For Whatever Ails You

Christmas Eve – 1999

As the wind whistled through the iron gate of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, and the chestnuts popped and sizzled in the fire's embers, Hermione reached into the enormous purple top hat on her lap and pulled out a folded piece of parchment. Glancing around at the expectant (and, in a few cases, apprehensive) faces of the younger members of the Order of the Phoenix, she unfolded the parchment and began to read.

Love is the funniest thing,

You never know what it will bring.

One day it's flowers and the next day teeth

Another it's brambles from a heath.

It rends, it tears, it shreds, it heals

You never know what you're going to feel.

But I know this one thing surely

It didn't come one day too early.

Though I cast it off and made you crawl

It wasn't long until the fall

Your eyes, your heart, your skin, your breath –

I'd keep them all and risk my death.

Because I never knew until that day

What things to do or words to say,

But I know them now and will do all to keep

Your body beside me as I sleep.

One day I love you and the next I hate

This fire I feel will never sate.

Believe me when I say to you

I am yours, what can I do

To keep you here another day

And never let you go away.

Because I know if one thing's true

It is that thing I said to you

That night (and you know which one I mean

You were the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen)

I said "I love you" a thousand times

And I'll say it again in a thousand rhymes.

Don't leave me here to face alone

The dragon's teeth that I have sown.

No more to fight and always to love

It's time for us to rise above.

If I ever hurt you, let me makes amends

And give you the strength I used to lend,

You've earned it now, I know it's true.

And I'll tell you again that I love you.

"Rot," said Ron, slouching into the gaping maw of his armchair. "Utter girly rot. Blech. I kept waiting to hear 'My love for you will never fade/So hurry up and let's get ourselves laid. . . .'"

"Ron," said Ginny. "Your metre is off. Merlin help the poor person who gets your poem."

Ron ignored his sister and turned to Hermione, his lips pursed as though he'd been sucking on a lemon.

“Who submitted that one?” he asked. “Mrs. Figg? It sounds very Squibish.”

“Honestly, Ron,” said Hermione as she folded the parchment and set it on the table at her elbow. “Do you plan on growing up anytime soon? First of all, calling anyone or anything ‘Squibish’ is bigotry, pure and simple; and second, these were all submitted anonymously. We don’t know who wrote any of these. That’s the whole point of a Secret Santa.”

Ron rolled his eyes and slouched even more. It was as though he were trying to merge with the upholstery, a feat – Harry found himself thinking – that would not be all that difficult considering the faded plum-red fabric was pretty much the same colour and texture as Ron’s jumper. “Tell me again whose bright idea it was to give anonymous poems as Christmas gifts,” Ron said sulkily. “Granted we’re stuck in this ruddy old house for the remainder of an interminable war and our ability to go shopping is kind of limited, but seriously! Couldn’t we have made stuff out of macaroni and dried Doxy shit? I know from experience that you can make a pretty mean quill holder . . .”

“Ew,” said Ginny, Justin, Seamus and Neville, more or less in unison.

“I for one would prefer a poem,” said Dean rather too diplomatically for Harry’s taste. He’d noticed there’d been lots of doe-eyed gazes at Hermione as of late, and the last thing they all needed was a pissed-off, jealous Ron.

“Who’s it addressed to?”

Draco’s voice, Harry noted, was devoid of emotion. Harry glanced at his morose slump in the darkened corner. He looked almost as dejected as Ron, but Harry knew it was for vastly different reasons.

Hermione unfolded the poem again and squinted at the name in the bottom right-hand corner of the parchment. “Funny you should ask, Draco,” she replied. “It’s for you.”

Draco sneered, his face as ugly for an instant as it’d ever been at school. “Lucky me,” he replied. “Can I guess who gave it to me now so I can go to bed?”

Hermione shook her head and levitated it into his lap. “You know the rules,” she said. “Or at least you should, considering the fact I’ve repeated them a thousand times.”

“Tell us again, Hermione,” said Dean, and the fingers of Harry’s wand hand twitched. Ron, he knew, had a lightning quick Leek Jinx. Harry would have to act fast if he hoped to intercept it.

Hermione sighed. “If you recall, last week we picked names out of a hat . . .”

“Mundungus didn’t,” Ernie chimed in like the little arse-kissing tattletale that he was. Satisfyingly, as though it’d read Harry’s mind, the card table where he was sitting lifted a spindly leg and slapped Ernie across the face. “Hey!” he squawked.

“And good thing,” said Ginny. She flopped down beside Harry and pulled his arm around her shoulders like a shawl. “Who here wants to receive a love poem from Dung?” From across the room, Harry could hear the pained inhalation. Even after the potion’s effects had entirely worn off, Draco’s pride was still wounded by any sign of affection that Ginny bestowed on him.

With no small amount of trepidation, Harry wondered when it would stop.

Obviously annoyed beyond endurance, Hermione put her wand tip to her throat and Sonorused a hem hem that would have put Umbridge to shame. “Then,” she said, her voice still a decibel louder than it needed to be, “we each wrote a poem for the person whose name we’d drawn – anonymously, of course,” she added quickly.

“Why,” Ron groaned. “Why oh why did it have to be poems? Why couldn’t it have been macaroni and Doxy shite?”

“Because,” said Ginny. “That’d be gross.”

“And poetry isn’t?” Ron sniffed. “So now what?” he asked. “We burn them all in a ceremonial pyre?”

“No,” said Hermione. “We each guess who wrote the poem we received. But Draco’s is only the first one. I still have at least two dozen more to read before we start guessing.”

“Sweet Merlin,” Ron groaned, surrendering at long last to despair. “Take me now.”

September 1, 1999, almost four months earlier

The corridor was damp and smelled of mould. The room was dimly lit with black candles that trailed equally black smoke. Harry was dragged in, Mulciber and Rookwood on either side, and thrown roughly onto the floor in front of a cauldron with a diameter the size of a tree stump. A metallic smell issued from its mouth, making Harry’s gorge rise.

Slowly, as his eyes grew accustomed to the light – meagre as it was – the true import of the setting dawned on him. “Oh no!” Harry said, his voice growing louder with each iteration of that one syllable. “No no no no no no no!” The most potent form of Amortentia, he knew, was brewed inside a circle of tapered suet candles with the blood of its two intendeds as the principle ingredients. With the force of a blow to the sternum, Harry realised that he was to be one of the potion’s victims and the cloaked figure kneeling on the floor beside him, clutching his bleeding forearm, the other. The lock of hair falling forward from beneath the cowl gave Draco Malfoy away in an instant. He did not look up at the sound of Harry’s cry, and the substance hissing and steaming in the bottom of the cauldron filled the air and Harry’s nostrils with the scent of aluminium and salt. It was not, Harry knew, the smell of frying Ashwinder eggs, although that smell was present too. No, it was blood. Malfoy’s blood. Despite having faced far more life-threatening situations since he’d been captured a month ago, Harry yelled and thrashed against his bonds. Loud and long until he was hoarse. Death he could escape, but not a love induced by Amortentia.

His struggle was violent and desperate and ultimately futile, and in the end it only served to accomplish

little more than to force the knife deeper into the vein-rich skin of his inner wrist. Once the act was accomplished, and his arm twisted like a rag over the mouth of the cauldron, each drop sizzling like fat on a fire, he actually considered struggling some more, wasting his strength and that of his enemies' as his life-blood pulsed over his palm and dripped through his fingers.

But that was before he remembered his ability to cast off an Imperius and, even more importantly, Ginny's ring. Ceasing his thrashing abruptly, he let Wormtail heal his wound before yanking his arm out of the coward's clammy grasp.

He would shake this off. He knew he would. When the cup was handed to him, smelling of yolk and blood and unicorn milk, Harry drank it to its dregs and defiantly swallowed back a gag. There was nothing for him to fear. Malfoy, however, was a different story. Harry watched as he tried three times to obey his Lord's order to drink and failed, spitting it back into his cup and sobbing huge wracking sobs. If he were anyone other than Malfoy, Harry might have warned him that crying into a cup of Amortentia only made it more potent. But he was Malfoy, and so that was that. Harry watched grimly as at last he managed to swallow and then held his hand over his mouth to keep himself from vomiting it back up. If he did, Harry knew, Voldemort would make him lick it off the floor, and the potion would take effect all the same. Around them, the Death Eaters laughed as Malfoy gagged and hiccupped and gulped in lungfuls of air. It was nothing but a game to them – an amusement bestowed upon them by their Lord to fill the long dull hours between battles.

Ah, but it was a satisfying sight after all he'd endured, often at Malfoy's own hands. Harry savoured it as he fought off the tendrils of desire that began snaking themselves through his intestines and curling in the chambers of his heart. They were nothing but smoke, and what remained of them was dissipated by the spell in the ring he wore. Ginny's ring. She'd given it to him in a fit of unwarranted jealousy, making him promise he'd never take it off. While he wore it, he was immune to the charms of any other person, and its power only increased in proportion to the desire it sensed in him. Despite the doggedness with which he pushed back against the effects of the potion, Harry still leaned on the ring heavily.

