundle carefully, and finds that it contains four broomsticks: his Firebolt, a Comet, and a couple of Cleansweeps. "Thanks, guys!" he says, trying to mask his confusion. "I've been missing my Firebolt. And now I've really got my pick of broomsticks, huh."

Hermione puts a hand on his shoulder. "It will make more sense in a moment," she says. Then, pointing her wand at a little rectangle in the

ceiling that Harry has never noticed, she says, firmly, "*Alohomora!*" The rectangle, apparently some kind of door, slides slowly open, revealing a rectangular hole in the ceiling.

"What's up there?" asks Harry, feeling suddenly excited

"Well," says Tonks, "Why don't you hop on your Firebolt and find out?"

Mounting his Firebolt for the first time in months, Harry does a lap around the room, before guiding the broom carefully through the hole in the ceiling.

Expecting a dark attic, Harry is stunned to find himself surrounded by the bright light of day. For one sinking moment, he is sure he has flown through the roof of the house and out into the world, on his broomstick in broad daylight, in a neighborhood of Muggles.

And then he looks down.

There are no houses beneath him. No Muggle girls from next door mucking about in their sprinkler. No poles or telephone wires. There is only bright green grass, and a little dark rectangular door leading back to Draco's room. Above Harry, there is only the expansive, blue sky and a few lazy clouds. And on either side of him, spread far apart from each other, are two sets of regulation sized goal hoops.

Hovering in midair, Harry is rendered speechless. They have turned the attic into a Quidditch pitch.

He flies upward, into the charmed sky, testing its limits. There is an invisible edge to the sky, but it is rubbery to the touch. He tries flying into it, and bounces backward, somersaulting gracefully on his broomstick. He flies into it harder, to the same effect. You could really play Quidditch in here, he realizes. Somehow, the space of the attic has been stretched to allow for generous flying space – a triumph of creative magic that only Hermione's abilities could have managed. The rubbery boundaries of the space can be bumped and crashed into without harming the flyer or the broom. It's the next best thing to open sky.

Exhilarated, he flies a few soaring laps around the goal posts and through the clouds. After a moment, he is joined by Ron, hooting triumphantly as he shoots through the rectangular hole on the Comet. Draco follows momentarily on one of the Cleansweeps; and, finally, Hermione makes a shaky entrance on the other. She is struggling to maintain a hold on a bulging, twisting sack, tied off festively with a bow.

"Harry, quick, open this before it opens itself!"

As soon as his fingers make contact with the sack, it bursts open, and a Quaffle and two Bludgers shoot out. A Golden Snitch follows, fluttering excitedly around Harry's head, before flying off somewhere past the goals. Hermione shakes out the bag, and hands Harry two Beater bats. "Well. Happy birthday," she says, "Oh, and also. The sky in here will change to match the weather outside. So, it will be dark at night, and you'll get rain in here and everything."

"I – " says Harry. Holding a bat in each hand, he looks from Ron to Hermione to Draco. "How did you think of it?"

"It was Draco's idea," says Hermione.

Harry turns to stare at him; Draco's face colors slightly, but he doesn't look away.

"It's perfect," Harry says softly. "Thank you."

"Sure," says Draco uncomfortably. Then, without warning, he shoots upward on his broomstick like the Seeker he once was.

The party guests clear out by late afternoon, after Ginny, Fred, George, and Charlie have had a nice, long turn on the Quidditch pitch. Harry, Ron, Draco, and Hermione spend the rest of the afternoon and early evening on the edge of catatonia, sprawled across the couches, munching on leftover cake.

There is a pub in town, a few blocks away, and Ron has convinced them that standard birthday protocol requires them to pay a visit. As the sky begins to dim, they retreat to their respective rooms to get cleaned and dressed for a night out.

Draco, thanks to the load from his mother, is no longer at a loss for Muggle clothes. He chooses a crisp white collared shirt over pressed trousers. He studies himself in the mirror. His cheeks are a bit flushed, but he supposes it could be worse. Inhaling, and then slowly exhaling, he wanders out into the living room. It seems he's the first one ready; he can hear the sounds of running water coming from both bathrooms.

But then, moments later, he hears approaching footsteps. His heart pounds lightly – but it's only Weasley. Dressed casually in jeans, Ron folds himself

into a chair and acknowledges Draco with a nod. He taps his fingers gently on the arm of the chair and sighs.

Then, suddenly, he turns to Draco. "Is that what you're wearing?"

Draco looks down at his outfit. "I was planning on it. Why?"

"Stand up for a minute."

Draco stands and regards him shyly.

"Yeah, no, you can't wear that."

"What's wrong with it?"

"What's wrong with it? Are we going to an opera, or are we going to a pub?"

"A pub," Draco says, uncertainly.

"Exactly. So go put on something, you know, normal."

Draco pauses. "I don't have anything not like this."

"Really?" Ron says, grimacing slightly. He frowns thoughtfully. "Well. Okay. Do you mind if I try something?" He reaches for his wand.

"Seriously?"

"Yes, seriously," says Ron. He looks sternly at Draco. "I'm trying to help you."

"Okay..."

"Good!" Ron studies him carefully, and then squints his eyes tightly closed. Pointing his wand toward Draco, he mutters something under his breath. He opens his eyes, biting his lip nervously. "Oh!" he exclaims, clearly surprised. "It worked!"

Draco looks down, and is startled to find that his collared white shirt has been transfigured to a soft tee-shirt; his trousers have changed to dark blue jeans.

"Go look in the mirror," encourages Ron, looking enormously pleased with himself.

Draco does this, intrigued. Then, returning to the living room, he says, "Do you think you could make it a bit tighter?"

"Tighter?" Asks Ron.

"Definitely," says Draco, pinching a handful of fabric away from his body to show him. "It's good. I like it. But it's a little too big."

Ron shakes his head. "No, no. You don't want to look like a nancy."

"A what?"

"A nancy. A homosexual. You know."

Draco is quiet for a moment; and then, before he realizes what he's saying, "Well. I am one."

"*What?*" Draco observes with detached interest that Weasley's jaw has actually dropped; he had thought that was just an expression.

"Gay. I'm gay," he clarifies. And, with that, he has come out for a second time. The first time to Moaning Myrtle, and the second to Ron Weasley. Blinking numbly, he steadies himself on the arm of the couch.

Ron stares at him in surprise. "Really?" he asks, after a moment, in a hushed voice. Draco nods. "Do Hermione and Harry know?"

"Um. No. I don't think so," he says.

"Huh," Ron says. He is silent for a moment. "You're really... gay?"

"Really, really gay."

"And I'm the only one who knows?"

"Except Moaning Myrtle."

"Oh, good thinking! I bet that put her off."

Draco smiles crookedly. "Let's hope."

"But you – I can't believe it. Why did you tell me?"

"I don't know," Draco says, sighing.

"I'm cool with it," Ron assures him, "As long as – I mean, you know *I'm* straight."

"Obviously," replies Draco, rolling his eyes.

Ron nods slowly. "Thanks for telling me. I'm, like, weirdly honored. And I'll do your clothes as tight as you want them. Now that I understand." And with that, he gives Draco a knowing wink.

Draco, feeling an odd rush of relief, sinks happily into the couch.

"You really think they'll let us through the doors?" Harry asks, running his hand nervously through his damp hair. "None of us are eighteen."

Ron shrugs. "So, we'll blast the bouncer with the Confundus."

"Ron!" Hermione looks horrified.

"What?"

"We can't use magic outside the house. We could be traced, you know that! And it's more important now than ever, now that Harry doesn't have – "

"*Right*, I forgot. Sheesh. Not the Confundus, then."

"Okay," says Harry, "Then do we just hope they don't notice we're underage, or what?"

"Maybe one of us could *seduce* the bouncer," Ron suggests, with a furtive grin in Draco's direction. Draco's eyes flash murderously.

Hermione smiles guiltily, oblivious to this exchange. "I made us I.D. cards, and I took some liberties with our birthdays." She reaches into her purse and distributes cards to each of them.

"Andrew Broadwinger?" Ron asks suspiciously, reading the name on his card, "What the..."

"I borrowed names from people in my primary school classes. I'm Rebecca Weathers tonight." Hermione informs him.

"Hermione, this is kind of devious," Harry compliments. He pauses. "You think I pass for nineteen?"

"Fleur doesn't think so," Ron, grinning widely, feels compelled to remind him.

"Well, assuming Fleur isn't the bouncer, I expect we'll be fine," Hermione says.

Happily bantering, they make their way to the pub, cutting through residential streets and slinking guiltily past a church. They find it nestled on the end of a small commercial strip, its warm lights glowing invitingly. It is immediately noticeable in pale darkness of early evening.

There is, in fact, no bouncer guarding the door. Harry feels a thrill of rebellious victory as he enters unchecked, blending in effortlessly with the pub's other patrons.

"All that fuss for nothing," he comments to Hermione, grinning.

"What?" she says. There is Muggle music, loud and bombastic, heavy bass pounding.

"The I.D.'s. We didn't need them. A lot of work for nothing!" he repeats.

She shrugs and shakes her head regretfully, not hearing him.

Ron comes up behind Harry and Hermione, catching them each around the shoulder. "Let's get drinks!" he bellows over the music. "Hermione, you sit down, and we'll bring something to you." Graciously, he gestures to an empty table where she can sit.

"But I don't want to sit alone," she says.

"Harry will sit with you," offers Draco. Then, resting a hand on his arm, he leans in close to Harry to ask, "What do you want?"

Harry blinks, feeling off-kilter. He can feel the warmth of Draco's breath against his neck.

"I don't know. Whatever you're drinking," he manages to respond, foraging in his jeans pocket for a crumpled Muggle bank note.

Draco shakes his head firmly. "No, I've got it." He smiles. "Come on. It's your birthday."

Harry follows Hermione's bobbing ponytail through the crowd, and they claim an open booth near the back wall. He feels nervous; something is flapping its wings with great force inside his stomach.

Two beers later, Ron is on his feet, clasping Hermione's hands in his own. He leans backward, trying to extract her from the seat.

"Okay. We have to dance to this one. This is my favorite song."

"So this particular song," says Hermione, "This *Muggle* song means so much to you, somehow – have you ever even heard this song?"

"Never," Ron admits happily.

Across the table, Harry feels hazy and lightheaded, and quite overtaken by the sheer joy of being sandwiched between Draco's thigh and the wall.

"Dance with him, Hermione," Harry commands. "It's my one birthday wish."

"THANK YOU," says Ron.

Hermione sticks her tongue out at Harry, but allows herself to be pulled out of the seat. Harry and Draco watch them weave through the crowd of grinding, gyrating Muggles to claim a spot on the dance floor. Draco sips from his beer, and Harry watches the way his thin fingers curve around the bottle.

"I love this birthday," Harry says, sighing. Somehow, it feels right to lean his head against Draco's shoulder. Draco looks down in surprise.

"The present you made me," continues Harry, lifting his head and turning to face Draco, "Was so freaking cool. Oh my God. A Quidditch pitch?"

"It was my best idea ever," Draco admits.

"The best idea," Harry confirms.

Draco has another sip of beer, and grins. "I was sure you'd find out before today somehow. Have you ever asked a Gryffindor to keep a secret? Because Gryffindors," Draco looks sideways at Harry, "Are useless."

"As secret keepers," clarifies Harry.

"And in general," Draco amends, eyes glinting.

Harry bumps him sideways as punishment. "I'll have none of that on my birthday, thanks."

Draco bumps him back.

Then, turning suddenly to face him, Draco asks, "Do you want to dance?"

"What?" says Harry, his stomach pounding excitedly.

"Do you," Draco closes his eyes briefly, "Forget it." He slides quickly out of the seat. "I'm getting another drink. Do you want anything?"

"No," Harry says dazedly, eyebrows knitted.

Harry watches Draco from the table as he stands in line at the bar. His posture is straight, almost prim, betraying no hint of turmoil, or excitement or – anything. His blond hair glows like the moon in the dim lamplight. He radiates calmness.

And Harry? He feels warm and restless, and his insides are a jumble. There is a yearning so intense it grips him physically.

He pulls himself out of the booth and stands. He feels as though he might burst. He might actually combust. And so. He catches his breath. He catches Draco's eye. He gestures toward the door.

And then he lets his feet carry him outside into the warm summer air.

Draco finds him around the corner, leaning against the side of the building. Seeing him approach, Harry looks up at him with an expression he can't decipher. He doesn't bother trying.

"Okay, Potter. I'm going to lay this on the line, all right?"

"Draco, you're drunk."

"No! Okay, yes. I am. A little." He inhales sharply. "But I can't seem to muster up the bollocks to say this when I'm sober, so – "

"Why don't we go back inside? I'm sure Ron and Hermione are wondering where we've got off to." Harry's heart is pounding wildly.

"Funny, because last I checked, they were groping each other on the dance floor, and I suspect they don't give an elf's arse where – well, not *groping*, exactly, given that it's Hermione. And Weasley. More like moony eyes and chaste hand touching. Anyway, it doesn't matter," he says, somewhat hysterically. "Just – I need you to listen to me."

Draco closes his eyes momentarily. His mind feels like a fat helium balloon, like it would float away, if not for the tight clenching in his chest. How is it this his body delivers these sensations all at once? Is it the alcohol, or is it Harry? Or is lovely bespectacled Harry, in fact, some sort of alcohol. It seems possible. He stares pointedly at Harry's chin.

"I don't know how the bloody fuck I'm supposed to do this, because Merlin knows I've never wanted – not with anyone, really – but." He laughs nervously. "God, how on earth do people – okay. Okay, Potter. Harry. It's like this. I *like* you. And not just in the sense that I don't hate you – though I don't," he laughs ironically, "I definitely don't hate you. I think you're – this is so embarrassing. I think you're sexy. I think your bloody spectacles are sexy. I think you're a self-righteous asshole a lot of the time, and a nerd, but as it turns out, I find that, well, sexy. So that's it." He rubs his forehead and glares at Harry. "And I want to kiss you, okay? It's all I've been able to think about this whole bloody night. This whole bloody summer, actually, now that we're being so fucking honest."

Words escape Harry. His stomach twists excitedly, his entire body has gone warm, and it's an effort even to breathe evenly. And there before him is Draco, in his Muggle clothes, eyes shining, cheeks flushed, biting his lower lip. Draco's lips. Harry wants to run away, but he can't, and he sort of wants to really wants to kiss Draco, but he definitely can't do that. Or can he? He can't. He can't even speak.

Draco speaks instead. "Okay, obviously you're not – can we just forget I said anything?" He exhales heavily. "I guess I misinterpreted... I just – I'm drunk. I shouldn't have said anything." Rubbing the back of his neck miserably, he stares off to the side.

"You are drunk," croaks Harry, finally. He clears his throat. "Draco, I – " He looks down at his hands, confused. "I didn't realize... I thought I was going mental this whole time."

"You thought *you* were going mental?" Draco laughs disbelievingly.

"Well, yeah," Harry says slowly, mind still reeling. "How was I supposed to even – I mean, I can hardly *think* straight around you, and then there you are teasing me all the time – "

"Teasing?" Draco shakes his head. "I was flirting!"

"*Flirting?* When?"

"Bloody hell, Harry. This – " he rests his hand lightly on Harry's arm, "This is flirting, okay? This too," he says. He grabs Harry by the elbow, suddenly, and roughly clasps his hand, intertwining their fingers with great deliberation. "And when I lean in like this, that means – " He pauses, arrested, before releasing Harry's hand and yanking his away, at once. "How could you not know?"

Harry shakes his head, dazedly. "I don't know. I – I guess I'm just dense. I didn't – " He swallows, looking up at Draco with sudden fierceness. "I wish you had just *said* something."

Draco glares back at him. "All right, well. Now I just did. I don't know what else you expect – "

And then, with a look of panicked surprise, but also steely determination, Harry leans into him quite suddenly and kisses him with the softest kind of intensity that Draco has ever known.

Chapter 16

Sleep isn't even a remote possibility; rather, Harry's mind's sole function is to replay every moment of the previous evening to a soundtrack of Ron's snores. He had kissed Draco Malfoy. Draco had come outside after him, flushed and determined, saying all sorts of things Harry wishes he had the sense to remember. And Harry had kissed him, his hands landing softly on Draco's waist, acting entirely on instinct. Draco had kissed him back.

They had looked at each other and laughed, Harry recalls, heart still pounding softly. Another kiss, Draco's fingers weaving in his hair. Harry had taken his hand and pulled him further around the darkest corner of the building. Draco had followed willingly. Harry had relaxed his body against the brick exterior of the pub and looked up at him.

Draco had tilted his head sideways and sighed, so tenderly it made Harry blush to remember.

Then, he had placed his hands tentatively on Harry's shoulders. And his hands had trailed down Harry's arms as his lips moved against Harry's.

They hadn't spoken, but for hushed, breathless laughter.

And then Draco had leaned in as if to kiss again, but surprised him by simply touching his forehead to Harry's – skin to bangs to scar. Harry's whole body was electricity as he listened to his own breathing synchronized with Draco's, felt the warmth of Draco's breath on his face.

They had walked home in a sort of daze, speaking minimally to Ron and Hermione, and not at all to each other. But, just visibly in the moonlight, Draco's lips had pulled upward at the corners in a close-mouthed, secret smile.

There hadn't been an opportunity to talk anything over before bed.

Sleep comes at last, and Harry wakes up late, mind spinning with half-remembered dreams. Ron is already awake and out of bed. Harry sits up in bed, a slow wave of excitement already rolling up through his chest. Carefully, he touches his lips – they feel strangely tender. Pawing for his glasses, he pulls his mum's old silver hand mirror out of the nightstand. His lips still look quite red and a bit swollen. He doesn't know if it's the sort of thing anyone else would notice, but thank Merlin for the cover of darkness

last night. He gropes for his wand and whispers, "*Accio* Murtlap." Moments later, the little jar nudges its way in through the crack of the door.

Funny that he feels he needs to brace himself for his next encounter with Draco. His stomach is all in knots, and he doesn't feel like eating, but he shuffles toward the kitchen nonetheless. He is achingly disappointed, and also profoundly relieved to see Ron sitting alone at the table gnawing on a hard Mars bar from the freezer. "Morning," Ron greets, yawning and stretching. Harry hears Hermione's shower running; Draco is apparently still in bed.

Harry feels a rush of nerves as he glances at Ron's pale, pillow-creased profile. Should he tell him? Part of him wants to just spill it all out, everything – but another part of him is screaming, "No, never!" He could put it off until later, anyway. But then, in a way, he's bursting to tell.

He thinks maybe he could tell it in bits, to lessen the shock. He could start with that bit about him liking blokes. How to come out to your best friend?

A deep breath, and he begins.

"Ron, can I talk to you about something?"

"Sure," he says, nodding. "Oh, here." He hands Harry a chocolate bar.

"Thanks," Harry says, feeling strangely calmed by this gesture, though he isn't hungry. "So, I wanted to... I was wondering what you thought about – have you ever thought about," spit it out, he commands himself, "Guys being gay?"

Ron surprises him by smiling. "Ah. Malfoy?"

He knows. Harry is stunned. "Yes," he manages. "Okay, so..."

"He told me himself, actually," Ron says.

"He told you? When?"

"Last night." Ron looks almost smug.

"But... wow..."

"I know, right? He told me before he told you."

"What?" Harry asks, dumbfounded.

"I'm so glad he told you. Can I just say that? I was, like, bursting to tell someone, but I didn't want to, you know, if it was a secret. But now that you know and everything..."

"Yeah, I reckon the secret's out now," Harry says. "Wow. Okay. Well, what do you think?"

"What do I think? I mean, I don't know. In retrospect, I guess it seems kind of obvious-"

"Really?"

"I guess so. I don't know. I mean, I don't have anything against it, or anything. It's not my thing, but if it's his thing, you know, that's cool. I'm happy for him."

Harry smiles slightly. "Thanks, mate."

"Okay..." Ron gives him an odd look. "Anyway, yeah. All the best to him, right? I hope he finds the right bloke."

Harry regards him, slightly taken aback. "You don't think I'm the right bloke?"

Ron's candy bar hits the table with a thud. "What?"

"Ron, what do you think we've been talking about?"

"Malfoy being a nancy," Ron says promptly.

"But I'm not one? Thought it took two to snog, unless I'm mistaken."

"Who's talking about snogging?" Ron asks, looking bewildered.

"So you know that Draco is gay. He didn't mention anything else?" Harry laughs, slightly hysterically.

Ron's eyes narrow suspiciously. "What else was there for him to mention?"

"He and I..."

"He and you- what?"

"He really didn't mention what happened at the pub?"

"I talked to him before!" Ron shakes his head and asks softly, "What happened at the pub?"

"Snogging happened at the pub!"

There is a pause – and then, finally, "Oh."

"I snogged Draco," Harry clarifies.

"Yes, I got that." Ron looks slightly green.

And then, suddenly, the door to Draco's room slides open, and Draco emerges, wearing pajama trousers and last night's shirt. He rubs the back of his neck, staring at the floor for a minute before glancing up at Harry. "Hi," he says, softly, at last.

Harry's face is shot with sudden warmth. "Hey."

Ron, lips tugging and twitching desperately, glances from Harry to Draco and back again. "I think I'll just. Um. I reckon it's time I took a shower. Or used the toilet," he stands up abruptly. "Something..." He collects his thawing Mars bar and stiffly departs.

Harry watches him go, head cocked to the side. "Okay," he says uncertainly, turning to Draco, "Well."

"So," Draco replies. He takes a seat at the table.

Harry smiles nervously. "Right, so. We should, you know. About yesterday."

"Yesterday," Draco repeats, nodding stiffly and blushing, "It was..." he shrugs, "What do you think?"

"Um, well," he inhales deeply, "It wasn't too awful, right?"

Draco smiles slightly, "Not a total disaster."

"Better than some birthdays I've had, I reckon."

"Slightly better than snogging Pansy Parkinson."

"Wow. Well done, me, then," says Harry with a short, breathless laugh.

For a moment, a tentative exchange of shy grins is all they can manage.

"Did you sleep?" asks Draco, finally.

"Sort of. Not really. And I'm not hungry. Not even for chocolate," he holds up his wrapped Mars bar, sparing it a wistful glance. "My stomach's, like, in knots. I don't know."

"No, I know what you mean."

Harry bites his lip. "Is this normal?"

"Not for me."

Harry is suddenly breathless, yet again.

"Harry!"

Hermione flings his arms around him with the gentleness of a boa constrictor.

"You're – not trying – to kill me - right?" Harry manages.

Hermione beams. "Well, it's meant to be a hug." She loosens her hold ever so slightly and looks fondly into Harry's face at close range. "Oh, Harry, I'm just so happy for you guys!"

"You are?" Harry says, uncertainly. Hermione has moved onto hugging Draco, who looks wholly startled.

"Oh my gosh, of course." Hermione shakes her head, exasperatedly. "How could I not be?"

"That's – I appreciate that," Harry says, nodding sincerely. He and Draco exchange fleeting, shy smiles.

"You don't mind that Ron told me, do you?" she asks, looking suddenly uncertain. She tucks a damp lock of hair behind her ear. "It's not that he meant to tell, but I caught him in the hallway looking so, kind of like, shellshocked, and I... I'm sorry. I know I'm talking too much. But I think it's wonderful, I really do!" She looks back and forth at Harry and Draco, beaming.

"Oh God, I'm sorry, you guys probably want to – anyway, I was just about to make breakfast, so I'll just be in here. If you need me. Not that you. Anyway."

"Thanks, Mum," Harry says, patting her affectionately on the shoulder.

Ten minutes later, alone at last, Harry and Draco are watching the telly in jittery, nervous silence. Harry, in a stunning display of romantic incompetence, had seated himself about two feet away from Draco on the couch, a distance that seemed ever the more insurmountable with every passing minute.

A string of insipid adverts. Draco shifts, yawning. Harry has never been so achingly unkissed.

Is there some sort of unwritten protocol for this, he wonders. Do you just ask him if he's up for a snog, or what?

A sigh escapes his lips, and Draco glances at him with eyebrows cocked.

Harry smiles wryly. Then, after a beat of a pause, he scoots closer to Draco, who takes his hand without hesitation. Absently, he traces his fingers down and around the valleys between Harry's fingers, while Harry watches with acute interest. He turns the hand over and traces the lines in the palm.

The best part is being able to touch Draco and smile at him and stare at him as much as he wants. Harry had ached for this without ever realizing. He turns to study Draco's face, memorizing the storm-gray eyes fringed with pale eyelashes, the thin lips, the delicate point of his chin. Draco catches Harry's eye, then looks down, smiling shyly. The telly blathers on, thoroughly ignored.

The kitchen door creaks open. Draco releases Harry's hand.

"Hey," Hermione greets tentatively, "Sorry to interrupt, but an owl's just come in from Tonks. She's stopping by around dinnertime, if that's okay."

"Sure," Harry says, shrugging up at her, "Is everything okay?"

"I don't know. She didn't say much in the owl." She purses her lips, thoughtfully. "She was just here for your birthday, though. I wonder why she didn't mention anything then..."

"Because she couldn't get a word in edgewise with the twins?" Harry suggests.

There is a muffled snort coming from the direction of the doorway. Harry twists around to find Ron leaning awkwardly against the doorframe, blushing and avoiding Harry's eyes.

"Hey," says Harry.

"Ron," Hermione says pointedly, "Wasn't there something you wanted to tell Harry and Draco?"

Ron looks miserable; Hermione grins, crossing the room toward him. "I'm off to finish my book – I'll leave you guys to it." She raises her eyebrows briefly at Ron, pats him on the arm, and proceeds past him out the doorway.

Ron nods, and claims an armchair diagonal from Harry and Draco's couch. Harry watches him sink in to its cushions like he's trying to disappear.

For several moments, Ron absorbs himself with the television, and they are silent.

Harry glances sideways; Draco is staring straight ahead, but he senses Harry's gaze and smiles slightly.

Ron sighs, shifting in his chair. "Okay, well," he says, blushing and staring at his knuckles, "Just wanted to let you know I'm happy for you and all. And I didn't mean to get weird about anything this morning." He sinks deeper into the cushions, his back almost horizontal.

"No worries," replies Harry, shrugging at him. Draco nods benignly.

Ron straightens up in his chair for a moment, and then stands. "Cool – then. So, I'll just – think I'll see what Hermione's up to..." he trails off, yawning and shaking out his shoulders.

"Hey," says Harry, suddenly, as Ron reaches the door. "Thanks." He smiles tentatively at Ron.

"Yeah, sure," says Ron, fingers trailing the doorframe. He meets Harry's eyes, at last, and smiles sheepishly back.

From the moment Tonks arrives that evening, it is evident that something is awry.

"Wotcher," she says dully, stepping across the threshold, a compelling, mouth-watering smell immediately wafting through the foyer.

"Mmmm, what's that?" asks Harry, eyes drawn to the covered plate cradled in her arm. "I mean, hi, Tonks," he adds, remembering to be civilized – and Hermione withdraws her elbow from his ribs.

Ron trails toward the door, nose-first. "My mum's fried sausages," he declares, "And roasted chicken?"

"How are you, Tonks?" Hermione asks. Her eyes flicker from Tonks' listless, mousy hair to the shadows beneath her eyes. Her brow is furrowed and tense.

"I'm fine," she answers distractedly. "Did you have a good birthday, Harry?"

"Yeah," he blushes slightly, "It was really good."

"Good, good," she murmurs, nodding, her voice distant. "Hey, so, I wanted to talk to you lot about something. It's kind of ... well – so maybe we could talk about it over dinner."

"That sounds fine," Ron replies earnestly, gazing longingly at the plate of food.

"Should I make a salad?" Draco offers, uncertainly.

Harry and Ron look at him, sincerely baffled. "Why?" asks Ron, after a moment.

They assemble around the dining room table, and plates and utensils are summoned from the kitchen. "Mmmm," groans Ron, as the foil covering is lifted from the plate. They help themselves to chicken and sausages and tuck in with enthusiasm.

Tonks, Hermione observes after a moment, is wandlessly rolling a sausage back and forth on her plate, rather than eating.

"Tonks, please, what's going on?" she asks, finally.

Tonks nods, and purses her lips momentarily. "Well," she says, glancing briefly at Harry, "There's some news. Not great."

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Draco watch her intently, breathlessly silent.

Tonks inhales, studies her plate, and continues. "There was another large-scale Muggle attack early this morning. About thirty or so victims, all in southern England, killed at home, in their sleep. All had wizarding relatives," she swallows uncomfortably, "A few of the victims were children."

Hermione lets out a soft, sad sigh, and Ron rests his hand on her back.

"Do they know who did it?" Draco asks hopefully.

Tonks shakes her head dully. "No," she says, "And Harry?" Harry regards her nervously. "I'm really, really sorry. Two of the victims," her voice is suddenly quiet, "were your uncle and cousin. They left headquarters after dark last night, and tried to return to Privet Drive. They didn't survive they night."

"Oh," says Harry. He blinks. "What?"

"I'm really sorry," Tonks repeats, wringing her hands together helplessly.

Harry stares blankly at nothing in particular until his gaze is caught by Hermione's sympathetic expression. He shakes his head. "I'm not. No, it's just," he begins, not knowing how to continue. He sighs. "How is my aunt?"

"In shock. Understandably. She hasn't left her room, and she isn't letting anyone see her. Except my aunt."

"My mother?" Draco asks, after a moment.

"Oh- yes," Tonks says. She and Draco exchange the odd, awkward glance of two acquaintances who have just recalled they are first cousins.