It did not fail him. Malfoy remained as he always was – a loathsome cowardly creature, pale as a mushroom and pointy as a sailfish's fin. He was nothing to desire. Nothing to want, and probably nothing that even deserved saving. Yet nonetheless, the face he turned to Harry, blank and vulnerable with adoration, was pitiable. He would do anything, Harry realised suddenly. Anything to please his new beloved. In other words, he was Harry's ticket home. He saw it as clearly as he'd ever seen anything. Malfoy under the influence of the strongest love potion ever brewed, was a useful – if ultimately disposable – tool.

He had, Harry reminded himself, no one but himself to blame.

Back to Christmas Eve, 1999

I used to think you were a prat

But now you're only an annoying gnat.

I wait for you to say something stupid

Like 'your arse's as rosy as the cheeks of Cupid,'

But lately you've let me down

You're no longer nothing but a clown.

You saved my life more times than I can count,

And my debt to you continues to mount.

But never once in all these months

Have you ever made me feel like a bloody dunce.

I can't thank you enough,

So this poem I'll snuff.

It isn't able to say what I want to say anyway.

"Whoa, that's kind of heavy," said Ron, sitting up for the first time that evening and looking around the room curiously. "Who's that one for?"

Hermione squinted at the parchment, causing Harry to conclude that either the writing was tiny and messy or Hermione was finally going blind after all that time reading faded manuscripts in bad light.

“Ernie,” she said.

Ernie looked genuinely surprised. “Me? That one’s for me? Is it nice or not, I can’t tell.”

“Wow,” said Ron. “Ernie, whose arse did you save?”

Ernie began counting on his fingers. As usual, it immediately annoyed the shit out of Harry. One thing was for sure, he hadn’t written that poem.

And he strongly suspected Draco hadn’t either. There’d been only thing to save Draco from, and the task had been his and Hermione’s. Not Ron’s, not Dean’s and definitely not Ernie’s. As far as Harry could tell, Ernie couldn’t save Ernie from Ernie, let alone save Draco from Voldemort. Maybe he’d written it for himself. But then again that would mean he had enough self-awareness to know he often was a complete prat. In other words unlikely.

The thought of Draco and how close he’d come to having his mind hollowed-out like a gourd by a sadistic madman made Harry want to look at him. But he didn’t dare. Either he’d find that Draco wasn’t looking at him in turn, or, even worse, that he was looking but with an expression of loathing and contempt. After everything that’d happened in the past twenty-four hours, Harry didn’t think he could bear it.

Ginny. Why’d it have to be Ginny and not Draco himself who’d crawled into his bed and spooned herself against his back? He’d been fast asleep after the brief but terrifying skirmish they’d had with some of the Death Eaters the evening before. He and Ron had ventured out for only ten minutes. A trip to the shop, that’d been it. But they’d clearly been waiting and ambushed them as soon as the door had closed behind them. It’d been violent, and Harry’d had to rely on instinct alone. He’d escaped, dragged back inside Number Twelve by an unseen hand, but Ron had been less fortunate. The Petrificus Totalus that hit him had caused him to fall backward and knock himself out on the stone step. His wand clutched in his hand and an Unforgivable on his tongue, Harry had reached out and dragged his best mate in by the collar of his jumper. Harry had never been so grateful for its thick unyielding knit until that moment.

Too exhausted and sick-feeling to crawl up three flights of stairs to their bedroom, Ron had all but passed

out on the sofa where Harry and Ginny now sat, and Harry had slept in their room alone, hoping beyond hope that Draco might see past his pride long enough to join him. So in the wee hours of the morning, when a warm body climbed into his bed and curled against his back, Harry's wishful thinking had led him to believe . . .

Oh God, but it wasn't Draco. It was poor dear Ginny. As soon as Harry had felt the swell of her breasts and smelled the scent of her perfume, he'd started and tried to turn over and tell her . . . . tell her what exactly? Tell her that despite her ring and his intentions, he'd started to feel something for Draco – something powerful and elemental and all-consuming? The words died on his tongue. The only thing she needed to know was that she couldn't be in his bed. Not then and probably not ever. He'd turned, and she'd mistaken the movement for agreement, holding his face and searching out his mouth with hers. He'd started to pull away, his heart pounding with alarm, when the person he'd wanted to be there walked through the door. Draco's expectant bashful expression had changed in an instant – first into shock and then into hurt and finally into a cold and haughty mask.

Please pardon me, he said. I mistook this for the bathroom. And then he was gone, and Ginny had tried to kiss him, and Harry had lain back against the pillows and wished for death.

Since then, Draco had not looked at him with anything but hurt and scorn in his eyes, and Harry had realised – belatedly and like a punch in the gut – that it hadn't all been on account of the Amortentia. Independent of the potion, Draco, like Harry himself, had developed a powerful need, a desire to be with him above all others. Harry had finally realised the truth, but it'd already been too late, and out of a fear of causing more pain, he'd not yet told Ginny that he couldn't be with her – whether or not Draco still cared for him. So tonight she sat curled beside him on the sofa, and Draco looked poised on the edge of his chair like a bird on a ledge poised for flight.

If Harry didn't act soon, he knew that he would lose him forever.

September 4, 1999 – day three after the ingestion of the most powerful love potion known to man

“Harry!”

The whisper in the darkness woke Harry from the sleep he’d managed to slip into. He tried not to groan out his irritation. It was essential that he feign a passion equal to that of Malfoy’s.

“What, my love?” Harry said, rising to his feet and seeking out the bars of his cell where Malfoy seemed to be waiting. He hoped his words didn’t sound as stupid and fake as they felt.

Malfoy reached out a hand blindly until he felt the collar of Harry’s shirt. From there, his cold fingers slipped beneath the cloth to trace his collarbone. For too long, he didn’t say a word, and his breath was loud and panting in the dungeon’s stale air. Despite himself, Harry shivered at the touch. Alarmed, he tried to nudge Malfoy towards an answer. “What?” he asked again.

Harry could feel Malfoy’s fingers twitch suddenly as though Harry had wakened him from a trance. “The key,” he whispered. “I have the key.”

He knew it! Harry all but grabbed him and kissed him, and then realising that, under the circumstances, that was exactly what he should do, he reached through the bars, seized Malfoy’s shoulders and drew him into as passionate a kiss as he could muster. “I knew you could do it, my darling,” he said, swallowing back a maniacal giggle. He went to pull away, but Malfoy grasped his forearms and pulled him deeper into the kiss.

Harry wanted to protest. They had the bloody key! It felt like now or never. They could escape, and then somewhere, somehow, Harry could escape him. It seemed only right, though, considering he’d risked his life to get the key, for them to try to escape together. If Voldemort could’ve all but tortured and starved Malfoy to death when he was a follower, what would he do when he discovered Malfoy had helped to free their most valuable captive? Despite his feeling of revulsion for Malfoy and the role he would have to play as his lover for the foreseeable future, Harry could not imagine leaving him to whatever sadistic fate Voldemort decided to mete out.

Harry tried to pull away again, but Malfoy’s grip was too tight, his mouth too urgent. A struggle now would give Harry away, and who knew how Malfoy would retaliate if he discovered Harry had duped him and treated him like a lovesick fool. Surrendering reluctantly to his fate, Harry opened his mouth and let

Malfoy's tongue slip inside. It was soft and warm and surprisingly plump. Harry would have sworn it would be as pointy as the rest of him, but it wasn't. It was as though his tongue was making up for the sharpness of his features. To his deepening alarm, Harry felt himself respond, the blood surging to his groin. Was it possible he wasn't as immune as he'd thought he was? The effect Malfoy's moan had on him made him doubt his immunity for the first time.

They kissed for what felt like forever and at the same time not long enough, their mouths opening wider and saliva slicking their chins. Their breath whistled through their noses, so busy were their mouths at devouring each other. On every other inhalation, Malfoy moaned softly, almost inaudibly, and after several minutes, Harry realised he was no longer reluctantly acquiescing. He pressed forward into Malfoy's hands and nudged with his chin to tilt Malfoy's head and give himself greater access. Malfoy's tongue filled his mouth. It should've been disgusting, but it wasn't. Far from it, in fact. It's the time I've been away from Ginny, Harry rationalised to himself. Nothing more. But even as he thought it, the ring seemed to squeeze tight enough to sever his finger. Clearly, it sensed the fierceness of his lust. He yelped with pain, and Malfoy drew away abruptly, leaving Harry's mouth feeling cold and bereft and with nothing to distract himself from the very full erection between his legs. He rocked hungrily against one of the bars of his cell, seeking a quick release. But Malfoy's frantic voice prevented any such thing.

"You're hurt," he cried. "How could I have been so selfish?!"