"That's good. That she has Draco's mum, that they're friends," Harry says, nodding slowly. "Do you reckon I should send her a letter? A card or something?"

Ron exhales. "I don't know, mate."

"It might be nice," Hermione murmurs, uncertainly.

Draco catches Harry's hand, squeezes it softly, and releases it.

"But Harry, how are you doing? Are you okay? This is..." Tonks shakes her head. "I mean, I don't know. It was a shock."

Harry purses his lips, his mind spinning. "You don't have any idea who was responsible?"

"We don't, other than it's someone without a dark mark."

"Someone under the Imperius," Ron suggests.

Tonks shakes her head. "But there weren't any Death Eaters in the vicinity who might have placed the curse."

"Tonks, we'll help you. We can figure this out." Harry looks determined.

"Oh no. You have enough on your plate with the horcruxes. Focus on the snake, and we'll take care of this." She sighs. "Anyway, the good news is that security wasn't breached. Headquarters is safe, your families are safe."

Hermione nods gratefully, her eyes suddenly wet.

"And give yourselves a bit of a break, okay? Harry, you'll call if you need anything?"

Harry nods distractedly.

"Okay - I'll check in on you lot soon," Tonks says, her voice oddly husky. She touches Harry's shoulder briefly and disapparates with a crack.

Lying flat on his back on a cushion of grass, Harry gazes absently at the darkening sky of his Quidditch pitch. His Uncle Vernon. Dudley. It's hard to know how he should feel.

In fact, he doesn't feel much of anything.

His fingers weave through the soft blades of grass, and he watches a cloud drift across the enchanted sky. His mind is oddly quiet. The grass feels smooth and damp against his skin.

There is a sudden rustle to his left, and a bright blond head emerges from below. Hovering briefly, and then descending next to Harry, Draco dismounts his broomstick and sets it on the ground. "Want company?"

"Sure," Harry says, smiling up at him.

Draco settles onto the ground next to Harry, close enough for their shoulders to touch. He lies down on his back. There is a small stretch of silence, as they both watch each other intently.

"Strange couple of days, huh, Potter," Draco says finally.

Harry laughs, almost wistfully.

Draco glances at him. "I can't tell if you're okay."

"I'm fine."

"You weren't close with them," Draco recalls. He takes Harry's hand, entwines their fingers, and lets them rest on his stomach.

"No." Harry sighs. "Still feels weird, though," he admits.

"I bet." Harry feels Draco's stomach rise and fall with each breath.

Another silence hovers.

"Funny though," Harry murmurs, after a moment. "My aunt and your mum as best friends. Not that it doesn't make sense, in a strange way, but it's still so bizarre. Aunt Petunia won't talk to anyone but your mum."

"Well." Draco twists his neck, turning his face toward Harry, "At risk of sounding like a sentimental git, I do want you to know I'm here for you. If you need me. Whatever you need."

Harry smiles and turns toward Draco. "You are a sentimental git, huh."

"Shut it, Potter," Draco says, catching Harry's cheeks in his hands.

Harry's breath hitches. "Shut," he says.

"Good," Draco murmurs into the disappearing space between their lips.

Chapter 17

It's past two in the morning, and the room is oddly silent. In the darkness, and without his glasses, everything around Harry looks smudgy and undefined. And yet, he's sharply awake. The room is too quiet.

"Why aren't you snoring?" he asks Ron, finally.

"Why aren't you?" replies Ron, his voice utterly untouched by sleep.

"Because I don't snore," Harry murmurs, indignantly, groping for his glasses. "Seriously, what are you doing awake?"

"Just – I don't know."

"Can't sleep?"

"Yep," Ron sighs, rolling over. Harry feels the blanket slide away, and he tugs it back.

"Weird day."

"Weird bloody fuckstorm of a day," Ron elaborates.

Harry laughs under his breath. "I mean, yeah." He stares at the ceiling, silent for a moment. "Sorry to dump this whole Draco thing on you," he adds, eventually.

"I mean, there's nothing to be sorry about."

"You can take the piss if you want," Harry offers.

"Um, about you being gay? That would make me a right arsehole, I reckon."

"No, about it being Malfoy."

A pause.

"Yeah, about that. Harry. A Slytherin?" Ron murmurs, finally, softening.

Harry sighs contentedly. "A Slytherin," he affirms.

"Merlin. No one could accuse you of having a type."

"What do you mean?"

"Cho Chang, my sister, and now Malfoy. It doesn't even make sense. Like, can you even name one thing they have in common?"

Harry laughs. "Me."

"And there you have it," concludes Ron. Eyes finally adjusting, Harry can just make out the smirk on his face.

"Okay, well, what's yours?"

"My type?"

Harry nods. "Yeah. Shall I guess? She'll have to be a smart, curly-haired, brunette, Muggle-born Gryffindor? With a cat and a lot of books?"

"A disgusting amount of books," Ron admits.

"And terrible at Quidditch," adds Harry, "Sorry, mate."

"It's true," Ron says, smiling to himself.

"Things are going well, yeah?"

Ron's smile widens into a beatific grin.

"Wow, that's a yes." Harry raises his eyebrows. He pauses, before adding softly, "You haven't...you know, done that yet?"

Ron waggles his eyebrows suggestively. "That's classified information."

"So, you haven't. Thank Merlin," Harry adds, under his breath.

"What do you mean, we haven't?" Ron says indignantly. Harry gives him a wry look. "How did you know?" Ron adds, finally.

"Because if you had, you'd be sputtering and blushing and tripping over yourself to deny it."

"Yeah, well, hmph," Ron concludes, mildly disgruntled. Harry snorts triumphantly.

"Anyway," Ron says gruffly, after a moment, "You're all right? About your uncle and stuff, and your cousin?"

"Uh, yeah," says Harry, nodding. "I don't know. Reckon I'm in sort of a muddle about it all."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, like, I mean. A part of me feels kind of bad, like, since I'm not more broken up about it all. I don't know. Should I be? And then a part of me wants to, like, actually kill the bloody fuck who did it. On behalf of my aunt. Which is, like, daft and weird of me, since my aunt always hated me and everything."

"Malfoy always hated you, too, and now you're snogging him," Ron reminds him, helpfully.

Harry rolls his eyes, smiling. "Well, yes." He sighs. "Anyway, hard to blame her now for being afraid of magic. Look where it got her."

"No, look where being stubborn, arrogant gits got your uncle and your cousin. Felt they didn't need magic to protect them. You heard what Tonks said."

"Yeah," Harry says, uncertainly. He yawns. "Guess that's true."

There is a small stretch of silence.

"Hey, we're all right, though, yeah?" Ron asks, eventually, with forced levity. "Still best mates and everything."

"Yeah. Sheesh. Ron. Of course."

"Heh. Right answer."

"Twenty points to Gryffindor," Harry replies, yawning widely.

"Guess we should try and get some sleep then," Ron concludes.

Harry's head has already sunk deeply into the pillow, and his mind has started chasing a dream. Ron watches him, briefly, before carefully removing Harry's glasses and placing them on the nightstand.

Hermione wakes up to a compelling, buttery breakfast smell. Draco Malfoy, endless catalogue of surprises that he is, has evidently taken to Muggle

cooking techniques. She finds him in the kitchen calmly supervising a pan of perfectly round miniature pancakes.

"Oh, yum," she sighs, inhaling deeply. Draco beams; he is perfectly tidy, she observes, but for an endearing streak of flour across his jaw line.

"Yeah, I thought we needed a sort of boost today. Good morning," he adds.

"Good morning, wow. That's fantastic." Hermione nods. "Anything I can do to help?" She rubs her eyes and blinks.

"Not unless you want to rouse the sleepers."

"Do I dare?" Hermione smirks.

"Do you think they would want chocolate bits cooked into theirs?"

Hermione raises her eyebrows.

"Right. Shall I ask, rather, if they might want me to include any pancakes with their chocolate bits?" Draco amends. Hermione and Draco grin at each other, somewhat shyly.

There's neither a hum nor a peep from Harry and Ron's room by the time Draco has turned out two generous stacks of obscenely cocoa-saturated pancakes. Hermione's suggestion of putting together a pair of trays to deliver to the bedroom is met by Draco's approval and secret pounding excitement. Hermione, happy to make herself useful, produces her wand from the pocket of her pajama trousers and summons the essentials from various cupboards and crannies.

Harry and Ron are gratifyingly delighted to be nudged out of sleep by the smell of homemade pancakes. They sit up in bed at once, Ron tucking his long legs up in front of him to make room for Hermione on the end of the bed; Harry follows suit.

"Draco gets all the credit," Hermione says.

"Oh, whatever," Draco says, blushing. Gingerly, he settles in at Harry's feet. Harry looks up at him and smiles.

Having conquered breakfast, Harry and Draco linger in the bedroom among the dishes and serving trays. Hermione and Ron have gone for their

showers, though not without enduring some spirited commentary from Harry.

Now, sitting cross-legged at the edge of the bed, Draco feels awash with contentment. The sun streaming through the window catches Harry's eyes, and he is all bedhead and irresistible boyishness. He yawns and smiles lazily at Draco, and Draco is absolutely certain that he has never known happiness so complete.

Stretching and sighing, Harry flops back against the pillows. "We don't have to work on the snake today, right?" he murmurs, wistfully.

Draco shakes his head. "No. Never. We'll stay here."

"Never do the dishes. Never get out of this bed."

"That's the spirit."

Harry smiles, his eyes closed.

Hermione and Ron reappear, damp and pink-cheeked. Ron's hair is a nest of peaks and wings.

"How was your shower?" Harry greets them, pulling himself up.

"*Showers*," corrects Ron, blushing deeply, "Two separate –"

"Uh huh."

"All right," Hermione declares. "We have got to get started here." She flicks her wand, and all the dishes line up in mid-air to begin their journey to the kitchen. "So, the snake. Really, half the battle will be finding it. He won't show up on the Death Eater map."

"He won't?" asks Harry.

"No, an animal wouldn't – his anatomy is too different...", she falls suddenly silent, eyes widening thoughtfully.

"Well, Ron says hopefully, "You speak Parseltongue."

"So...?"

"So, I reckon you could call him, maybe?" Ron cocks his head sideways, looking uncertain.

"Ah, shall I open the front door and have a shout for him?"

"Never mind," Ron scowls.

"But doesn't he have a point?" Draco remarks eventually.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asks distractedly.

"I'm not sure, but I'm thinking – can snakes talk to each other?"

"Well, yeah," says Harry.

"Then do you think we can recruit snakes to find him for us?" Draco shrugs.

"How long do you think that would take?" Harry asks, doubtfully.

"Actually," Hermione muses, seeming to return to herself, "Not necessarily that long. Because if we can get a network of snakes working for us – each snake passing the message on to a few others... I actually envision this working."

"Okay," Ron nods excitedly. "What should we tell them, do you think? Do you reckon they'll want to help?"

Harry shrugs. "I don't know. But maybe... if I explain the situation..."

"Maybe we should start by thinking about where we're going to find the snakes," Draco proposes.

"Pet store?" suggests Ron. "Or the zoo."

"Pet store," decides Harry. "Muggles tend to notice when snakes go missing from the zoo." He nods sagely, the voice of experience.

A computer search yields walking directions to a pet store that isn't far beyond the supermarket.

Hendrick's House of Beasts is staffed by one twitchy looking older gentleman, who seems wholly overwhelmed to be faced with a quartet of teenage customers.

"Excuse me, sir?" Hermione begins, tentatively.

"Yes, yes!" he exclaims, "I suppose you need help!"

"Well," Hermione says, slightly taken aback. "We were wondering if you had any reptiles available for purchase – specifically snakes."

"You'd like to see my snakes!" Harry and Ron are seized by a brief but potent spell of giggles. The shopkeeper rubs his hands together nervously.

"Yes, thank you," Hermione confirms, pointedly ignoring the various subversive gestures being transmitted between Ron and Harry.

There are several tanks containing different sized snakes, all of them coiled and motionless. Harry notices Draco shudder slightly and step back toward the safety of guinea pigs.

"You're afraid of snakes?"

Draco purses his lips. "Slightly."

"Some Slytherin," Harry murmurs, brushing his hand against Draco's arm.

Draco leans in slightly toward him. "And I suppose you'd be perfectly calm if you encountered an actual lion."

"Absolutely. I'd be the picture of serenity," Harry insists, "Just like this bloke." He gestures toward the shopkeeper, who, at the moment, is absorbed in exclaiming something to Ron and Hermione, his lips twitching nervously. "Which reminds me," he adds, leaning to whisper in Draco's ear. "Would you like to see my snake?"

"Yes," says Draco, simply.

Harry's face lights up red, and Draco grins.

"Well... I suppose we'll want to take all of them," Harry hears Hermione say, "We can carry four tanks, right? There are four of us."

Draco blanches, but squares his shoulders with stubborn resolve.

As it turns out, four teenagers carrying tanks of reptiles alongside the road attracts a certain amount of attention from the locals. They are gaped quite unabashedly through car windows, and by garden hose-wielding mothers and their sunburned children. Having grown accustomed to life in hiding, the

attention is discomfiting to the point that they walk the entire twenty minutes in perfect silence.

The snakes, for their part, show no awareness of their sudden change in circumstance; they remain entirely motionless and only questionably alive. Arriving home at last, Harry, Ron, Draco, and Hermione cut straight back to the woodsy area behind the house.

"Now what?" asks Ron, setting his tank on the mossy ground with a sigh.

"I guess I try talking to them. Do you think they can hear me through the glass?"

"I hope so," mutters Draco, taking a step backwards.

"Hello?" Harry greets in Parseltongue, kneeling and tapping the glass experimentally.

The transformation is astonishing; all four snakes wake up at once and slowly turn their heads toward Harry, standing still and at attention.

"Oh, okay. Hello!" he says, blinking in surprise.

"Hello," intones the snake nearest to Harry, dark green and slender. The other three echo him promptly.

"We, uh, need your help," he begins, realizing that he might have taken a moment to plan what to say to them. Too late now.

"My friends and I would like to give you your freedom," The snakes hiss excitedly. "But there's something we're hoping you'll do for us."

"We would be pleasssed to help, sssir. What can we do for you?"

Harry nods slowly, and carefully describes the creature they are looking for. Hermione, Ron, and Draco look on in baffled amazement as Harry and the snakes confer in sharp hisses. Apparently reaching an agreement, Harry unlatches each snake from its tank. The dark green snake, emerging as a sort of leader and liason, slithers up Harry's arm and wraps himself around his wrist affectionately. Draco feels a prickly shiver run down his spine.

With a final glance at Harry, the snakes disappear into the forest. Harry blinks slowly, as if emerging from a trance.

"So, they're willing to help?" asks Hermione.

"They say they are," Harry says. "I believe them. The green one says he'll meet me here in two days to tell me what they found."

Feeling heartened, they carry the empty tanks back around to the front of the house, where they are promptly intercepted by the neighbor girl, Kate.

"Where have you *been*?" she demands, wielding a stick at Ron much in the manner of a wand at a duel, "I've been looking for you!"

Her sister Emma sidles up to Harry. "What's those for," she asks quietly.

"This? It's a tank," Harry says vaguely.

"Where is the animals inside it?"

"There are no animals in it anymore." Harry bends down, letting her peer inside it. "There was a snake in here, but we freed it and told it to go find its mum and dad in the wild."

"Oh," she nods, understandingly.

Kate, meanwhile, has got Ron, Hermione, and Draco lined up on the stoop, under strict orders to remain "perfectly completely still" until she returns.

"How do you know where his mum and dad live, though?" asks Emma.

Harry improvises. "He told me they live right here in the woods."

"You talk to snakes?" she murmurs, sounding impressed. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry catches Ron, Hermione, and Draco biting back grins.

Harry shrugs. "I do talk to snakes," he admits.

"Me too," Emma says, after a moment. "I talk to every animal in the jungle."

Kate re-emerges from the house, tottering beneath an armload of plush animal toys. "We're playing pet shop and I'm the shop worker and these are my tanks!" she declares. "You can be the customers."

And so passes the afternoon. Kate's stuffed animals are caged and then adopted; liberated and then recaptured to begin the process again. They let the girls keep the tanks as consolation for having to go in for dinner.

Somewhere, close to the ground and out of sight, a network of snakes is expanding slowly, pushing closer to the final horcrux.

"How much do you want to bet they talk their mum into getting them some kind of pet within a week?" speculates Ron over dinner.

"Well, they'll need four pets," Harry points out.

"Ah, right," agrees Ron, "There are four tanks, and they won't shut up until they're all filled."

"With snakes," adds Harry.

"Their parents must really appreciate us right now," says Draco, taking a dainty bite of his chicken.

Harry smiles. "Did you hear what Emma told me? Apparently, she speaks Parseltongue."

"Among other languages of the jungle," remarks Draco.

"That was so cute." Hermione sighs.

"Cute?" Ron says, "It's dead useful! We'll be needing her on our side."

"Recruiting little Muggle girls for the cause. I love it," says Harry.

"Sometimes," remarks Harry, with a yawn, "I'm nearly convinced that this is just a really, unusually vivid dream." He's sprawled on Draco's bed, foot dangling off the side, and an arm draped across Draco's stomach.

"What part of it?"

"This," Harry gestures vaguely around the room. "All of this. Not being in school."

"It's summer," Draco reminds him.

"But the fact that we're not planning to go to school this year. And the horcruxes. And you." He glances sidelong at Draco through his lashes.

Draco laughs softly. "What do you think everyone at school would think if they could see us."

"Depends on what they saw." Harry smiles.

"Well," replies Draco, pulling himself up onto his elbows. "Say they saw something like this." And he kisses Harry firmly on the mouth.

Harry catches him round the trunk and holds him close. "I suppose they'd say, 'Well done, Harry!'"

"Ah. I'm sure."

Harry laughs. "That's what they should say. But yeah. Probably more like shocked, silent gaping."

"Followed by shunning."

"Followed by shunning," Harry agrees. "Can you imagine how different it would have been if we were in the same house? Did I ever tell you the Sorting Hat considered putting me in Slytherin?"

"Really?"

"Yeah, we could have been bunkmates. Imagine the trouble we'd have got into then."

Draco groans. "Don't tell me that. It just makes me think of all the time we wasted pretending to hate each other." He grimaces. "You could have prevented a disgusting snog with Pansy."

"I did really hate you, you know," Harry protests.

"Whatever you say. But I'm admitting right here that I thought you were cute since you told me off on the Hogwarts Express our first year."

"Really?"

"You pissed me off, too, don't get me wrong."

"Likewise." Harry smiles, kissing him briefly. "I don't think I realized I was attracted to you. Took me awhile to realize I was attracted to blokes, in fact."

"You and Weasley never..."

"You'll have to clarify which Weasley..." Harry raises his eyebrows.

"The one attached to Granger's face."

"Merlin's Beard, no," Harry says emphatically, catching Draco's cheeks with his palms. "He's straight, for one thing, and he's *Ron*, and that's gross – shall I go on? Anyway," he adds, "He isn't you."

"He is absolutely not me, for which I thank Merlin daily," Draco concludes, tucking his arms beneath Harry's, and pulling him backward into a great heap on the bed.

Chapter 18

Ron falls to his knees on the kitchen floor, with a desperate, guttural moan. "This isn't happening. Sweet bloody Merlin, this isn't happening."

"Mmm," murmurs Hermione, turning the page of her book.

Ron sinks ever further, face meeting tile, arms stretched helplessly outward. Draco steps carefully past him, taking pains to avoid spilling his coffee.

"All right, Ron?" Harry asks blearily from the doorway.

"Am I all right?" Ron repeats, incredulously.

"Ten minutes ago, he discovered we were out of chocolate," Draco summarizes matter-of-factly, "Then he remembered he had put some on top of the refrigerator. Then he remembered that he had already eaten it."

"I'm so sorry," Harry says gravely.

Hermione closes her book, and Harry glimpses the title in gold script lettering: *Uncovering the Animagus*.

"Okay," she declares, "Shall we make our emergency run to Tesco?"

"Are we all going?" asks Harry.

"If you want," she says, glancing sidelong at him. "I just thought you might have things you wanted to take care of around the house."

"Not really," Harry says, agreeably.

"Actually, I need your help with something," Draco says, without missing a beat.

Hermione smiles furtively, and gathers her purse. Ron, fully revived, beats her to the door.

Harry sits on the bed beside Draco, who promptly pins him down with two hands to the chest.

"Oof," says Harry.

Draco brushes the black fringe back from Harry's forehead. He slides his hands up through the sleeves of his cotton shirt, letting them rest on the skin of Harry's shoulders, under the fabric. Harry lifts his chin and says, grinning, "Needed my help?"

"I couldn't have done this without you." Draco points out. His voice is slightly shaky, but his hands trail firmly and steadily across Harry's clavicle and onto his chest. Harry can feel the warmth of Draco's breath as he speaks.

"You'd better not have," Harry whispers gruffly. Pulling himself up slightly against the bed frame, he manages to extricate his arms; he wraps them tightly around Draco's trunk, underneath his shirt.

It is impossible to say who is kissing and who is being kissed. Harry's hands are acting on their own accord – traveling southward, finding smooth patches of skin beneath the waistband of Draco's trousers. It occurs to him that he hasn't the slightest clue how to kiss a boy – funny that no one has taught him. Funny that his lips seem to have found a method regardless.

Time stands perfectly still and at attention. There is only Harry and the miracle that he is not dueling with Draco, nor arguing with Draco, but kissing him soundly. And Draco, he of the storm-gray eyes and surprisingly warm skin, is reciprocating in full.

Draco, while kissing, is: intently focused. Nearly silent. Sometimes tentative. Apt to pause at times, resting his lips gently against Harry's before resuming the pressure of the kiss.

Harry falls back on to the pillow and sighs. "You learned all this from Pansy Parkinson?" he asks, somewhat breathlessly.

"Gross," says Draco. Harry laughs.

Draco shifts onto his back, resting his head beside Harry on the pillow. "How long do you think we have before Weasley and Granger come back?" he asks, nudging Harry's foot with his own.

"Not long enough."

"Always stolen time," says Draco. He rubs at his collarbone, gazing contemplatively at the ceiling.

Harry rolls his head sideways to face him.

Draco looks away. "When your snake comes back tomorrow," he says, "Assuming he was successful – it means we come out of hiding and take care of Nagini?"

"That's the plan," Harry says.

"And then, I gather, we locate Voldemort. And we fight."

"Well," Harry nods, "But it's going to be fine."

They are silent, breathing slowly, letting this hang in the air.

"You realize that the Slytherin in me wants to steal you away up into the Quidditch pitch and hide together until this is over."

"But I can't."

"Because you're a Gryffindor, I know."

Harry smiles wistfully. "Well – and there's a prophecy," he lets his arm rest lightly over Draco's waist. "But if you'd like to hide, I wouldn't blame you. You know that, right? I'd like that, honestly. I'd know you were safe."

Draco shakes his head. "Not a chance. I'm in this."

"I knew you would say that," Harry replies.

Draco looks at him with surprise. "And that's the way you see me," he says quietly.

"Hello?" calls a voice from the hallway. "Anyone home?" Harry and Draco hastily disengage and sit up with a start.

"Tonks?" Harry opens the door.

"Wotcher, Harry," she replies distractedly. "Oh, hi, Draco."

"We were just doing some research," Harry attests, blushing furiously and hoping that Tonks won't notice the rumpled bedsheets, not to mention Draco's uncharacteristically disheveled hair.

"Great, great." She nods eagerly, and Harry observes that she seems quite punchy and flustered herself; in fact, her hair is changing colors rapidly before their eyes. "Ron and Hermione aren't home?"

"Grocery store- they should be back any moment. You okay, Tonks?"

"Yes, of course! Why?" Without waiting for an answer, she walks out of the bedroom. Exchanging quick glances with raised eyebrows, Harry and Draco follow her into the living room.

The sound of a key in the door signals Ron and Hermione's return. "Oh, good," exclaims Tonks, "You're all here."

A procession of levitating grocery bags glides through the living room and into the kitchen, trailed by Ron. "Oh, hi Tonks," he greets, lips edged in chocolate, "Charlie's not here?"

"Charlie?" Tonks says quickly, her voice unnaturally loud, "Why would he have come?"

Hermione arrives shortly behind, partway through a chocolate bar of her own, and the usual exchange of news and plans commences.

"Quite brilliant, truly," Tonks praises, nodding energetically, "Do you think the snakes will be able to find him, though?"

Hermione bites her lip. "I hope so. It's our only plan."

"I reckon we'll find out tomorrow," Ron concludes.

"That we will," replies Tonks, her hair changing from yellow to green to blue before their eyes. Harry notices Hermione looking at her quizzically.

"Anyway," Tonks continues, "We're continuing to monitor the map for Death Eater activity."

"Anything?" asks Harry.

"Nothing, really... other than the fact that they're unusually scattered across England and Scotland. It doesn't much help us predict Voldemort's location. And with you lot being that close to finishing off the horcruxes, that's got to be our priority."

"And the Muggle deaths?" queries Hermione.

"No, nothing," Tonks says, her frustration evident. "We were looking into Fenrir Greyback, who doesn't have the Mark, of course, but then Remus -," she cuts herself off, frowning. "We realized that one of the attacks occurred during a full moon. Greyback wouldn't have been able to use a wand."

"Have you been following Peter Pettigrew?" she asks, quietly.

Tonks regards her with interest. "Yes, of course. Why?"

"I've been wondering," she begins, haltingly, "He has a Mark – but the map wouldn't be able to trace him when he's in his rat form. There's nothing in the literature about this situation, exactly, but quite a few of my books have talked about trace spells not working on animagi in animal form."

"Pettigrew?" Ron gapes at her. "Hermione, I didn't even know you were working on this. How long have you...?"

"Oh, a little while."

"Interesting," remarks Draco, "Have there been times when he disappears from the map? Or shows up somewhere unexpected?"

Tonks appears to contemplate this. "I don't know. Bugger," she says, after a moment, "Maybe."

"He was at Dervish and Banges, wasn't he? Had to be, because he hid the horcrux," recalls Harry, "And didn't someone say they hadn't seen him anywhere around there on the map?"

"So, what, we think he's been scuttling about as a rat, and then coming back human for a bit whenever he fancies knocking off some Muggles?" Ron says, looking stupefied.

"That's my hunch," Hermione replies, glancing shyly at Tonks. "I know you wanted me to focus on the horcrux, but I just couldn't get it out of my mind. I'm sorry."

"Merlin, don't be sorry, Hermione, that's quite brilliant. I've just got to tell Kingsley."

"Right then. Hermione solves another one," Ron declares, squeezing her hand.

"We'll see," she replies soberly. "Okay, then. Perhaps we should think about how to proceed once we know Nagini's whereabouts. Oh," she adds, suddenly, "We never put away the groceries."

They relocate to the kitchen to accomplish this.

"When you have an idea of where he is," Tonks tells them, "Definitely, definitely contact me, or someone in the Order. Immediately. Kingsley, Charlie, whoever." They all watch nervously as Tonks levitates a carton of eggs into the open refrigerator, the carton dipping dangerously near the ground as she becomes distracted. "I'm sure you know there's a really good chance that Voldemort himself will be in the vicinity of the snake. We'll want to send reinforcements to support you there immediately. Things will probably start happening quickly."

"When can I begin using magic?" Draco asks, immediately.

Tonks regards him thoughtfully. "Well. As soon as you cast your first spell, you can consider yourself out of hiding. Which is fine – going to have to happen eventually, but be sure you're ready for it."

She looks now at Harry, her chin raised. "Try not to worry. The entire Order is with you."

"Thank you," Harry replies, his voice low.

She nods, turning to Ron. "You haven't heard from Charlie recently, have you?"

"Uh, not since he was here with you. Why?" he asks.

"Oh, nothing," she replies, evidently attempting to sound casual and failing. "Okay. I'm meant to be going now, but I'll expect to hear from you sometime tomorrow."

"Wow," Harry murmurs, once Tonks disappears.

"I know," Ron agrees, leaning back against the counter. "Bet you a galleon they snogged."

"What," asks Harry, "In Godric's name are you on about?"

"Tonks and Charlie. Who totally snogged. You were thinking of something else, then?"

"Uh, I was thinking of the fact that we could sort of be facing Voldemort within the next few days." He glances sidelong at Ron. "Not to say that you're wrong."

"I actually think you're right, as well." Hermione contributes.

"What do you mean, *actually*?" Ron demands, rubbing her atop the head with his fist. Hermione looks sheepish.

"But what about Lupin?" asks Harry, to general shrugs.

"Talking of Lupin, I'll have some more chocolate," Ron decides. And so turns the conversation, because talking of chocolate is far more agreeable than talking of Voldemort.

"Harry," Ron says, lingering in the kitchen, after Hermione and Draco have settled into the living room. "Mate, I wanted to ask you. What if I slept in the guest bedroom tonight?"

"Hermione's bedroom," Harry says.

Ron blushes. "Yeah."

"Um," Harry considers, "Not sure why you need my permission. Does Hermione know about this, then?"

"Yes," he replies.

"Well," he concludes, "Have a superb night, then."

"Thanks," says Ron.

"Have at it like Tonks and Charlie," Harry can't resist adding.

"Ha ha. Really, though- I really think they snogged!"

"As will you," Harry replies, generously.

Odd, though, that Harry feels a bit out of sorts, after that. Not that Ron is such a pleasure to share a bed with, he considers. A night with Ron is a night unencumbered by blankets; those that begin their journey on Harry's side are inevitably integrated into a complex cotton nest on Ron's side by morning. And then there's the snoring, that symphony of chainsaws. But nonetheless, losing Ron to Hermione's room seems to signify something.