"Ssshhhhh," Harry said, expecting any moment to hear footsteps ringing on the stone stairs. "I'm not hurt, it's just . . . it's just I got a . . . a cramp in my leg."

Oh God, that was the wrong thing to say. Rather than getting on with their escape, Malfoy dropped to his knees and gripped Harry's thighs, massaging them through his filthy jeans. His hands were strong, and Harry groaned as Malfoy moved them higher, until at last they found his arousal, engorged and aching and ready to explode. In the pitch-like darkness, Harry heard him gasp.

"We have got to get you out of here," he said, pressing the heel of his palm against Harry's erection. "I have got to make you come."

Christmas Eve, 1999 again

You're tall and gangly, your hair is ginger,

Most of the time, I want to give you the finger.

Your jumpers are ugly, your eyes are blue.

I'm stuck with you, I'm stuck like glue.

I'm always with you like a foot in a shoe

Adhered to your heel like a bit of goo.

Now for this poem you will probably sue

But it's been worth it to say to you

You're a bloody wanker, I'll have you know

My pillow at your head, I long to throw.

Your lawn I will never mow,

Nor your boat I will ever row

And I think I've run out of rhymes for now . . .

Oh shite. I'm about to have a fit!

"Row" doesn't rhyme with "now." What's up with that?!

Everybody in the room cracked up, and Ron buried his face in his hands, his flaming ears still visible between his collar and the cup of his palms. "Kill me now," he said. "There is clearly only one person who could've written that piece of shite, and he used to be my best mate!"

"Ron," Hermione cried. "We've only read half of the poems! You're not supposed to guess yet."

"Why wait when I know the author? It's bloody obvious seeing as Harry's the only one I room with. Whatever happened to the spirit of Christmas? Harry, you are the biggest bloody wanker! That's the only poem so far that's not been romantic or, at the very least, nice."

“Hey!” said Harry, his voice full of wounded indignation. “Why blame me? Maybe the pillow reference is from our school days, when all of us had to put up with your bloody snoring! It seems to me it could’ve been written by Dean or Seamus or Neville as much as me.”

“As if Neville would write something so mean,” Ron sniffed.

“Merlin, you’re a big baby,” Harry said, scowling. “It’s not like the poem you wrote is going to be all hearts and flowers!”

“Maybe it is,” Ron said, sinking again into his characteristic sulk. He’d rallied briefly when Hermione had read the poem about fat blushing bottoms with its reference to buxom Baroque maidens kicking off their little shoes (Harry was willing to wager that Ernie had written it – either Ernie or Seamus), but the glow hadn’t lasted. “How would you know, Mr. Arsehole?”

From his darkened corner, Draco snickered balefully. “Yeah, Mr. Arsehole,” he said. Feeling hurt, Harry glared at him. For at least the hundredth time, he found himself missing the Amortentia Draco – the Draco who’d sought out his hand under the table and murmured Harry’s name in his sleep.

Glowering at the room at large, Ginny wrapped her other arm around Harry and kissed his cheek. “Leave my boyfriend alone!” she said. “Oh, and by the way, Ron, if Harry is an arsehole, which I’m not saying he is, it’s not like he’s the only one.” She looked pointedly at her brother. Out of a sense of duty, Harry kissed her back. He could all but feel the indignation rolling off of Draco like heat from an oven. But it wasn’t as though he’d returned Harry’s kiss the last time Harry had tried to kiss him – that first night after the Amortentia wore off. Draco’s mouth had been cold and motionless, and when Harry had pulled back in an effort to read his expression, Draco’s eyes had stared unseeingly past his shoulder.

Harry had wanted to shake him; to promise him that it hadn’t all been a facade. But he knew that what Draco had seen the night before had belied his assertion. There was no Time-Turner. He could never undo what had happened. No matter how much, in retrospect, he might wish he could.

September 7, 1999 – three days after the escape

The afternoon was hot. With their robes slung over their shoulders, they tromped through beech forests and fields bristling with foxtail and rip-gut brome. On narrow lanes, the hedges hummed with flies, and everything smelled cloyingly of over-ripe berries and earth and rot. Their shirts clung to their backs from the humidity, and their hair dripped with sweat. But on they went, convinced that it was too dangerous to Apparate within mere miles of Voldemort.

Malfoy, Harry discovered, was remarkably fit for a bloke who'd been all but starved to death for a year. When Harry teased him about it as they lay under a rowan tree chewing grass stems and batting away bees, Malfoy rolled on to his side and slipped his hand under the hem of Harry's shirt. It was due, he said, to all the wanking he'd done over Harry this past week. Three times a day at least. Harry had no idea that frequent wanking had such impressive curative properties. Plus, Malfoy added when Harry gave him a sceptical look, after he'd drunk the Amortentia, Voldemort had mysteriously become more generous with his pantry, which explained, Harry suddenly realised, how Malfoy had acquired the meat pies and oranges he'd smuggled into the dungeons for Harry over the past few days.

Returning to the task at hand, Malfoy traced Harry's lips first with his fingers and then with his tongue. Both were sticky from the blackberries they'd discovered and eaten far too many of. In any effort to appear love-struck, Harry pulled the pads of his fingers into his mouth and sucked all the sweetness from them. It was not as loathsome a task as he'd imagined it would be. Malfoy responded by rolling his body onto Harry's and plundering his mouth. He was ravenous, licking and sucking and moaning, pretty much all at once. Again, as it had two nights ago in his cell and nearly every other hour since, Harry's body responded. By this time, it felt less like an act and more like second nature. Ginny's ring had left blisters on his finger the night before when they'd come so close – too close, for Harry's comfort level – to getting naked and . . . and doing whatever it was that randy nineteen year-old boys did with each other when they were naked. He had a vague idea, of course, but not having had sex with anyone, let alone a boy and let alone Draco Malfoy of all boys, Harry had begged off. I want our first time to be special, he'd said, rather unconvincingly in his opinion. But Malfoy had seemed to buy it, smiling shyly and admitting that he, too, was a virgin. Not much opportunity, he'd replied vaguely upon seeing Harry's raised eyebrows.

When the kissing and the licking and the rocking against each other grew to be too much, they went for a swim in a coldwater spring to take the edge off. Malfoy kicked and splashed and ducked underwater to tickle the backs of Harry's knees with a reed. Laughing, Harry grabbed him, and they soon ended up

frotting against each other through their underwear in the silk-soft mud on the bank. For the first time, Harry orgasmed with another person – not only for the first time with Malfoy, but the first time with anyone. It was, he realised, an unparalleled experience. He'd been close for several minutes, agonisingly close, when finally he'd had the brilliant idea of pushing the elastic of his briefs down and off the tip of his cock, pressing the exposed and excruciatingly sensitive glans against the straining cloth covering Malfoy's cock. The sensation struck him like a lightning bolt to the groin, and he pulsed hard, coming all over Malfoy's stomach. Clearly needing nothing more than Harry's release, Malfoy came as well, his body pressing in a hungry arch up into the gutted curve of Harry's own. They collapsed panting into the cooling grass, and Malfoy threw an arm and leg possessively over Harry. It had been then, when Harry's defences were shockingly low, that Malfoy said that he loved him.

To his surprise, Harry needed to bite his tongue to keep himself from saying it back. Because he didn't love Malfoy. And even if he might, the ring he wore would not allow it.

Christmas Eve, again

There you are behind a book,

All I can do is sit and look.

Your frizzy hair, your bark-brown eyes

They send me flying in the sky.

But a romantic poet I am not,

I think this shite is full of rot.

"Well, the recipient of that one is pretty obvious, isn't it?" said Ron, blushing hard and instantly giving himself away. Ron, Harry thought, had never been able to pull a poker face.

"Indeed," said Hermione coldly. "How . . . interesting that you should have drawn my name as opposed to someone else's. What are the odds I wonder?"

Ron blushed even brighter. “You can’t say for certain it’s from me,” he said indignantly. “Could’ve been by Dean . . . or somebody.” Ron glared at Dean, and Harry’s wand hand twitched again. How long until the place was thick with hexes and McGonagall had to come in and tell them to head up to bed?

Heading up to bed was a prospect that Harry really wasn’t looking forward to. There was no chance tonight of slipping away from an oblivious and snoring Ron and going to Draco with his room no larger than a closet and a single window that somehow always seemed to frame a moon, waxing or waning or full and bright. How often had they made love in its light? Harry was certain he couldn’t count them all. That potion be damned! Harry was certain they’d started feeling something deep and profound between them. Or at least Harry had felt that way. Draco on the other hand . . .

Harry blushed with shame as he remembered the day Hermione had sussed out the fact they were sleeping with each other and weaselled the truth out of him about the Amortentia.

“Harry!” she’d cried, and Harry’d had to shush her. The last thing in the world he wanted was for Ron to find out about him and Draco – Ron or Ginny, for that matter. Ginny hadn’t been there for the past three months Harry and Draco had been at Grimmauld Place, but then, on December second, on the very morning of her eighteenth birthday, she’d escaped her mother’s clutches and come to be with Harry.