Harry has fallen asleep to the sounds of Ron's snores more nights than not for six years; their rhythm is a language revealing the intimacy of schoolmates, of best friends. But school ends, and best mates are supplanted by lovers, and it all disappears. Harry feels, at that moment, that there is no end to the things to which he must say goodbye.

It is an evening of conscious, deliberate enjoyment. The topic of Voldemort is kept at arm's length, always on the edge of their attention but never approached.

They have figured out how to mute the telly. With this comes the discovery that, when they themselves provide the dialogue, the comic potential of Muggle television is nearly infinite.

Harry watches them, each in turn, when they aren't paying attention. Ron, his eyebrows raised as he attempts a falsetto voice; Hermione in pajama trousers, convulsing with giggles; Draco, smirking, legs tucked up onto the sofa – the familiarity of their features, posture, and voices strikes Harry tonight as strangely, inexplicably moving.

It isn't like him to be so sentimental. He wonders if this is part and parcel of becoming a nancy, or if it's simply the magnitude of what is to come. Tomorrow, maybe the next day, and Harry could be gazing into the end of Voldemort's wand. *Neither can live while the other survives.*

The specter of death is not to be endured, not tonight. But Harry feels as though it follows him, trying to catch his eye as if at a party, while he averts his gaze. Ron burps softly and Hermione giggles again and Draco yawns and they are all so vibrant and alive. The thought of losing any of them is as incomprehensible as losing himself. They are safe in the glow of the telly, and death is distant and abstract. It's just that he can't entirely tune the thought out of his mind.

Sleepy-eyed Draco is watching him, he realizes eventually. Harry watches him back, noticing the shifting lights from the television play across his cheekbones. Draco smiles slightly, rubs his eyes, and leans back against the

pillow. Over his shoulder, Harry sees Ron and Hermione engaged in quiet conversation, the pair of them smiling and blushing profoundly.

"Well, mates, I reckon it's my time," Ron suddenly announces, his vertebrae crackling as he executes an odd and complicated stretch. "Hermione, you're tired, yeah?"

"Um. Yes," she says, her face palpably radiating heat. "Goodnight, Harry. Night, Draco," she concludes, with a small, self-conscious smile.

Harry watches them disappear down the hall, bouncing on their heels and looking very far from tired.

"I'd tease them," remarks Draco, yawning, "But they make it too easy."

"Far too easy," Harry smiles, feeling suddenly nervous, "And anyway, I was going to ask if you were up for the same."

"Were you?" Draco says, his pale eyebrows arching, "You mean..."

"Not THAT." Harry quickly replies, shaking his head vigorously. "They're not doing that in there."

"So you tell yourself."

"Hush," Harry admonishes, unnecessarily, since he has now clamped a hand over Draco's mouth.

"Mpphh."

"They're talking or sleeping. Which, you know, are things that we could do."

"Immmdesmmmmrmm?"

"Well... yeah, in the same room. Since we can. I don't know. We don't have to." He liberates Draco's mouth.

"I never said I didn't want to."

Harry tries to decipher the expression on his face. Draco watches him steadily, with a coy, almost imperceptible lift of the eyebrows.

"What?" Harry asks, endeavoring to suppress a smile.

Morning arrives in Godric's Hollow, cool and dreary. Ron, Hermione, and Draco have taken roost at the kitchen table, and are absorbed in the business of yawning continuously and staring out the rain-streaked window.

"How long has he been out there?" Ron asks.

Hermione frowns. "I don't know. Thirty minutes?"

"Anyone else reckon that snake is maybe taking sort of a holiday? Out enjoying his freedom, you think? Can't be bothered to come round here?"

"Ron, don't say that. I bet he'll come, yet," Hermione rallies, instigating a chain reaction of yawns that hits Draco next.

"Why are you so tired?" Ron asks Draco, grumpily.

"Oh, and you're one to talk," is the extent of Draco's wit at the moment.

An odd, twitchy expression passes over Ron's face. "You were in with Harry last night, then?"

"And what if I was?"

"Bloody – Merlin. I sleep in that bed, you know."

"How horrifying for you. Shall I disinfect it? Shall I disinfect the couch as well, and," he stands up stiffly, "This chair? What do you think?"

"Shut it, Malfoy. Don't pretend you don't know what I'm on about."

"Ron," Hermione interjects, warningly.

"Go ahead, Weasley. Enlighten me."

Pink blotches bloom on Ron's face and neck. "Fluids," he stammers.

Hermione bites back a yelp of a laugh. "What?" asks Ron, irritably.

"Oh, for the love of Salazar. Seriously? All we did was sleep. Tried to sleep. Not that it's any of your business."

"It's quite a bit my business, seeing as I sleep in those sheets," Ron retorts, but he looks much appeased.

"Sure," says Draco, smiling slightly. His eyes drift toward the window, through which Harry can be seen, pacing tensely. His hair remains dry in the rain – they had thought to cast a shield charm. Nonetheless, he looks impatient and grim.

"Bloody snake's never coming back."

"No, Ron, look," Hermione says, voice lifting hopefully. "He's – I think Harry's kneeling." They crowd by the window, squinting to make out a slender form sliding toward Harry through the damp grass.

Harry nods soberly, his lips and tongue stretching to form strange, hissing syllables, unintelligible to Ron, Hermione, and Draco. He nods again, bites his bottom lip, and stands upright. Draco opens the door.

The chill from the rain follows Harry inside. He slides listlessly into a chair, looking up at them. Three pairs of eyes watch him expectantly.

"Nagini's in Diagon Alley," he says, simply. "Reckon it's time to alert Tonks."

Chapter 19

Barely an hour later, a lone owl makes its way through the pounding rain, hooting loudly outside the kitchen window. Hermione rushes into the kitchen to let it inside. It flies immediately past her, heading purposefully toward Draco.

"It's a blood letter," Draco murmurs, surprised, seeing his name amid deep crimson splatters on the envelope. "From Nymphadora, I suppose?"

It is from Tonks, which baffles Harry and Hermione, and irritates Ron. "You're her liason, now?" he asks, a hint of a whine creeping into his voice.

Draco carries the letter into the living room, reading it silently. Harry sits on the edge of the couch, watching him expectantly. "Will you tell us what it says?"

"Um, yes," Draco replies, folding the letter and looking up. Harry, Ron, and Hermione all gazing at him with rapt attention. "She'll be over in half an hour. And she wants me to talk about Snape."

"Snape," Harry murmurs darkly. "What did he do?"

"She wants me to tell you that he's on our side."

Harry and Ron regard him blankly, while Hermione appears lost in thought.

"Why should we believe that?" Ron asks, his voice perplexed rather than hostile.

"Well, I've known that he's against Voldemort, was working for Dumbledore-"

"He killed Dumbledore," Harry interrupts, flatly.

"Sort of," Draco says, locking eyes with Harry.

"There is no sort of. We were both there."

"But we didn't know what we were seeing," Draco explains. He frowns. "I'll try to tell it to you as he told me. But I need you to believe me."

There is a charged silence, which Ron ultimately breaks, saying, "Okay, out with it." Hermione nods, quietly taking Ron's hand.

Harry's gaze softens, and the tension in his body dissipates. "Of course we'll believe you."

"Then here's what I know," Draco replies in his low, even drawl, "He sacrificed himself. He asked Snape to kill him. I don't entirely know why. But Snape said I was a part of the plan. That Dumbledore asked Snape to kill him so that his death wouldn't be on my hands. He wanted you to be able to forgive me. He said there was something I was meant to help you with."

"The horcrux," says Harry. "Do you think he knew...?"

"Yeah. I don't know." Draco glances at Harry, tentatively. "You believe me."

"I believe you. I trust you." Hermione and Ron nod, and there is another short silence.

Hermione looks curiously at Draco. "So that's what Tonks wanted you to tell us? I wonder why."

"Oh," replies Draco, "It's because she's bringing him here with her," he glances at the clock, "In about fifteen minutes. And she wanted you not to kill him."

Fifteen minutes later, there is a hollow pop, and Tonks appears in the foyer. Snape follows directly behind, managing, somehow, to apparate into a shadow.

Tonks greets Ron with a high five. "So this is it," she declares grandly, but she seems a bit distracted, and her hair is still crackly and wild. Snape's dark circled eyes slide appraisingly around the room. He looks less than enthralled with James and Lily's marital home.

They assemble around the dining room table, which feels strangely formal to Harry. "So we've now learned that he's in Diagon Alley," Tonks begins, breathlessly.

"The snake is," clarifies Hermione.

"But we can expect its master to be there as well. We've developed the skeleton of a plan." Harry nods attentively, but watches Snape out of the corner of his eye. So far, his former professor has not spoken a single word.

"We've charmed a handful of portkeys to link between here and the Leaky Cauldron," she continues, gesturing at a small pile of slightly discolored knuts. "And we've made copies of our Dark Mark tracking map, as well as a separate map indicating the locations of members of the Order." She pauses, smiling slightly. "You'll find Severus on both."

Ron, Hermione, Harry, and Draco turn instinctively to look at Snape; he regards them impassively, revealing nothing.

"A few of us will return here tomorrow morning to travel with you, just in case. We'll join with the others at the Leaky Cauldron. I realize it's not much of a plan," she adds, suddenly apologetic. "We're still working on it."

"May I take a look at the maps?" asks Hermione.

Draco, watching Hermione poke at the map with the tip of her wand, is startled to hear Snape murmur a discreet request to meet with him privately. He looks at Snape inquisitively, and notices Harry watching quietly as well.

"Excuse us," says Draco, uncertainly. He leads Snape into Harry's former bedroom, the room he now thinks of as his own. There is a sock on the edge of the bed, which Draco hastily clears away, trying not to blush. "Harry's," he mutters, by way of explanation. He sits stiffly atop the bedspread and gestures for Snape to do the same.

"Harry?" Snape murmurs, arching his eyebrows, "Not Potter?"

"Yeah," Draco replies guardedly, regarding him coolly through narrowed eyes.

"A most unlikely friendship."

"Sure."

Snape gazes at him for a moment before speaking. "Or do you dissemble, treating him as a friend for your own protection?"

"No," Draco protests hotly, his cheeks turning pink.

"You're a Slytherin," Snape reminds him, benignly.

"Well -"

Snape calmly cuts him off. "I am not displeased to hear that you and the Potter boy have reconciled. This was, of course, Dumbledore's plan, and my own."

"I helped him with the horcruxes."

"Yes, that worked out nicely – a helpful bonus. But forgive me, Draco. I did not share with you Dumbledore's true plan for you, which is far less concrete and considerably more important."

Draco looks down to see that he is clutching the edge of his pillow. "You're telling me that there is some part I'm supposed to play in this, beyond the horcruxes?"

"Dumbledore believed that you are the key to Potter's survival."

"Okay," Draco says, impatient but intensely curious, "So, tell me how. What can I do?"

Snape looks at him. "It's not what you can do, but, rather, who you are."

"Who I am," Draco repeats, more of a statement than a question.

"As I mentioned before," Snape says, "You're a true Slytherin. If Potter has your loyalty, you can protect him in ways that his Gryffindor friends cannot." And, at once, Draco's own description of Slytherins, shared with Harry, Ron, and Hermione, comes soaring back to him.

"Granger and Weasley believe they would do anything for him," Draco murmurs, considering this, "But they fight fair. They only know how to fight fair. Whereas, I don't think I'm limited by that."

Snape nods, evidently pleased at Draco's insight. "You are approaching the crux of Dumbledore's plan. Additionally, he believed that you would strike first, if necessary, and strike to kill. Granger and Weasley, like Potter himself, share an honorable but inconvenient reluctance to escalate attacks."

"But he had to convince Harry that I wouldn't kill in order for him to forgive me, or else we would never be..." Draco trails off, blushing. He finds himself stunned at how impossibly well Dumbledore had understood him after all.

By the late afternoon, several members of the Order have come round. Harry watches them with some anxiety as they argue and debate around the

dining room table, drawing up sketches, and erasing them hastily with their wands. Hermione works feverishly among them, sucking on the edge of her quill as she adds to a long list in messy script. Tonks' hair is dancing like flames, while the quiet intensity emanating from Kingsley is enough to make Harry and Ron retreat to the kitchen.

Fortified by the sanctuary of the kitchen table and an oversized bag of Galaxy Minstrels, they are startled to encounter two people at the exact same moment: Remus Lupin, apparating in the doorway near the refrigerator, and Charlie Weasley, emerging through the door from the dining room.

"Hi," Ron greets, licking a rogue spot of chocolate from the corner of his mouth.

"Hello Ron, Harry," Lupin greets. "May I?" Harry hands him a small handful of Minstrels.

"Oh my. Excellent." And then, glancing at Charlie, seemingly as an afterthought, he murmurs a cool, "Hello."

"Lupin," Charlie replies formally, nodding.

Ron blue eyes widen, and he sneaks Harry a very significant glance.

"I was just heading into the dining room," Charlie adds, already backing out of the kitchen through the door where he had entered only moments earlier.

"No need," replies Lupin vaguely, "I'll just be in the toilet."

And, at once, Harry and Ron are alone again with their chocolate.

"Merlin," moans Ron, clutching his heart. "The awkwardness..."

"Yeah, do you think this is about-"

"Of course it's about Tonks. Blimey. Did you hear Lupin? 'No need' – right, which says that there *would* be a need for Charlie to bugger off if he hadn't been running off to the toilet. Can't be in the same room together."

"What do you think happened?" Harry asks, peering toward the living room.

Ron cocks his head thoughtfully. "She snogged Charlie, and Lupin found out."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Has to be. Charlie seemed more guilty, don't you reckon? So it fits."

"As long as they can all work together tomorrow, the adults can snog anyone they please, as far as I'm concerned." Harry shrugs.

"I want to know," Ron says, plaintively.

"Me too," Harry admits, consoling himself with chocolate.

By dinner, the members of the Order have dispersed, leaving Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Draco alone and shellshocked at the dining room table.

"Are you hungry?" probes Ron.

Harry shrugs. "What are you having?"

"Chocolate, probably."

Hermione stands up abruptly, clapping her hands together. "No. Just – no. Not tonight. I'll make you some cheese toast."

"If you must," Ron agrees.

As the door to the kitchen shuts behind her, Harry's hand flies to his forehead.

"We forgot the snake. Merlin's beard, I can't believe it. We forgot the snake."

Ron spares him a puzzled glance. "What do you mean – he's in Diagon Alley, remember?"

"Yeah, but we never planned for him. All of our strategies and all this rubbish," he gestures uselessly at the maps and portkeys Tonks had left, "All for Voldemort. None will help us with the snake."

"Well – do we need a plan, really?" wonders Ron. "I guess I thought we would just, like, kill it. Stab it or something."

"Harry has a point," Draco remarks, sighing.

"Is anyone else so sick of coming up with plans? I mean, I'm tired of it," Ron says, with feeling.

"What are you tired of?" Hermione asks, emerging with a few plates of melted cheese over toast.

"Harry just realized we don't have a plan for the snake, so I reckon we have to come up with that now as well."

"Oh, right," Hermione says, looking entirely unperturbed as she bites into a slice of toast. "I've got some ideas about that, I meant to tell you."

"What – really?" Harry looks at her hopefully.

"Yes, well, I thought it would be wise to approach this like we did the other horcruxes, so I did a bit of research – what?" she adds, blushing.

"Didn't say anything," Ron replies happily.

"Well. The point is that I've got an idea. A starting point, anyway. It's actually something I learned from Parvati Patil, if you can imagine."

"When did you talk to Parvati?" Harry asks.

"Oh, not since we were at school. But she told us this story – Parvati and Lavender used to talk and tell stories at night. This particular one was just a month or two before we left, and –"

"You told each other stories?" Ron looks flabbergasted.

"They told stories," Hermione corrects. "I got better at ignoring them. In fact, I got really, really good at it when you were dating Lavender," she adds, nodding sourly. "Fun times." She shrugs. "But anyway, this story hooked me, somehow. I only remembered bits of it, but I looked it up on the internet."

"This relates to the snake?" Harry sounds skeptical.

"I think so. According to Hindu legend, there is a race of divine snakes known as Naga – and the female ones were called Nagini."

"Oh," Harry says, sitting up alertly.

"You Know Who's snake is a female?" Ron seems mildly taken aback.

"I expect so. Why so surprised?"

"Dunno. Just thought it was a male."

"The shape of it," suggests Harry, "Long and cylindrical. Makes you think male."

"So, you feel," Hermione concludes, "That Nagini is shaped like your genitals, and therefore, must be a male."

Draco snorts, while Harry and Ron blush.

"You had to say *genitals*," mumbles Ron.

"Yes, okay," Harry says abruptly, "But where do we go with this? So it's a lady snake, fine, and there's a great Hindu tale about it. But, you know, how do we kill it?"

Hermione looks thoughtful. "There are lots of stories about the Naga, and I don't suppose it will all be helpful. But there was one thing," she pauses. "The enemy of Naga is the eagle, Garuda."

The boys regard her blankly. "How does that help us, though?" Harry asks, finally. "I don't suppose you've found this eagle and recruited him for our side?"

"No, Harry, it's an ancient legend. But eagles – that's a clue for us, isn't it? It's the symbol of –"

"Ravenclaw," Draco finishes, bringing his hands to rest on the table.

"Right," Hermione says. She nods eagerly. "It's a start, don't you think?"

"The question now, of course, is who do we know that's a Ravenclaw, that could help us? You know, thinking of it, I don't suppose there's a single Ravenclaw in the inner circle of the Order," Hermione muses.

"Yep, big lot of Gryffindors, mostly," agrees Ron, "And then there's Tonks – Hufflepuff."

"And one Slytherin," pipes Draco, quietly.

"Oh, right, Snape. Forgot he's supposed to be on our side now." Ron raises his eyebrows.

"There are the Hogwarts professors," Hermione considers, "Flitwick..."

Harry nods uncertainly. "Yeah, I reckon we could talk to him."

"And Luna. Oh, and Padma Patil, of course! Probably Parvati, as well – she might at least have some ideas. Oh, who else? Anthony Goldstein, Michael Corner, and that lot?" Hermione bites her lip. "I suppose it would be best if we could just call a meeting, somehow, in the Room of Requirement, perhaps. Thank heavens we have that portkey to Hogwarts – otherwise, there would never be time."

"Hermione, they won't be there. It's summer," Draco interjects softly.

Hermione's face falls. "Oh, fuck." The boys' faces whip toward her in surprise.

"There just isn't time," she murmurs slowly. "To owl them - Hedwig wouldn't make it out and back by tonight. Oh, why didn't I take care of this sooner?" she cries.

"Look," Harry says, taking charge, "If it's just information we need, we'll get it. We've got the internet and the whole Hogwarts library at our disposal." Ron groans. "Yeah, it's not how I want to spend my evening either," replies Harry, impatiently, "But if we can find out how to beat that snake..."

Hermione looks troubled. "But it isn't just that, Harry. It may not work without a Ravenclaw holding the knife."

"Well," Harry replies, resolutely, "It may not work, but we'll have to hope it will. There isn't time to get anyone else." He smiles crookedly. "I snogged a Ravenclaw once – maybe that'll be good enough."

Draco looks at him crossly.

Harry sighs. "Do you know what I think we all need? We need to relax tonight, to try to get our minds off of this rubbish." He shakes his head. "Tomorrow will be what it is, won't it?"

"You don't think we should spend a bit more time planning?" says Hermione.

"No, I don't." Harry regards her, stubbornly. "Who's up for some Quidditch?"

Despite his resolution, despite his very passion for Quidditch, it is nearly impossible for Harry to lose himself in the game. He wants nothing more than to shut off all anticipation of tomorrow, to truly let it go. Nonetheless, Harry knows perfectly well that his determination to Relax and Have Fun is his answer to the tiny voice in the back of his head, the voice that won't let him forget that tomorrow could be his last. The knowledge follows him round the Quidditch pitch like a Bludger. It settles in his throat like a lump when he eats his chocolate bar. Truth be told, he's afraid.

He observes Hermione as she reads, lying on her back with her book charmed to hover over her head. Her dark curls are fanned out across the grass. Ron and Draco are on broomsticks, lazily tossing a Quaffle back and forth. Draco catches him watching, and shoots Harry a brief, self-conscious smile.

It's just that there are so many good reasons to stay alive, nowadays.

The weather is cool and dry by nightfall. Ron, Hermione, Harry, and Draco spend the night together on the Quidditch pitch, under the stars. With tomorrow's burden weighing heavily on all of them, sleep is its own battle. They cycle through periods of fitful sleep and alert wakefulness, conscious worries sliding into anxious dreams. At one point, Harry awakens briefly to find Hermione paging through her book again, wand aloft, mouthing the words to hexes and countercurses. "Hermione," he whispers, yawning, "Go to bed," he admonishes, already drifting back to sleep.

Eyes sliding open at dawn, Harry is startled to find himself on his side, face to face with Draco, a breath apart. They are perfect mirrors of each other, their knees tucked up and almost touching. Harry's glasses sit, folded neatly, in the small valley between their chests. Even without them, he can make out the thick fringe of blond eyelashes resting lightly atop Draco's pale cheek.

Draco, sensing Harry's gaze even through a layer of sleep, slowly returns to consciousness. His gray eyes open and catch Harry's, and he smiles sadly.

"Nervous?" he whispers, watching Harry carefully.

"Never," Harry replies, heart pounding nonetheless.

When Tonks, Charlie, and Snape arrive, Harry and his friends are sitting in silence at the kitchen table, forcing cereal into their jittery stomachs. "Wotcher," Tonks greets, plunging her hand in for a fistful of sugary oat bits.

Charlie briefs them on a few updates to the plan. "Hagrid's been able to pinpoint Nagini's location – it appears that she's in Knockturn Alley, in a little recess underneath Borgin and Burkes."

"How did he figure that out?" asks Ron, impressed.

"Hagrid, you know, he's a bit of a genius when it comes to beasts. He said he figured it out based on the behavior of the animals in the area. Doesn't make sense to me, but I trust him."

"I trust him, too," Harry agrees.

"Which one of you is in charge of killing the snake?"

"I am," Harry says, firmly.

"I thought so. Harry, you'd best bring your invisibility cloak. Draco, you're to stay near him, with Severus a few meters off," Charlie adds, glancing at Snape, who nods curtly.

"The rest of us will have to lay low, but we'll be close enough to support you, Harry. Once we take care of the snake, we wait for You Know Who. We can assume he'll come to us as soon as he realizes. Again, we'll put Draco with Harry. It's likely that there will be quite a few Death Eaters to keep us occupied at that point, but we'll have to play it by ear." He takes a deep breath. "That's all, I think. Ready to move?"

"Wait," Hermione interjects, suddenly. She reaches into her pocket and produces her bookmark portkey. "Harry and Draco should take this. In case we can't reach you in time, if you need to make a quick escape. The bottom part takes you back to Godric's Hollow."

"Not a bad idea," agrees Tonks. "All right – does everyone have a knut?"

Feeling a familiar jerk beneath his navel, Harry opens his eyes to find himself at the Leaky Cauldron, the rest of the Order assembling around him.

"It would be wise for us to move quickly," says Snape.

Harry nods, wordlessly. Ron looks at him. "Gonna be fine, mate," he says, pulling Harry in for a quick hug. Turning then to the blond Slytherin, Ron reaches out his hand. "Draco," he says, shaking it once, firmly. Draco looks back at him with surprise, and they exchange the tiniest of smiles.

Hermione, having released Draco from a hug, takes both of Harry's hands and looks up at him for several moments with an expression he can't decipher. "Be careful, Harry," she says, finally, turning her face away quickly. He sees her hands move to the corners of her eyes.

Harry, Draco, and Snape set off briskly and wordlessly toward Knockturn Alley, carrying their wands, maps, the portkeys, the invisibility cloak, and one of Bill Weasley's new steak knives. They have nearly arrived, when Draco gasps suddenly. Harry and Snape stop in their tracks and turn to face him.

"I have – I need to – do something, quickly. I'll be right back. Please stay here," he turns to Snape. "Stay with him." Snape's eyes narrow. "There isn't time to explain," Draco says, breathlessly, "But it's important. Just trust me." Without waiting for their consent, Draco pulls Hermione's bookmark out of his pocket and disappears in an instant."

Waiting alone with Snape is agonizing. He and Harry stand in the grip of a tense silence, wands at hand, avoiding each other's eyes. Draco's absence seems interminable.

Finally, thankfully, he reappears, walking briskly down the path from the Leaky Cauldron. He is breathing laboriously, but smiles brilliantly at Harry.

"What did you do?" asks Harry, eyebrows furrowing.

"I've got our Ravenclaw."

"What?" Harry asks, excitedly, "Who?"

Snape regards them silently with raised eyebrows.

"You'll see – she's on her way. She can't travel by Portkey, but she's got another way – should be here any moment."

"How did you –"

A hazy flash of movement catches Harry's eye, along the same path from the Leaky Cauldron. As it draws closer, Harry can make out an indistinct shape – pearly, translucent skin, dark pigtailed, and thick spectacles.

"Moaning Myrtle?"

Myrtle smiles proudly. "Draco wouldn't trust anyone else for the job."

Harry glances dubiously at Draco. "Can she...uh...hold the knife, though?"

"No one ever thinks I can carry things," Myrtle complains crossly. Draco, seeing her on the verge of launching into a rant about Peeves, quickly hands her the knife. Holding it, she beams, a bit wickedly. "I feel quite powerful," she declares.

"Er - good," Harry says.

"Do you remember what to do?" asks Draco.

"Make the cut as long and deep as I possibly can," she replies, yawning. They begin walking down Knockturn Alley, passing Borgin and Burkes to come around the backside.

"We're here," Snape says softly.

"Draco, get under – oh good," Harry says, feeling Draco tap his shoulder, but seeing only empty space, "You've got the cloak. Snape, should I – I guess it's time for me to call him? Oops, I mean her."

"When you're ready," Snape replies.

Steeling himself with a deep breath, Harry calls to Nagini in Parseltongue. There is a beat of perfect silence.

Then, slowly, Harry hears a rustle in the grass as a figure moves swiftly toward him. At once, the great snake raises her head and looks Harry straight in the eye, mouth opening wide to reveal razor-sharp fangs. He feels a tightening in his stomach, his chest clenches, and his scar - "Myrtle," he breathes, "Please-"

Nagini turns her head swiftly, evidently perceiving movement or perhaps a glint of light coming off of the knife. Myrtle, betraying no fear, glides directly in front of Harry, protecting him from the snake, who hisses softly. Stretching upward, the snake is close enough for Harry to perceive the

pattern of scales on her underbelly, clearly visible through Myrtle's translucent flesh.

Then, suddenly, the snake strikes, curving above and around Myrtle's head, aiming for Harry. Harry feels oddly calm. There is terrible, soft clink as one of her fangs makes contact with Harry's glasses, and Harry hears Draco gasp from a point unseen.

And then, as quickly as it began, it is over. Harry, breathing quickly, looks down to see Nagini in a heap at his feet. Myrtle hovers above, smiling almost radiantly, holding the knife aloft – it is dripping in putrid, yellow blood.

"Myrtle, thank you," he says, hoarsely.

"Cut the body into pieces," Snape says calmly, joining them.

Draco flings off the invisibility cloak, tossing it almost carelessly to Snape, who catches it in surprise.

"Harry!" he cries, embracing him, and kissing him soundly in the middle of Knockturn Alley. Then, burying his face in Harry's shoulder, he sighs, and Harry wraps his arms around him tightly.

Snape watches carefully, eyes narrowing with dawning understanding.

"Harry! Draco!" Harry looks up to see Hermione running toward him from the path, Ron trailing closely behind. He disentangles from Draco just in time to be caught in Hermione's forceful embrace. "Oh, thank God you're all right." Harry looks over her shoulder and catches Ron's eye. Ron greets him with a little salute. Harry notices he is limping slightly.

"Did you kill the snake?" Hermione asks, breathlessly. "Oh, Harry, you're really okay!" She beams.

"Is that Moaning Myrtle?" asks Ron. "How did she get here?"

"Myrtle killed Nagini," Draco says. "She was in Ravenclaw," he adds, glancing significantly at Hermione. Hermione claps a hand over her mouth, eyes widening.

"Of course," she murmurs, after a moment. "Brilliant – just brilliant."

"It was all his idea," Harry credits, while Draco blushes magnificently.

"But what happened to you lot?" he asks, suddenly, "Oi, Ron, why are you limping?"

"We're fine," Ron replies. "We're all fine. There were a couple of Death Eaters, four of them – I think they showed up because they knew the snake was killed. We outnumbered them, though, by quite a bit. Kingsley killed the stumpy little bloke, don't know his name. Fleur might have killed the blond one, but I don't know for sure that he's dead. He's captured, at least, and we captured another one, sister of the one we killed."

"Pettigrew got away. He was the fourth," chimes Hermione. "He took his rat form and slipped away during the fight. But all things considered, it went okay. Tonks broke her foot, I think, and one of them cursed a bit of skin off of Kingsley's leg. Oh, and Fleur got a scratch on her face."

"Oh Merlin," Harry replies, knowingly.

"You can't imagine the screaming. Cut's gone away already – it was nothing, really, but Merlin's beard was she off her trolley. About killed the bloke who did it – that was the blond one."

"I bet she did." Harry chuckles.

"Anyway, we're all fine. So far, so good, right?" Hermione smiles, tentatively. "We've been sent to fetch you and bring you back to the Leaky Cauldron, so we can figure out what to do next."