Harry had been avoiding her like the plague. Eventually, he knew, he’d have to come up with a way of telling her – and everyone else. But he wanted the Amortentia to wear off first. He didn’t want them all to think that his and Draco’s affair was nothing more than the effects of a potion. It was more than that. Harry was certain.

“Amortentia! Harry, that’s a very dangerous potion!”

Harry had shrugged. “I know,” he said. “But it’s not the only reason . . .”

Hermione had folded her arms across her chest and given him the patented Hermione look. “Is that so,” she’d said.

“Yes,” Harry had replied. “Yes, it is. I mean it started as the potion, but then . . . but then I got to see a side of Draco I hadn’t even known existed. I . . . I kind of fell in love with him . . .”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Well, of course you did,” she’d said. “That’s what people do when they’ve drunk a cup of Amortentia brewed with someone else’s blood. In fact, I doubt that anyone in the history of the world has ever managed to resist a draught of Amortentia. Harry,” she’d said, her face sad, “we’ve got to figure out a way to break its effects – on you both. I mean, haven’t you ever wondered why You-Know-Who gave it to you in the first place?”

“I’ve always thought it was to amuse himself,” said Harry. “He’s that kind of guy after all.”

Hermione shook her head with obvious frustration. “Okay then,” she’d said. “Even if I give you that – which I don’t – then why did he make it so easy for you two to escape?”

“He didn’t!” Harry said indignantly. “Draco risked his life . . .”

“To do what exactly?” Hermione asked. “He told me the other day that he thought You-Know-Who was going barmy because he’d simply found the key in a corner on the floor. It was in plain view, he’d said. And what do you make of the fact your wand was nearby, also in plain view?”

Harry felt his blood run cold.

“Sweet merciful Merlin,” he’d whispered. “It is a trap, isn’t it?”

Hermione pursed her lips and nodded. “Welcome home from the land of the brainless and besotted,” she’d said.

“But . . . But Draco doesn’t know about it!”

“Are you certain? How can you be so sure?”

“Because,” Harry started to say and then stopped. There was simply no way of telling Hermione how he knew without revealing some of his – and Draco’s – most private moments. Despite any danger, it was a thought he was loath to contemplate. “I just know,” he’d said, “as much as I know anything. Trust me, Hermione.”

She’d regarded him for a long moment. “Alright,” she’d said at last. “But it’s against my better judgement. I think . . . I think perhaps Draco may not even realise it’s a trap. He may believe it’s all good fortune, just like you did. But I fear, Harry. I fear that You-Know-Who is using Draco in some way. Maybe, I don’t know, maybe as a living Pensieve. After all, Draco has learned much about you and the Order. Maybe You-Know-Who planned for your escape, planned on the two of you not being able to resist the Amortentia. He knew that you would show and tell Draco anything and everything. He knew that if he could draw Draco back to him, then Draco would have some . . . interesting secrets to reveal. Willingly or not.”

Harry had taken a deep breath. It was too likely a scenario not to consider. After all, why hadn’t Voldemort come after them once he’d discovered they’d escaped? They couldn’t have been that difficult to find, even without them using magic. The reason was clear. Hermione was right. Voldemort wanted them to escape. The question was why.

Hermione broke his train of thought. “I need to see if I can brew an antidote to the Amortentia. We need to see if Draco will run back to him the minute it wears off.”

To his horror, Harry had heard himself snarl at his best friend. “He won’t,” he said. “Don’t even suggest it.”

Hermione had smiled sadly and shrugged. “Maybe you’re right,” she said although Harry could tell she didn’t believe it. “For your sake, if not necessarily for his, I hope so.”

September 9, 1999, the fifth and last day on the run

It had happened one night in a small inn in Glasgow's east end.

It was the first time Harry had ever been inside someone else's body, and judging from Malfoy's response it was clear that it was the first time for him as well. They'd eaten at a noisy pub – something greasy and vaguely resembling fish. And they'd both had a pint – or two. Or three. Harry had kind of lost count. But despite the likelihood of a hangover the following morning, it'd been worth it to see Lord Pureblood Prat Extraordinaire, his Excellency Draco Malfoy get completely swept up in the football match on the widescreen telly.

"Go on!" he'd yelled, standing up from their table and waving his hands about in a gesture of supreme irritation and contempt. "He's clearly off sides, Ref. Throw him to the Blast-ended Skrewts!"

True, the other patrons had stared at them, but then again Malfoy had been wearing his Slytherin tie, and the pub was on Gallowgate. He'd been adopted instantly as a Celtic FC fan as soon as they'd walked in and apparently forgiven for his posh English accent. Harry, on the other hand, had been less lucky in his attire, having unwittingly purchased an interesting blue t-shirt with what looked like a Gryffindor lion on it in Dumfries that morning. When it'd appeared that he'd be given a famed Glasgow smile if he didn't change immediately, he'd stripped to the skin, chucked his new t-shirt in a bin and hastily purchased a green and white football jersey with a shamrock over the left nipple from a bloke who was worse for the drink and propped against a wall in the gents. It was smelly and stained, but at least it had prevented the pub's other patrons from kicking the tar out of him.

"It must be a special warded shirt," Malfoy had said knowingly, even though Harry had started to remember some of the things Dean had gone on and on about at school. Something about a famous and often times deadly rivalry between two Glaswegian football clubs.

"Bollocks!" Malfoy had yelled every time the blue and white team sunk the ball into the net. Apparently his Slytherin brain had quickly sussed out which team's net one wanted the ball in and which team's net produced a chorus of savage yells and drunken boos.

“Oh! You barmy git! Go over there and kick his shin!” he’d yelled at the screen when a burly Rangers player tripped one of the Celtic players.

“Bloody right!” shouted an equally burly bloke at the bar and lifted his pint in a salute to Malfoy’s apparently fervent loyalty. “It’s too bad, innit? The new rules are shite. Used to be youze could knock the bastards’ bloody bollocks in.”

Malfoy had nodded sagely. “Ah yes,” he’d said. “Those were the good old days, weren’t they.”

Back at the inn, Harry laughed his arse off, and Malfoy beamed over the fact that he could amuse his (assumed) boyfriend so much.

“We should go to a bootball match when we get back to London,” he said. “But this time we’ll make sure ahead of time that you’re wearing the right colours. I almost had to break up with you back there to save my skin. I fear I shall now have to surrender my Slytherin pin.”

Malfoy’s face glowed with all the sun they’d had in the last few days, but mostly with unfeigned ardour. Anyone with at least one eyeball in his head could’ve seen it a mile away – how deeply in love Malfoy was with him. Remembering suddenly their very disparate situations, Harry stopped laughing abruptly and announced he was having a shower and then going to bed. He was tired, he said. Busy day and all that.

He tried to pretend he didn’t see Malfoy’s deflated expression in the mirror on the bathroom door as he walked away.

Merlin, Harry thought as he scrubbed every last trace of pub smell out of his hair and off his body. This was getting more and more awkward everyday. Yes, they’d kissed that evening two nights ago, and they both had come. And yes, Malfoy had pulled him off with eager hands the night before, but things were clearly escalating, and Ginny’s ring hurt him almost constantly now. A throbbing ache that almost (almost) dampened the desire he felt churning in his belly at the mere sight of Malfoy sleeping beside him. Maybe, he thought, he wasn’t nearly as immune to the Amortentia as he’d thought he was. But it

also was true that he clearly wasn't as madly besotted over Malfoy as Malfoy was over him. Harry saw it constantly, how lost Malfoy was in the potion's effects, his eyes searching out Harry's approval, his smile, at every opportunity.

It was starting to make Harry feel horribly guilty, which was probably why he didn't shout at Malfoy to get the hell out when he opened the bathroom door, stripped off, and stepped into the shower with Harry, his erection already full and jutting from the patch of dark blond curls at his groin.

"Sssshhh," was all he said before kissing Harry almost chastely on the mouth. "Ssshhhhhh," as if he'd known that a violent objection was on the tip of Harry's tongue. Slowly, the heat of the water and the relaxing properties of the steam convinced Harry's body to respond in turn. Malfoy was as sleek and muscular as a seal, and Harry found himself clinging to him and deepening the kiss. Hell, if he had to act as though he was under the effects of Amortentia, then he was bloody well going to enjoy it! Which was why he reached around Malfoy's back, retrieved the soap to slick his finger, slipped off Ginny's ring and chucked it into the sink. It spun once around the bottom of the basin and then disappeared down the drain. It would have felt liberating but for the fact that as soon as it was off him, the Amortentia bore down on him like a storm. It'd been waiting a long, long time for this moment.

Almost immediately Harry felt the Potion surge into his blood. It was a powerful force – almost too powerful for his mind to resist. Quickly, it surged into the previously barren caverns of his brain and sloshed around along with the lager in a potent brew. It didn't take long at all for his mind to catch up with his body, and he pinned Malfoy against the shower wall and ground his arousal against his hipbone.

"God," Malfoy moaned into his mouth. "My God, Harry."

From there it was only been a matter of instinct. Harry wanted nothing more than to be in Malfoy's body, in whatever way he could manage it. He'd never felt so keen for a fuck before, never knew it was even possible to feel so keen. Against him, Malfoy twisted and writhed in a parody of a fight when in reality, Harry knew, he was looking for an angle that would not cause his erection to slip frustratingly off Harry's wet skin. Harry knew this because it was exactly how he felt too.

"I need . . . ," Harry said. But what did he need precisely? To come, certainly, but it was more than that. Merely coming, under the circumstances would've been a poor alternative to whatever it was that Harry really wanted. If he came in Draco's hand or even against his groin, it wouldn't be enough. It would still

leave him hungry, his nerves jumping like flames under his skin. No, what he needed definitely had something to do with the feel of Malfoy's arse flexing beneath his palms. There, Harry was certain, he would find some relief.

Turning Malfoy so his back was to him, Harry looked down at the slippery cleft between Malfoy's buttocks and the tiny soap bubbles that disappeared there only to run down the backs of his thighs moments later. Gripping his cock in one hand and pressing the other into the middle of Malfoy's back, just between his shoulder blades, Harry slid himself inside that sweet cleft and pushed his hips up and forward until he could see the purple head of his erection emerge and rub deliciously against Malfoy's tailbone. It was good – very good; Harry now knew why everyone in the know at school had raved about anal sex. Malfoy thrust back, begging for more, and Harry kept rocking his hips, watching the pearly drops pulse out of the slit on the tip of his cock, joining the soap bubbles to make Malfoy even wetter and slipperier then he'd been before. Each time precome had winked from his swollen prick, Harry felt his belly hollow out; it definitely was only a matter of time before . . .

"God," Malfoy groaned savagely. "What are you waiting for? Put it in me!" But before Harry's lust-fogged brain could process the request, Malfoy started coming violently and untouched as though the mere idea of Harry inside him was enough to push him over the edge.

It was enough to push Harry over the edge as well, and he watched as his come spurted from the cleft between Malfoy's buttocks onto the small of his back. Harry slumped against him, pinning Malfoy beneath him and relishing the way his trapped breathing rocked both their bodies beneath the shower's spray. Looking down over Malfoy's shoulder, Harry saw his still partially engorged prick and reached down to stroke it. Malfoy shuddered violently with sensation, and Harry winced sympathetically.

"You git," Malfoy said fondly. "Didn't you learn anything tonight? You've got to put the ball in the net!"

Harry laughed; sex and football analogies seemed so unlike the Malfoy he'd known. But then again, much about this besotted Malfoy was unlike the Malfoy he'd known. He was light-hearted, laughing and relaxed. The opposite of the uptight guarded nasty boy he'd been. Happy, Harry decided, looked good on Malfoy.

"Really now," he purred, turning Malfoy to face him and pulling him flush up against his chest. "Is that what I should've learned?"

He realised, with the smile that greeted him at his teasing, that Malfoy hadn't been receiving such playfulness before that night, and Harry remembered how he'd rolled away from Malfoy on both previous occasions. Not tonight. Tonight may be the last they'd have together, alone. They were far enough from Voldemort to feel safe Apparating, and tomorrow Harry would take them to the steps of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place and ask – no demand – that Malfoy be permitted to enter. Leaving him to fend for himself was out of the question. He'd be nothing more than a lamb to the slaughter, weakened as he was by the Amortentia, his judgement impaired. He'd probably sit on the sidewalk where Harry had disappeared and pine away, or worse be torn to shreds by the Death Eaters he'd betrayed – not so much out of revenge, but out of boredom and a lazy retribution.

No, Harry saw clearly what must happen. They must go to Grimmauld Place, and they must be permitted to enter together. And if Malfoy was going to be turned away, then so was Harry too. Pure and simple.

"Potter, you're hopeless," Malfoy said, reaching around the shower curtain for a towel. Harry grabbed his arm to stop him. There was just something about a wet, slippery-skinned Malfoy that he wasn't prepared to let go. Yet.

"Hopeless," Harry laughed. "How so?"

"You almost got us killed for supporting the Grangers!"

"Don't you mean the Rangers?"

"No," Malfoy said. "The Grangers. It's much more amusing that way."

"You leave Hermione out of this hundred years' old rivalry," Harry teased. "She's only nineteen!" Both of them still naked, Harry wrestled Malfoy playfully out of the shower and on to the bed.

Alive to the challenge, Malfoy wrestled back, struggling, still wet and soap-slippery, on the shiny brocade coverlet. Harry pinned Malfoy's wrists above his head with both of his hands and rode out the muscle

surge of Malfoy's thighs. It was wonderful being able to fight without the fear that someone was going to get his nose broken or his balls kneed. Instead the match was muscle and sinew, rather than bones and fists. Two young men in the prime of their strength trying to best each other and pin his opponent against the pillows.

Laughing, Malfoy squirmed out of Harry's grasp and quick as a flash reversed their positions, his hands pinning Harry's wrists and his thighs straddling Harry's hips. By this point, Harry was more than half-hard. The smell of Draco's hair was making him mad as was the sweat of exertion that mingled with what remained of the soap and water.

"Surrender," Malfoy crowed triumphantly. "I beat you, Potter, fair and square." He was panting and flush-faced from their wrestling, and Harry was going to be damned if he let a Slytherin best him at anything. Thrusting his hips upward, Harry went to throw Malfoy off and . . . .

. . . and slipped inside his body just like that.

The combination of sweat and soap and the openness of Malfoy's thighs had made it not only possible but inevitable. Harry felt a jolt of pure ecstasy – as sharp and electric as pain – shoot from his belly and balls and straight into his cock. The sensation was that novel and that momentous. It was only the tip, and Malfoy froze, remaining on his knees with none of his weight resting on Harry's hips – probably, Harry thought, out of a fear of hurting Harry or himself. Harry groaned and was surprised at how gutted he sounded. Reaching for Malfoy's waist, he went to push him up – he wasn't certain that either of them were ready for this, if indeed they'd ever be – but at the last moment, he'd merely held Malfoy steady and snapped his hips up off the mattress, feeling the head of his penis slip pass the tight ring of muscle and catch.

By then, Malfoy was squirming, and through the fog of lust, Harry couldn't be certain whether it was pain or pleasure that he felt. In fact, he himself couldn't say for sure which of those things he was feeling either. The sensation was so intense it carved out its own category somewhere in between. He was still only inside Malfoy about an inch and a half, just scarcely past the head, but the rim of Malfoy's entrance was spasming in a way that made Harry know he didn't need to go any deeper before he came. In fact, he wasn't certain if he could go deeper without losing his mind. He didn't want to hurt Malfoy, but neither – for the very life of him – could he withdraw. Instead, he held Malfoy's hips steady and rocked his own in a way that ensured he stayed inserted only so far, but that Malfoy's tight muscled ring would massage the head of his cock to orgasm.

Above him, Malfoy's face was shuttered with either pain or concentration. "I can stop," Harry said, even though he knew it was a lie. Malfoy opened his eyes and looked into Harry's, his face once again completely open and vulnerable.

"It hurts," he said, and Harry's belly ached at the realisation that he should stop, that this had been an accident and not a consenting act, but then he added, "but, God, Harry, don't stop. Just don't go any deeper, not yet at least. It's a lot." He didn't elaborate, but Harry felt he understood anyway.

"Will you turn around?" he groaned, and Malfoy nodded, rising up on his knees and expelling Harry from his body with what Harry experienced as a gut wrenching pop. He almost came there and then.

But then Malfoy was turning, presenting Harry with that perfect arse, and Harry was thrusting up, without hands once again, relishing the suspension of pleasure every time the head of his penis caught on the tight little pucker of Malfoy's hole, only to have it slip off at the last instant. It was as though they were still wrestling and Harry wasn't really trying to push himself in. Malfoy wriggled, trying to catch the tip of Harry's cock as Harry slid over his entrance again and again. The sounds issuing from his mouth sounded more animal than human, and at last his anus pulsed open on nothing but sheer need, and Harry found himself slipping inside once again.