After checking the map carefully for hidden Death Eaters in the forest, they walk quickly back down the path. Myrtle hovers alongside, still brandishing her knife with pride. Harry, falling into step beside Draco, feels an odd mix of anxiety and relief. The worst is yet to come, he realizes; at best, he will certainly experience complete and utter terror before the day is through. And yet, he's still alive. They're all alive. It feels like an accomplishment.

"Draco. A word." Snape says coolly, coming up behind him.

Exchanging a quick glance with Harry, Draco hangs back to meet him. Snape pauses, allowing the others to walk several meters ahead, before speaking.

"Where did you and Potter meet?" Snape asks brusquely.

"Pardon?"

"I assure you, it is important. I assume it was on the train, or perhaps the platform."

"I'm not – I don't know. What do you –"

"You must think, Draco."

"Why are you asking?" Draco looks up at his former professor, baffled.

"Are you in love with him?" Snape asks, his voice curt.

"Sorry, but that's personal," Draco's replies, irritably. "Perhaps we should have been more discreet, I'll grant."

Snape grabs him by the arm. "It is imperative, Draco, that you answer my question."

Draco watches him for a moment; Snape's brown eyes are ringed with dark circles, and he is breathing heavily. "Yes," he says, finally, warring between defiance and confusion.

"Does he love you in return?"

Draco flushes. "Yes. Maybe. I don't know." He inhales deeply. "I think so."

Snape closes his eyes briefly. "That's fortunate, Draco."

Draco looks up at him in surprise, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Yeah?"

"Listen to me very carefully," He looks at Draco. "Witches and wizards in love can provide magical protection for each other in the location of their first meeting; the closer to the exact point of meeting, the stronger the protection. That's why it's crucial that you remember precisely where you and Potter met."

"What?" Draco shakes his head, mind reeling. "How do you know?" His eyes meet Snape's. "Have you ever – experienced this protection?"

"No," Snape replies, quickly and bitterly. "No. I tried once, but she wouldn't –" He stops abruptly, looking terribly sad. "Dumbledore showed me something in his pensieve, right before he died," he says, suddenly. "He - as a young wizard, Dumbledore met and fell in love with another young wizard in his home neighborhood."

"What? Dumbledore was – gay?"

Snape ignored him, rushing to continue, "They had a disagreement, and it led to a duel at Dumbledore's home. Dumbledore aimed a curse at his opponent, but his love for this wizard shielded him at the same time. The curse ricocheted off of him and hit Dumbledore's younger sister, killing her instantly." He paused, shaking his head slowly. "I couldn't understand why Dumbledore showed me this memory, why it was important." He regarded Draco with solemnity. "Had I known this was what Dumbledore meant for you and Potter, I would have told you sooner."

"You're saying – you're saying Dumbledore knew all along that Potter and I would eventually... but that's impossible."

"He said you would be the key to his survival. He then invited me into the pensieve to ensure I would know about this kind of protection. If you see it as a coincidence, so be it, Draco." Snape watches him carefully. Draco is silent for a moment, contemplating this.

"Madame Malkin's," he says suddenly.

"Excuse me?"

"It's where Harry and I met. I just remembered. It's a clothing shop on the Alley."

"I am aware." Snape gazes at Draco intensely. "Are you certain?"

"Yes – I am. We were eleven. School hadn't started yet. I was getting fitted – I remember it perfectly." He nods, excitedly.

Snape grabs Draco by the shoulders. "Listen carefully, then. Whatever the Order has planned, you will ignore it. You and Potter will wait for Voldemort inside Madame Malkin's. You will be under the Invisibility Cloak. Voldemort must believe Potter is alone. You must face him there – he has to come to you. Do you understand?

Draco nods quickly, his breath catching in his throat.

"You must not tell Potter. His occlumency skills are abysmal. We can't take the risk of Voldemort discovering your advantage." Snape gazes at Draco, sternly. "Find him now, and go directly. I'll take care of everything else."

"You're not going to tell me where we're going?"

"You'll see," says Draco. He tugs Harry's hand, guiding him past the shuttered shops of Diagon Alley.

"What did you say to Hermione back there?"

Draco glances at him, sidelong, "I told her not to worry. I'm looking out for you."

Harry grins crookedly. "Thought I was the one looking out for you."

"Maybe." Draco squeezes his hand. "We're here."

"Flourish and Blotts?"

"Next door." He bites his lip. "Madame Malkin's. Will you break us in?"

"*Alohamora*," Harry says automatically, though he suspects Madame Malkin will have used a more complex charm – but, to his surprise, the lock clicks open at once. "*Lumos*." He glances carefully around. "You're expecting Voldemort will come here, then?"

"He will, because you're here."

"But why here?" He walks among the robes, absentmindedly fingering the fabrics. Turning back to Draco, he sees him standing atop one of the small pedestals that Madame Malkin's customers stood on for sizing and alterations. There is a sudden pull in Harry's chest. He meets Draco's eyes.

"This is where I met you," Harry murmurs, after a moment, watching Draco with amazement. Draco's pale, straight hair, his stiff posture – it's as if Harry has stepped back in time.

"I was horrible back then." Draco's cheeks flush with shame at the memory.

Harry steps onto the next pedestal over from Draco's. "Merlin, Draco, we were both completely horrible to each other. But we're different people now."

"How can you - know that?"

"Hey," Harry says softly. He regards Draco levelly through his spectacles. "Are you worried about all this?"

There is a still, charged silence.

"I don't know if I'm worried," Draco says, finally, "But I'm not – I'm not naturally brave."

Harry smiles. "You are," he says, simply. He steps over the gap to share Draco's pedestal, feeling that he can't be close enough. His hands, balled into loose fists, tuck into the space between them and rest on Draco's chest. Draco's heart beats so quickly. Harry has to look up, just slightly, to meet his eyes. And then they are kissing. Soft and still. Draco's eyes slide closed, and he sighs.

Harry leans in, burying his face, taking in the clean-laundry smell of Draco's button-down shirt.

"We'll be fine," Harry declares, resurfacing. He looks up at Draco. Dusting of summer freckles across his sharp, delicate nose: he is so different now, and so much the same. "You should put the cloak on," Harry adds. "Who can say when he'll be here?"

"Harry, I," Draco begins.

"Gonna be fine," Harry repeats, biting his lip. "You'll see."

"Explain to me again," says Ron, "Why you're so certain they don't need our help in there." He is perched on a barstool near Hermione.

"Because Potter must appear to be alone," Snape looks bored, "His cloak of invisibility only fully conceals one of you."

"Why Malfoy, then? Really, why not Kingsley Shacklebolt, or -"

"Severus, look at this," interrupts Tonks, looking up from one of the maps. Her voice jumps sharply; the expression on her face gives Ron chills. "Please," she adds, almost a whisper.

Snape walks briskly toward her, robes flapping behind him. Ron and Hermione glance at each other nervously. Tonks and Snape, peering at the map by wandlight in the darkness of the Leaky Cauldron, are conversing in low tones, shoulders stiff with tension.

"How could he have..." Ron makes out bits of their conversation.

"We must move quickly," Snape says.

A wave of sudden movement swells inside the Leaky Cauldron: robes billowing, wands lighting, and ultimately, the whole of the Order assembling with brisk energy around the bar. Tonks clears her throat, but is drowned out by the shuffling of chairs and a low, fretful murmur passing among the witches and wizards in the room. She spares a worried glance at Snape, shuts her eyes briefly, and climbs atop of a chair. "Everyone, listen!"

Fortunately, she captures the attention of Ron's twin brothers, who bring the room to startled silence with a shockingly loud simultaneous whistle. "Oi, listen to Tonks!" Fred bellows.

"Thanks, guys," she says, and Ron catches a hint of tremble in her voice. Her hair has gone brown and limp. "Okay, news isn't good, and we've got to act fast – like, immediately." She rubs her temples. "Headquarters has been infiltrated."

"What?" someone exclaims.

"By Peter Pettigrew," Tonks continues. "The maps showed him at Grimmauld Place for just a moment, but then he disappeared, so he's probably taken his rat form. Which is good – he can't perform magic as a rat, so it's unlikely that he could have harmed anyone yet. But of course he could – really, at any moment, so we've got to move. We have over a hundred Muggles in hiding there, and they don't stand a chance against him."

"My parents," Hermione gasps.

"So let's just – most of us need to stay here to cover Harry and Draco. Kingsley, I take it you'll stay? Okay, and I'll take a team to Grimmauld Place – who's with me?" She pauses, craning her neck around the room to see which figures have raised their wands. "All right, great – Arthur, Molly, and Remus. Let's go!"

"Wait!" yelps Ron, "Hermione and I are coming with you."

"Fine," agrees Tonks, jumping off of her chair. "But hurry. Let's apparate to the spot outside, and we go in together."

Harry stands alertly on the pedestal, wand at the ready, expecting Voldemort's arrival with every breath. He should be able to trace Harry here. After all, Harry had cast the spell to open the door.

There is suspense in waiting to face Voldemort, waiting for the prophesied moment – but Harry feels quite at ease, almost perversely calm. Draco's veiled, silent presence is somehow palpable to Harry, and indescribably comforting. The slightest rustle of fabric among the racks is Harry's only clue to Draco's location; if he has figured it correctly, Draco is tucked among the Hogwarts uniform robes. The thought of it makes Harry's heart sort of clench.

Time nudges forward at a crawling pace. So many ways he and Draco could pass this time, under other circumstances. He wishes he could read Draco's thoughts. He's had quite a few secret conversations with Snape, recently. What about them had made Draco so nervous, all of the sudden?

Harry feels a bit silly when he recalls that they are about to face Voldemort, and grants that most people would become a smidge anxious under the circumstances. Harry himself feels quite clear-headed, but then, he's always at his best in a crisis.

Sometimes it seems to Harry that the hardest thing about a crisis is waiting for it to get started.

Tonks has them travel as a group using side-along apparition, not wanting to risk the inefficiency of staggered arrival times. Hermione, heart pounding with anxiety, feels a moment's relief that Ron won't have to apparate on his own – he's still been known to splinch when nervous. They arrive in a huddle on the doorstep of Number 12, Grimmauld Place, entering without hesitation.

They all look to Tonks, who takes charge immediately. "Okay, here we go," she pronounces. "Everyone gets a map. We all split up. All of you are capable of handling him on your own – the important thing is making sure that every single Muggle is under the protection of one of us. Keep an eye on the map, be mindful of his whereabouts if you can, but remember that you won't see him on there as long as he's in rat form. Don't try to follow him – just work on corralling as many Muggles as you can, and stick with them. Put a shield over them if you can. Won't hold forever, but you know. Always helps." She takes a deep breath. "Okay, and if you find yourself up against him and things are getting out of control, just press your wand tip

on the map at your current location, and it will send out a distress call." She regards them soberly. "But we can't be the ones to respond – stay with your Muggles and let someone come in from the Leaky to handle it." She smiles weakly. "Got it?"

Ron pokes along his chosen corridor, shining his wand behind closed doors and taking the occasional peek at the map. Nothing – no sign of Peter Pettigrew, but no sign of the Muggles either. He would not have thought it was possible for over a hundred bloody Muggles to stay so well hidden. One thing he knows for certain – a hundred Weasleys would not have managed to stay so silent. Perhaps Muggles sleep during the day? But wouldn't Hermione have mentioned that in the six years he's known her?

He feels eerily alone, walking past the heavy tapestries and dusty candelabras. Even the portraits are silent, their eyes tracking him shiftily as he passes. He nudges open each door he passes, and each is more pointless than the last. Bedrooms, closets, lavatories – all of them empty. He tries not to feel discouraged. He wonders how Hermione is getting on.

He turns the next doorknob, and is momentarily perplexed to find it to be locked. "*Alohamora*," he intones, yawning, and the door creaks open before him. Leading with his wand, he peeks inside, and is stunned to find a large bedroom, occupied by perhaps sixty or seventy Muggles. They are pressed together in clusters, eyes wide with fear, holding candlesticks and tarnished silverware aloft, presumably as weapons.

"Hello, uh, hi," says Ron, trying to sound friendly. "I'm Ron. I'm not going to – I'm here to protect you, actually."

There is a tense silence, broken at last when a female voice says, "Oh, Ron, it's you!" There is a shifting in the crowd, as a familiar figure steps forward.

Ron's shoulders sink with relief. "Dr. Granger – hi!"

"Oh, please. Call me Helen." She steps forward and turns to face the group. "We can all relax," she says, in a steady, soothing tone that Ron imagines she must use on her patients, "Martin, you remember Ron Weasley? He's a dear friend of Hermione's from Hogwarts."

"Great to see you, Ron," remarks Hermione's dad.

"Petunia Dursley," a pale, thin woman introduces herself, stepping forward. "I'm Harry Potter's aunt."

"Yes, we've met –"

"Yes, of course, through the fireplace." She runs a hand nervously through her gray-streaked dark hair.

Ron is glad to see a collective release of the tension in the room. He looks out upon the group, to see everyone watching him intently. "I take it you know we've been infiltrated," he deduces, eyeing their weapons. "But everything's going to be fine. I need you all to trust me. I'd like to put a few shield enchantments in place to protect you."

He works with as much care as he has ever put into a charm in his life, repeating the enchantment a few times for extra strength, and checking and doublechecking for holes.

"Now, there are more of you Mugg- more of you hiding elsewhere, I take it, yes?"

Petunia nods. "There's another group of fifty or so in a bedroom on the east wing. They've got Narcissa, though."

"Narcissa Malfoy?" Ron nods, "Okay, that's good. And hopefully, one of my lot will have found them by now as well." He pauses. "How did you all know to hide? Did you see him?"

"Not exactly," explains Martin Granger, "But Crookshanks did – he must have seen him or smelled him. He went absolutely mad - I've never seen anything like that from him. He completely ransacked one of the bedrooms and found a photograph. It was a snapshot of four young men. Didn't mean anything to me, but it clearly made sense to Narcissa." He shrugs. "So she split us into two groups and had us hide. She wanted to keep us all together, but there wasn't a space big enough to hold us."

"She did great," says Ron, genuinely impressed. "I think things are under control now. I've got a map with me that should give us a clue if he's getting close, though, unfortunately, he doesn't show up on the map when he's turned himself into an animal." The Muggles watch him uncomfortably, looking a bit gobsmacked. "Yeah, the animal thing, it's really not common, even for us. It's just sort of..." he trails off, eyes honing in on a bright spot on the map.

Someone's put out a distress call, he realizes with a tightening in his throat. It's Hermione.

At Madame Malkin's, a green-tinged darkness falls, and Draco's heart accelerates rapidly. This is the moment, it seems.

Voldemort doesn't apparate; rather he appears to descend from the rafters, hovering in mid-air. He swoops toward the pedestal where Harry stands.

"*Harry Potter*," he says, almost lovingly. Draco's skin pricks beneath the invisibility cloak. He feels very cold.

"Voldemort," greets Harry, his voice defiant.