He was still only deep enough that nothing more than the rim of Malfoy's hole was massaging the very end of his cock. From this vantage point, Harry could even see the roll of foreskin still outside Malfoy's body. He braced Malfoy's hips, and Malfoy leaned forward, opening himself up more and giving Harry a completely unobstructed view of his pink, swollen anus. It pulsed and spasmed, stroking Harry past the point of madness and almost past the point of endurance. Now and again, the tight clenching ring would swallow his whole head and then squeeze it out, probably, Harry supposed, on reflex if nothing else. Watching the rhythmic contractions, Harry was sure that if he removed his cock and inserted one of the plump cherries they'd stolen from a farmer's field the day before, that Malfoy's hole would pull it in and then push it out, caught between the competing needs to draw it in deeper and expel it entirely. Harry groaned, imagining how the sweet juice would seep out and trickle down Malfoy's balls. He was almost (almost) tempted to try it, but then Malfoy started coming. The contractions grew even more intense than before, and Malfoy threw his head back, clearly intent now on plunging Harry to the hilt in his body. As much as he wanted to, Harry was too much in the thrall of watching Malfoy's anus squeeze and massage the unbearably sensitive head of his cock to orgasm. Plus, he was worried about hurting him by inadvertently pressing up too suddenly and deeply on one of his out-pressing spasms . . .

Merlin, the mere thought of burying himself like that caused Harry to start coming, and he watched through the waves of pleasure as Malfoy's hole gulped in his semen like a thirsty mouth. Teetering on the brink of overwhelming sensation, Harry pulled all the way out and grasped the head of his prick in a firm steady hand as he finished coming violently through his fingers and watched Malfoy's body involuntarily expel his come with hard little contractions in rapid sequence. It flowed out of Malfoy's arse and ran down his balls before dripping on to the coverlet.

It was a sight, Harry knew, that Amortentia or no Amortentia he would never forget. They'd lost their respective virginities together in a way that was as drenched in eroticism as Harry could've barely imagined, even in his wildest of fantasies. Fascinated and growing hard again, he spread Malfoy's buttocks with his palms and watched his anus expel Harry's come in long dripping rivulets.

It had been inevitable, of course, the way things had been going, but Harry had never imagined that Draco would have let himself be that open and that vulnerable. Potion or no potion, Harry felt himself slip inside love just as his penis had inadvertently slipped inside Draco's body.

It was heaven.

Christmas Eve, 1999

Your brogue is hilarious

And your right hook perilous.

I wish I had ducked,

'Coz I knew I was f'ed.

I never meant to spill that ink

All over your pointy-toothed Fink.

It was a mistake

One I plan to never remake.

Seamus you're a good friend,

So long as no leak afflicts my pen.

"Well, once again, we not only know who that's for but also who it's by." Ron glanced meaningfully at Seamus and Neville, who blushed a colour the same hue as Ron's sweater and the upholstery of his chair. He glared hard at Ron or at least as hard as Neville was capable of glaring at anyone.

"How do you know it's me?" he asked.

"Because," said Ron with supreme confidence. "No one else here would say 'f'ed' rather than 'fucked.' Not even my pristine virginal sister," he added glancing at both Ginny and Harry as if to ask, I am right about that, aren't I?

"Ron!" said Ginny. "My virginity . . ." she paused to glance meaningfully at Harry, "is none of your business."

"Er," said Harry, feeling no small measure of distress. Hermione cast him a look of sympathy that made Harry want to cry – or hit something really hard.

"Oh, and it's not like Neville and I are the only virgins in the room." She gazed meaningfully at Harry once more, and then – to Harry's horror – reached for his hand in search of his ring finger.

The ring had remained where Harry had left it that September night. In a drain in a sink in Glasgow.

Ginny gasped. "Where is it?!" she demanded. "Where's my ring?!"

Everyone in the room was staring at them, including Draco. If the floor had opened up and swallowed Harry whole, it still wouldn't have been enough. He said the only thing that he could think of under the circumstances.

"Er, I lost it?"

Ginny drew away from him. "You did not," she said flatly. "I was the only one who could've taken it off you! Either that or you took it off because you were no longer in love with me."

"Er," said Harry again. "Well, now that you mention it . . ."

But how he was going to finish that sentence, Harry would never know because Draco started laughing as if all of this was the funniest thing in the world.

"Get over yourself," he said sneeringly to Ginny, who just looked at him in a combination of confusion and hurt. "What he may or may not have felt for you was nothing in the face of what the Amortentia caused him to feel for me. Get over yourself, Weaselette. You may have him now, but I can assure you that your ickle boyfriend . . ." he spat out the word, "is not a virgin and hasn't been for several months." He looked at Harry, his eyes glinting with malice. "Clean up that little mess, Romeo. Go on, I want to watch."

Harry rose to his feet, anger and hurt surging through his veins. "Fuck you, Malfoy," he said, his voice low and dangerous.

"I believe you already have," Draco said nonchalantly, examining his fingernails with an expression of boredom. "Honestly, Potter, you are unbelievably unoriginal. And not worth my time or my energy."

The words struck Harry like a blow, and he literally stumbled backward. "You . . ." he stammered. "You never cared for me at all, did you?"

Draco looked up at him, his lip curled with contempt. “It was a fucking love potion, Potter. I thought you were more than clear on that concept.”

Harry inhaled sharply. A stinging – and damning – retort was on the tip of his tongue, but then he glanced around and saw that every eye in the room was on him and Draco – a situation he’d direly wanted to avoid at all costs.

“Draco,” said Hermione. “Perhaps this is neither the time nor the place.”

“Oh no,” said Ron standing up and clenching his fists. “Au contraire, Hermione. I think this is exactly the time and the place! You’re a lying little shit,” he spat at Draco. "Harry, tell him . . . Harry?!”

“Ron,” Hermione said warningly. “I’m quite serious. Shut. Up.”

Hermione’s resort to “shut up” should have been more than enough of a clue to Ron that he should do precisely that, but then he glanced at his sister and saw her blank look of deepest betrayal.

“Harry?” she said, her chin wobbling. “What is Malfoy talking about?”

Harry swallowed. He was still staring at Malfoy, begging him to remember some small bit of what they’d shared together. The sitting on the gate and swinging lazily in the sun, eating purloined cherries and talking about Quidditch. The nights at Grimmauld Place, in a room just there, just there at the top of the stairs. They’d slept in each other’s arms as recently as Friday last. Draco had kissed his jaw and draped an arm over his chest. This is it, he’d said, and Harry’s heart had stopped for an instant. “What do you mean, ‘this is it’, he’d asked and without pausing, Draco had answered, The real thing. This is the real thing, Harry.

Was there really nothing left? Had it really been nothing but the Amortentia after all? He pleaded with Draco with his eyes to tell him that it wasn’t true, but Draco’s eyes were as cold and grey as slate.

“Ginny, what Draco is talking about,” said Hermione gently, “is something that only he and Harry and I know about. While Harry was a captive of You-Know-Who . . . of . . . of Voldemort, he and Draco were forced to drink Amortentia. It caused them, as it causes everyone who has ever been subject to it, to fall in love. And yes, Ron, you guessed it, Harry and Draco were . . . were intimate, so you can close your mouth now. Doxies are likely to fly in there and die if you don’t.”

“So, so,” Ginny stammered and it broke Harry’s heart. He’d never meant to hurt her. “So, you’re in love with Malfoy?”

Harry swallowed and opened his mouth, but Draco cut him off.

“There’s a difference between ‘falling in love,’ and being a victim of a dangerous potion, Weaslette. I can assure you that it was that way for your boyfriend.” He paused and glanced swiftly at Harry and then, when he saw Harry watching him, he turned his eyes away again. “And for me, too,” he added quickly. “So you all can untwist your knickers. Granger here cured us last week. Believe me, Potter and I are not lovers. You can go back to your perfect little fairytale world.”

The disgust and anger were thick in his voice, and Harry found himself thinking how hard it must have been for him. Waking up after drinking an antidote with his lifelong nemesis sitting on the edge of his bed and reaching for his hand. What must he have thought? How must he have felt?

Especially when he’d learned that Harry had never really succumbed to the potion at all; that he – at least in Draco’s mind – had faked a great love. And why? Clearly he thought it was an effort to humiliate him, but how could he think such a thing after . . . after all that had happened.

September 10, 1999

They arrived in London just as twilight closed over the city. Draco, Harry could tell, was anxious. Several times, he paused suddenly, and Harry had to double back and take his arm.

“You won’t leave me?” he said for the fourth time, and Harry kissed him, right there in the street.

“No,” he said. “You’re coming with me, and no one is going to do anything to hurt you. Not unless they want to answer to me.”

Clearly wanting to stall the inevitable, Draco insisted they stop at a Muggle shopping centre, ostensibly to buy clothes and food, but after the third time Draco tried on the same pair of jeans, Harry realised what he was up to. Slipping into the changing room, he locked the door, disabled the anti-theft camera and cast a Muffliato. Draco, it turned out, was defenceless against the kind of kisses Harry bestowed on him. Open-mouth and wolfishly hungry, he would have eaten Draco alive if he could figure out how not to hurt him in the process.

“It’s alright,” he murmured into their kiss. “I mean it, Draco. Anyone who has anything to say about you – about us – is going to have to reckon with me. I,” but then he paused. Despite everything they’d done and learned about each other, Harry still wasn’t certain it was the right time to say I love you. Especially not in a changing room in Whitley’s Department Store. Harry swallowed back the words and shut himself up with another kiss.

As it’d been since the day Draco had saved him from his cell, Harry’s body responded intensely to their kiss, stroking Draco’s back beneath his shirt, tracing his spine, and moving away now and again to kiss his throat and nip on the tendons leading down to his collarbone. Beneath his ministrations, Draco relaxed, as slender and pliant and ever-moving as reed in a stream. “I love you,” he murmured enough times for the both of them, and Harry kissed him deeper.

“Turn around,” Harry whispered into his hair, and Draco did, stepping out of his soon-to-be new jeans. In contravention to store policy, he was wearing not a stitch of underwear. Harry grasped Draco’s wrists, guided his hands to the partition wall and knelt on the floor. Draco’s arse was something that could only have been carved by God’s own hands. Pale like the rest of him, with a rosy little blush in each cheek. Harry used his hands to part Draco’s buttocks and breathed in the scent of him, the cheap soap from the inn and the warmth of the day’s walking. Harry felt his mouth water at the mere thought of burying his face in that perfect cleft.

“What’re you doing?” Draco asked from somewhere above him, and, his finger on Draco’s entrance,

Harry felt him clench in shock. He smiled against Draco’s hip.

“What do you think?” he asked.

Draco swallowed audibly. “Are you sure you want to?”

Harry replied with his own question. “Do you want to do this to me?”

Without even pausing to think about it, Draco nodded vehemently. “God, yes,” he breathed, and Harry smiled again.

“Well, then why wouldn’t I want to do it to you?” He glanced up at Draco’s face to gauge his expression. Draco blushed deeply.

“Because,” he said quietly. “Because I’m me and you’re you.”

Harry furrowed his brow at the implication. “Is it that you think I’m too good, or that you’re not good enough.”

“The latter,” Draco answered. “Most definitely the latter.”

Words, Harry knew, were not going to be enough to respond to that assertion. It almost made Harry’s brain explode to know Draco Malfoy – literally – didn’t believe he was good enough to have Harry Potter – literally – kiss his arse. Words were simply not enough. Harry leaned forward and did just that. He planted a wet open-mouthed kiss right on Draco's no-longer-so-virginal entrance.

The effect was instantaneous. Snapping his hips back in a way that Harry was convinced could only be reflexively, he moaned and reached around to assist Harry in opening himself further to Harry’s tongue. Drawing away to glance up at him, Harry saw that he’d leaned his forehead against the partition wall, his

eyes screwed shut and his mouth panting open. How long, Harry wondered, had Draco dreamed of this? It simply had to have been longer than the Amortentia's effect. It was too animalistic, too instinctual.

Returning to the task at hand, Harry set about making Draco come with nothing but his tongue and his fingers. It wouldn't be that difficult; Draco's cock, Harry could see, was already so swollen with arousal that it looked as though it could burst. Its tip leaked almost continually, and Harry reached around to soak his fingers in it, using his body's own lubricant to penetrate him. With one hand rubbing his prick through his jeans and Draco's hands still holding himself open, Harry fingered him slowly, deeply, watching as the puckered ring of Draco's opening pulsed in anticipation of the width of his knuckle and then closed tightly around the tip, squeezing just as it had the night before around the glans of Harry's penis. The sight brought the memory crashing down around him, and Harry started to come in his jeans, huge wracking shudders as he licked the ring around his finger and wriggled the tip against the tight little ball in Draco's rectum that made his body jerk and tremble.

He lasted another minute before he surrendered to Harry's caress, coming with a sob and involuntarily contracting long enough to let Harry slide his finger out and replace it with his tongue. Draco, it appeared, had a weakness for being rimmed to orgasm. It was a secret that Harry planned to exploit at every available opportunity.

It was only later, as they stood in front of Number Eleven and Number Thirteen Grimmauld Place, with Draco hyperventilating with fear beside him, that Harry took his hand, kissed the palm and told Draco he loved him. It was the first and only time he'd ever said it.

Christmas Eve, 1999

This is boring, this is weird.

Poems from a purple hat?!

It's everything I'd feared.

So kill me now, and with this be done

If I were a Muggle, I'd buy a gun.

With rhyme and metre we keep score –

Curse this bloody awful war!

Nodding solemnly until the soiled bandage around his forehead slipped down over his eyes, Ron clapped long and hard as though he'd just heard the final aria in an opera.

"Whoever wrote that one is bloody brilliant," he said. "Which I suppose means it wasn't Ernie."

Ernie pouted and the coffee table lifted its leg again to pat the top of his head condescendingly with one ornate foot. "You can't know that for sure," he said. "I might've."

The fire was getting low, and the chestnuts were cold. Despite himself, Harry was starting to feel sleepy. It'd been at least twenty-four hours since he'd slept at all, and at least a week since he'd slept soundly. He'd grown used to a warm bed, to the feel of Draco sleeping against him as his lungs expanded with each breath and curled him closer and deeper into Harry's arms. How he'd loved to sleep spooned around Draco's back – the feel of Draco's hair against his cheek, his shoulder blades the perfect place for Harry's chin to rest. And of course, his belly softened with sleep and the heavy warm weight of his penis under Harry's hand, exhausted for the moment, but ready on the first impulse to swell and harden. Even in the midst of his misery, just thinking about it caused Harry his own twitch of memory.

The thought of never being able to make love to Draco again was more than he could bear.

So the truth was out now. Harry had nothing to hide any longer. Everyone in the room – including Ginny – now knew that he'd been in love with Draco. But they all believed it'd been the Amortentia, and they must also believe that now it was gone from his system, everything would go back to normal. Even Ginny had retreated from affronted silence and returned to her seat on the couch. She was no longer trying to put her arm around him, but she was holding his hand loosely. As if to say, "It's alright; we'll work this out." But Harry didn't want to work it out. He wanted Draco back. In the corner where the shadows were barely touched by the firelight, Draco sat in his chair with his head in his hands. Even with the distance between them, Harry could see his fatigue. Obviously he wasn't sleeping any better than Harry, although what kept him awake was apparently quite different.

As soon as he'd drunk the antidote, Draco had reverted from the Draco Harry had come to know over the past several months to the Malfoy Harry had known at school and as one of his tormenters while he'd been Voldemort's prisoner. It had been more startling than an unintended Transfiguration. The soft grey eyes had turned hard. The elegant curve of his back and shoulders had gone rigid with wounded pride. Get out! he'd said. Get away from me, Potter! Don't touch me! In an instant, everything they'd created together had come crashing down like a tower built by a child out of blocks . . .

"Do you know how he's going to react?" Hermione had asked, the trepidation slipping in behind her words. "Is he going to take this well, Harry?"

They'd been sitting in the cupboard under the stairs where Hermione had been brewing the antidote, waving cobwebs away from the candle flame and brushing spiders out of each other's hair. Harry had been trying to keep memories of another cupboard in another house at bay, so he hadn't heard her properly until she asked the question again.

Harry thought for a long moment. "I think," he said, "that his feelings will probably change a little bit. I think we'll probably go back to . . . to holding hands and stuff rather than . . . well, you know . . ." He trailed off lamely, annoyed with himself for being unable to say the words "make" and "love" in the same sentence, even with his best friend.

Hermione tilted her head and fixed him with a look balanced between gentle and concerned. "But you think he's still going to . . . going to be in love with you?"

Harry had nodded firmly. There was no doubt in his mind. Love potions could make you feel certain things you might not otherwise feel, but they couldn't make you do things you wouldn't otherwise do. Love potions were not Imperiuses after all. As strong as they were – and as needful of strict regulation – they did not override a person's will to act or not to act. You still had a large measure of autonomy, even where it related to the potion's other intended target, your beloved. You were still yourself, and Harry was convinced that the way Draco was with him – the way he sought Harry's opinion, the desire to make Harry laugh – did not come entirely from the Amortentia. There were independent emotions there. And memories they'd made since they'd ingested the Potion. These were the stones in the foundation of a real relationship. Maybe it had started in a less than an optimal way, but it'd been worth it. More than worth it in Harry's opinion.

“His pride will be hurt when he realises how wide the gap is between what he thought he felt and what he actually feels,” Hermione had said. “Also, he’ll be horrified that you didn’t fall as far under the potion’s spell as he did. You must be prepared for him to shy away – maybe even a lot.”

But Harry had already thought of that. He would let Draco know that he loved him, and that, when he was ready, they could be together just as they were under the potion’s influence. All of these considerations had gone into his decision not to tell Draco about the antidote ahead of time. Harry didn’t want to give him a chance to doubt the reality of Harry’s affections or to contemplate the possibility that, without the aid of the Potion, Harry would abandon him. No, what Harry wanted was for them both to drink the antidote together, and to remain together as the changes took place. Harry had wanted to hold his hand, to assure him that although everything had changed, nothing important had to – at least not for the worse.

It had all gone so terribly, terribly wrong.