"*We meet again, Harry Potter.*"

Draco's heart pounds. Will it be enough, Snape's theory about love and protection? Will Harry be saved just by Draco's hidden presence, shielded by the fact that Draco loves him?

Because Draco does love him. Never before has he felt so certain about anything. He is enveloped in it, fortified by it, ready to die for it if that's what it comes to.

He feels compelled to act. What was it that Snape had said? Strike first, if necessary, and strike to kill.

"*Avada kedavra*," Draco whispers, voice calm. A flash of green light shoots toward Voldemort; but Voldemort flies gracefully upward, dodging it, face whipping in the direction of the racks of clothes where Draco is standing.

Draco throws off the invisibility cloak. "*Crucio*," he yells, the curse hitting its mark this time, but seeming to have barely an effect.

"*Draco Malfoy. I see that you are alive – though only for another moment.*" Voldemort smiles coldly, seeming perfectly relaxed. He raises his wand –

"DRACO!" Harry's voice, sharp with fear. His terrified face. I love you, Draco thinks, sadly.

"*Avada Kedavra.*"

Draco's world is washed with green.

"Ron, is everything okay?" asks Hermione's mum, her eyes crinkling with concern. Ron looks at her, only half present.

"Fine, yup," he says, mind racing. He shouldn't worry her parents, should he? Hermione would murder him if he did.

He stares at the map. "Someone, get there," he wills silently, "Help her."

He looks up again. The Muggles are looking back at him strangely, and he senses a seed of panic beginning to bloom.

"Everything's under control!" he reassures them, hollowly. Five minutes, or perhaps five hours, pass in tense silence, Ron compulsively checking the map every few seconds. The distress call is still pulsing. Has no one gone to help her?

As Ron stares at the map, the light flares brightly once more – Hermione has put out a second call. He looks desperately up at the Muggles. Is he truly expected to stay here with them, and watch from a distance as Hermione gets killed? The shield enchantment is up, isn't it? Shouldn't that be enough?

"Please – stay right here," he instructs, finally, nearly gasping. "Don't leave. Just – I'll be right back." He nearly flies out the door, map in hand, running through the corridors and up the stairs. He arrives, panting, to the room from which Hermione sent her distress call, hoping desperately that he's not too late. He opens the door.

Hermione is in the corner, bound and gagged by magic. Her wand appears to have been flung carelessly in the middle of the floor. Pettigrew is nowhere to be found.

Ron reverses the gagging and body-bind spells, and Hermione scrambles to her feet. "Oh, Ron!" exclaims Hermione, looking at him with dismay, "It's a trap. You shouldn't have come!"

Ron looks at her, uncomprehendingly.

"He heard the whole plan – must have been in the room with us in rat form as Tonks was explaining it!" She seems to be fighting back tears. "He followed me, and just, he petrified me and took my wand. Sent the distress

call on purpose from my wand, hoping to lure you away from the Muggles. Ron, you shouldn't be here!"

"What was I supposed to do? You – he sent out a second distress call. I thought you were with him, and no one had come. Merlin, I thought –"

"I know, oh Ron. I'm sorry." She runs to him, hugging him tightly.

"Why didn't anyone come find you, from the Leaky Cauldron?" Ron asks, voice trembling angrily.

"I don't know, he must have blocked the message from leaving the house. I – I kept hoping someone would come." She buries her head in the crook of his neck. "I'm really glad you're here," she admits.

"I love you – I really love you," he whispers. "I wasn't going to let," he cuts himself off, sighing. "We've got to get back to the Muggles, though! I put up a shield, but he's got a head start. We've got to get there before he finds them. Hermione, your parents –"

"Did you see them? Oh, God, are they all right?"

"Yeah, they're fine. They're with a ton of other Muggles," he nods, "Crookshanks found a way to warn them, and Draco's mum helped, so they're hiding in two groups. They've all got, like, weapons and stuff."

Hermione smiles slightly. "Good for them. We better move, though." She pauses, looking him squarely in the eye. "I love you, too, you know."

Briskly, they retrace Ron's route through the corridors, hastily flinging open the door of the Muggles' hideout. Breathing heavily, they are confounded by the sight of an empty bedroom.

"Ron, you're sure you have the right room?"

"Positive," he says, shaking his head with confusion. "Have they – they just left, then?"

"I guess so! Oh, Ron, you don't think he found them, do you?" She looks frantically down at the map in her hands. "He's not showing up. He's in rat form, then. But where did they all go?"

Ron gazes down the hallway, frowning. "What's that?" he murmurs, as the light catches on something silver. They walk quickly toward it to investigate.

"A fork," observes Hermione, picking it up for a closer look.

"Some of the Muggles were carrying them – must have dropped one!" Ron exclaims. "Look, there's another one up there." They scurry forward, finding another piece of silver, and then another a few meters beyond. "Do you think they left us a trail?"

"Looks that way," Hermione replies, excitedly. They move quickly, following the trail of silverware down a flight of stairs and down another corridor. Ron hasn't a clue where it will lead.

Suddenly, they hear shouts and the thunder of running feet. Acting as one without even needing to glance at each other, they run together toward the commotion, wands aloft.

The Muggles are charging, their candlesticks and kitchen knives raised high for battle. Ron registers this, stunned, as he struggles to keep up. There is a sound like wailing, something between a roar and a battle cry, rough and primitive.

"Was that – Harry's aunt Petunia?" Hermione murmurs, flabbergasted.

They catch up to the back end of the surge. "What's going on?" Ron asks one of the Muggles.

"We're going after that rat," the Muggle replies breathlessly in an Irish accent, sounding quite cheerful, "That ginger bloke said that the wizard we're after can turn into animals, and we reckon the rat is him!"

"I'm that ginger bloke!" Ron exclaims, "And the rat is him! Did he touch any of you?"

"Didn't have an opportunity to," the Muggle replies, grinning, and Ron realizes with a start that his smile looks familiar.

"Mr. Finnigan?" he asks, hesitantly.

"Ron, look!" interrupts Hermione, grabbing his arm. There is a sudden swell of movement coming back down the corridor toward them – a second battalion of Muggles, led by Ron's parents and Narcissa Malfoy.

"Surround the rat!" someone shouts.

There is a collective gasp as Pettigrew returns suddenly to his human form, looks around in apparent panic, and then quickly turns rodent again. He weaves through the crowd at ankle level, nipping and biting here and there, before making a sharp turn and breaking free down a corridor.

"No!" yells Ron, as Pettigrew disappears yet again.

"Mom, Dad!" Hermione shouts, catching a glimpse of them in the crowd and pushing toward them.

Tonks doesn't wait a beat. "Arthur, Molly, Hermione," she says, "Take the Muggles to the top floor and keep them in Sirius and Regulus' bedrooms. Remus, Ron, come with me. We're not going to let him get away."

They take off down the corridor after Pettigrew, Tonks and Lupin moving faster than he thought possible, and Ron cursing his summer diet of candy bars as he struggles to keep up with them. Always a few meters behind, he can nonetheless hear their conversation perfectly.

"Remus, you can't shut me out forever."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Merlin, Remus," Ron watches as the back of her hair rapidly switches among several shades of nervous brown, "Can't we just talk about it. Please," she begs.

Lupin's shoulders sink. "I don't know what's left to discuss. It happened, and don't tell me it didn't mean anything. I haven't forgotten what you said."

"About-"

"About him. How you felt about him at Hogwarts."

Ron squirms a bit, torn between awkwardness and curiosity. Have they forgotten he's right here behind them?

"Oh, Merlin, I don't even know why I told you that. It was just a crush. He was a Quidditch player. It was stupid. Nothing ever came of it."

"Until now," Remus replies emphatically.

"Remus, I - "

"Dora," he replies, his voice softening. "Please – I understand."

"You couldn't – you're so bloody perfect. You would never - "

"You don't think so? God, Dora, if Sirius were alive," his voice cracks, "If he were here..."

Bloody hell, Ron thinks, mind boggling. Is everyone in the world a pouf now?

"Dora, my first love is dead," Remus continues, "I lost him. That's – but yours, your first love is here, he's alive. And he's completely off his broomstick for you. Head over heels."

"A crush," Tonks says softly. "Not my first love, my first crush. It was nothing – doesn't mean anything."

"You'll never know what it means, if you just write it off. If you never do anything about it."

"I don't understand you, Remus!" she sounds hoarse, "I'm sick over what I did to you. Why are you trying to – Merlin, Remus, I don't want to hurt you."

"Dora, I love you. Truly, I do – but I don't know how to– I don't want to hurt you either. But you and I never really had a chance, did we? I think we both know that by now. My heart is – it's quite pathetic," he laughs sadly, "My heart belongs to Sirius. He's dead, but still."

"Remus," Tonks sighs.

"Do you love him?"

"Charlie?" she says, hair turning pink as she says his name. "I don't know, I –"

"So let yourself find out."

Ron, feeling a tad overwhelmed and more than a little guilty for eavesdropping, lets himself fall back a bit farther behind, to make it look like he was out of hearing range. Then, loudly, he calls out, "Oi! Wait up!"

"Oh, Ron!" Tonks stutters, awkwardly, "Merlin, I'm sorry – I forgot you were back there."

"It's fine," Ron says, "Still haven't come across him, have we?"

"Hmm?" asks Tonks, distractedly.

"Pettigrew," Ron prompts.

"Ah, right – no," she replies, "Not yet."

"Is that Crookshanks?" Lupin interjects, suddenly.

The fluffy ginger cat trots toward them; if a cat can look buoyant, he certainly does.

"What's he got in his mouth?" wonders Tonks.

Ron kneels down as Crookshanks approaches, dropping his quarry at Ron's feet. Crookshanks purrs in a self-satisfied way, rubbing in between and against Ron's ankles.

Ron gapes at Crookshanks in stunned amazement. "Merlin's beard... good kitty. You lovely, lovely cat."

Crookshanks has finally achieved a goal he's had since the day Hermione adopted him: to catch and kill the rat that Ron once called Scabbers.

"DRACO!" Harry cries, over and over, his voice coming out as a sob.
"DRACO, NO!"

"There's nothing to cry about, Harry Potter," teases Voldemort, softly, cruelly, *"Surely, you expected this to happen when you brought him here. But no mind – you'll be joining him soon."* Harry hardly hears this, hardly cares. He sees Draco's body in a crumpled heap beneath the school robes, still and silent.

Voldemort laughs with dark joy. *"So long, I've wondered what this moment would feel like – to have you at my wands end, preparing to die."*

"I hate you," says Harry, uselessly.

"*Avada kedavra,*" Voldemort replies, simply, and, not for the first time, aims the curse directly at Harry's forehead.

There is a shock of green light, and Harry feels suddenly limp, depleted. He hears only laughter, high-pitched and unrelenting, until – abrupt silence. *Draco,* he thinks.

Moments later, a surge of strength sweeps over Harry. He lifts his head – is he alive? Everything around him is a blur.

His fingers close around something thin and solid: his wand. "*Accio glasses*," he whispers, breathing heavily. His glasses, cracked into three pieces, soar into his waiting hand. "*Reparo*." He puts them on, pulling his body into a sitting position with great effort.

Voldemort's body is lying in a great heap of robes before him, white limbs twisted at grotesque angles. "*Avada kedavra!*" Harry shouts, but Voldemort is already dead. Harry tries to muster up some joy or even relief, but the victory feels utterly and completely hollow.

It's happened again, he realizes, feeling utterly numb. Saved again from a sacrifice made by someone he loves. Draco Malfoy. Harry hated him once, then loved him beyond reason, and now he's dead.

Before his courage fails him, he pushes through racks of clothing to kneel by Draco's body. How will he bear this? Truly, this again? His parents, and now Draco. Harry's face is in his hands, his cheeks slick with tears.

Then, there is a cough. Harry uncovers his face, slowly, almost afraid to breathe.

"Potter," croaks Draco, "Harry."

"You're kidding me," says Harry, hiccupping.

"I'm - " Draco clenches and unclenches his fists, watching his fingers move. "Look at that," he says laughing breathlessly. He flexes his ankles.

"I love you," Harry says, his green eyes electric from crying.

"I know," Draco says, beaming, "That's what saved me."

Epilogue

Nineteen Days Later

The strangest part of all is how normal it feels, eating sandwiches and chocolate frogs on the Express.

"I can't believe we managed it all before the start of term," Ron groans, not for the first time that day, "Couldn't have missed a day or two of classes, could we?"

"I know!" Hermione sighs happily, tucking her head into his shoulder, "I'm so looking forward to getting back into transfiguration, oh, and arithmancy..."

"She's mental," Ron notes, regarding her sympathetically. His arm is slung around her shoulders, and he pulls her in tighter.

Harry and Draco sit on the other side facing them, the half a meter's distance between them feeling like a vast, gaping chasm. Sharing a train compartment with no bodily contact is its own brand of torture. Five or six times already, various dormmates of Harry's have popped their heads in with some variation of, "Hi, Harry, how's your summer, and thanks for saving the world by the by, and Malfoy here isn't bothering you, is he?" – always accompanied by a threatening Gryffindors-mean-business sort of glance and a conspicuously held wand.

"You are bothering me," Harry informs Draco quietly, after another one has swaggered off. "I am exceedingly bothered."

"Hush," replies Draco, looking at him sideways with unconcealed longing.

"Both of you hush," Ron intercedes, gagging. "I'd actually take watching you snog over this. Don't, though," he adds hastily, when Harry and Draco raise their eyebrows. "Had enough of that, anyway, watching bloody Charlie and Tonks at the Burrow for the last two weeks. And Mum's just encouraging it, isn't she – already started hinting about a wedding."

"Yeah, about that. Your mum and weddings," remarks Hermione.

"I know." Ron sighs heavily, "I'm so sorry. Just ignore her. For now," he adds quietly, glancing at her sidelong.

Hermione puts her hands over her face, blushing, and Harry and Draco exchange grins.

The door to their compartment slides open suddenly, and Ginny Weasley pops her head inside. "Be there in five minutes or so – just spreading the word!" she says, her red hair shining brightly against her red robes. Harry looks up to see her staring at him and Draco with a startled look, before recovering somewhat with a slight smile.

"Good summer, Harry?" she asked, her voice holding a mix of wistfulness and curiosity.

"Not bad, thanks," he replies, blushing.

She steps out, clicking the door shut behind her. Draco glances at Harry, head cocked to the side. "Not sure we're going to have as easy of a time keeping our secret as we thought," he murmurs. They had planned to break the news gradually: let everyone get over the shock of them being friends, first, and then ease into the whole relationship bit.

"So, do you think we should just...?" Harry shrugs, looking at Draco questioningly.

"Why the bloody hell not?" says Draco with a sigh. They beam at each other, nervous but completely electrified.

The train slides slowly to a halt. Harry reaches for Draco's hand, letting their fingers intertwine.

They open the door to their compartment and step out into the train.

The end.

Author's note: Thank you again to those who have followed me so faithfully down this winding road. I feel very grateful to you all.

With love and longing glances,

Neverbird