Harry closed his eyes wearily. He’d stared into the fire for so long that his eyes felt like sandpaper, and spots danced on the insides of his eyelids. “Harry?” Ginny waved her hand in front of his face, startling him out of his memories. “Hello, honey. Is there anyone in there?”

Harry started, automatically shying away from her and then promptly feeling horribly guilty. But he just couldn’t help it. Couldn’t she understand that it wasn’t like whispering Nox at a lit wand? Even though the antidote had worked for Draco and broken the hold the Amortentia had on him, Harry, himself, had not – and could never have – escaped so easily. He’d never come under its effects the way Draco apparently had. His fall had been his own, and fall he had. Unaided and unhindered by potions or rings. If anything, the power of both the potion and his resistance to it had neutralised both. He’d been himself. Everything he’d done and said had been under his control and subject to his will – more so perhaps than anything else in his life had ever been. He still felt everything – the desire, the love, the raw gut-blistering-wake-you-in-the-middle-of-the-night grief. Apparently, the only things Draco felt were anger, humiliation, annoyance and – at best – a curiosity that had led him to Harry’s room and, in turn, led him to find Ginny in Harry’s bed. And now Ginny wanted to play boyfriend and girlfriend as though none of it had ever happened.

Harry smiled wanly at her face with its expectant expression. It wasn’t her fault. It was his for not saying something sooner, for not anticipating how sensitive Draco was to any and every perceived sleight. For

not realising that their whole relationship had been balanced on a cup of a potion and a dram of an antidote. He'd bollixed it all up beyond repair. It was silly, he knew, but he'd put every last hope into the poem he'd written for tonight, but when he glanced again at Draco, he saw only a crumpled and discarded piece of parchment at his feet. His love nothing but words on a page. His hope nothing but the synthesis of ink and paper.

December 18, 1999, one week ago

"Draco," Harry said gently, shaking his shoulder. "Wake up."

It was one of those mornings when even a warming charm wasn't enough to keep the cold away. Harry had shivered when he'd pulled away from Draco's body to answer Hermione's knock on their door. It was dawn, although, without glancing at the clock, one would never know. Outside the rain fell in grey sheets, slicking the black branches of the pitiful old tree in the back garden. Between the heavy sky and the jut of drab buildings in the housing estate four blocks away, the sun seeped like yellowing pus from a wound too deep to fully heal. Harry felt oppressed by the ugliness of it all. And fearful of what would happen when they drank the bezoar juice that Hermione had been brewing for the past two weeks.

For at least a dozen reasons, Harry had not told Draco about the antidote. He hadn't dared. He hadn't wanted to add one more variable to the equation of their fragile affair. Ever since Ginny had arrived at Grimmauld Place, Draco had been losing weight, his eyes haunted with the possibility that, despite everything and despite his best efforts, Harry might be slipping through his fingers.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Harry just needed the right time and place to tell Ginny, and besides, he wanted the effects of the Amortentia gone. He wanted to look in the faces of Ginny and Ron and Seamus and Dean and Neville and the rest of the Order and tell them that he was in love with Draco Malfoy.

"Harry? What's going on?" Draco replied sleepily, and then, catching sight of Hermione, he started to panic. "What's going on?"

Harry reached out and tried to soothe him with a gentle hand on the bare skin of his shoulder. Draco, Harry knew, was naked under the blankets and probably feeling terribly vulnerable. Hermione smiled at him kindly.

“It’s alright, Draco,” she said, her voice soft. Harry could’ve hugged and kissed her in that moment, except he didn’t want Draco to get the wrong idea – now of all times. She handed them both shot glasses of a cold but steaming potion. “This is an antidote for the Amortentia,” she explained. “Drink it and you will be yourselves again.”

With trembling fingers, Draco set his glass on the nightstand, and Harry followed suit, his thoughts awash with sudden concern. They hadn’t even drunk the bezoar juice yet and already Draco was taking things badly. Harry watched him as he swallowed back panic and fear.

“I didn’t know,” he said, his voice shaking. “I didn’t know you two were working on an antidote. Harry,” he said turning to him. “Harry, why were you working on an antidote? What’s going on? Why do you want to be rid of the Amortentia? After . . . after everything it’s brought us? Why after everything do you want to be rid of us?”

Harry opened his mouth to say that the last thing in the world he wanted was to be “rid” of Draco, and that what he wanted more than anything was for them to love each other without a potion getting in the way. If he wanted to be “rid” of anything, it was the foreign influence of the Amortentia. He wanted to look Draco in the eyes and tell him, that beyond a shadow of a doubt, he loved him. And always would. But Hermione spoke first.

“It’s absolutely essential, Draco, that you drink this antidote. This has all been nothing but a trap. You and Harry were supposed to fall in love and escape, so that when the Amortentia wore off, you would go back to Voldemort and willingly – or unwillingly – reveal all of our secrets. Our location, our numbers, our plans. Under the Amortentia, Draco, you are no more than a puppet in his hands. And a danger to us.”

Draco stared at Harry with a wild despair. “Is this true?” he whispered as though anything louder would break a tenuous spell. “Has this all been nothing more than a giant trap? A giant farce?”

No, Harry wanted to say. No, it has been the farthest thing from a farce that he could imagine. Compared with the past four months, Harry realised that it'd been the rest of his life that had been the trap, the giant farce. Draco was the whole reason Harry got up in the morning, and the sole reason he looked forward to returning to bed. In the course of everything that had occurred, Harry had fallen. Hard.

Not wanting to waste another second on the Amortentia, Harry seized his glass and drank the bezoar juice in one gulp. When he lowered it, Draco was still staring at him with a look of anguish on his face.

"You seem . . . ," he said, his voice shaking even more than before, "awfully keen."

"I am keen," Harry replied. "I can't wait to . . ."

But he never got to finish. Draco seized his own glass and drank it down. When he was finished, he smashed it down so hard on the nightstand that it cracked, cutting his finger on jagged crystal. On the wood, the lavender potion and Draco's blood merged into a dull brown as though the dreariness of the day outside had seeped its way into their room. Harry reached for Draco's bleeding hand, but Draco snatched it away from him and wrapped it tightly in the sheets.

"Can't wait to what, Potter," he snarled. "Tell me what a fool I am; how glad you are that you no longer have to share . . . share . . ." His voice trailed off and then was silenced by a dry sound that could have been a sob. Harry watched as pain and humiliation and rage, along with the lifting of the Amortentia, crossed his face.

Harry himself, however, felt no change at all. His ability to cast off the Imperius must have protected him after all. More than he had ever imagined.

Draco glanced at Harry with his jeans and his jumper already on and wrapped the quilt tighter around his nakedness. Harry wanted to tell him that the only reason he'd dressed was that he'd suspected Hermione might come to them sometime around dawn, before the others awoke. He was certainly not dressed because he was disgusted by the idea of being naked with Draco in his arms. In fact, he wanted nothing more in that moment than to reach out and . . .

“Don’t touch me!” Draco sobbed. “Don’t you dare touch me!

Harry recoiled as though he’d been bitten by a snake. He felt no different. He felt no different. Draco had to know. Harry had to tell him. He reached out for Draco’s hand, but Draco flinched away, his cheeks wet with angry tears.

“The Amortentia,” Harry said. “It didn’t affect me at all. Draco, don’t you understand? I never . . .”

“I know you never . . . ,” Draco shouted. “You don’t have to bloody well rub it in, Potter! Merlin! Don’t add insult to injury. And thank you, Granger,” he said sneeringly. “Now the potion doesn’t affect me at all either.” He looked at Harry with an expression of extreme distaste. “Get out,” he’d spat. “I’m disgusted by what we did. I don’t want to think about it one second longer than I have to! You were so keen to make and drink the potion, Potter? You were so bloody keen to have me get over my bloody stupid puppy love? Well, now you have your wish! Get out!”

Shocked by Draco’s vehemence, and the terrible change in him, Harry rose from the bed as though he’d been slapped. It really had been nothing but the potion. Everything that Draco had said he felt, everything they’d done, everything they’d been through together – it’d all been the potion for Draco. All a terrible, terrible illusion. Not knowing what he’d be capable of saying in the midst of his hurt, Harry stumbled backward and reached for the doorknob. Hermione wrapped a protective arm around his shoulders.

“I know it’s hard, Harry,” she said, stroking his hair back from his brow when he rested his head on her shoulder. “It’s hard realizing all the things you said and did were . . . were not your will.” She turned to Draco, her eyes hard. “Malfoy,” she said. “Leave Harry alone! You can stay here, but leave Harry alone. Some of us care about him, you know!”

Harry watched Draco go pale and then slightly green, remembering no doubt how they’d made love just the night before. Harry’s semen was probably still inside him. Clearly it made Draco want to wriggle out of his skin.

“Don’t worry, Granger. I plan on leaving your beloved Potter as alone as I ever have. Now get out!

With Hermione beside him, holding him by the arm, Harry stumbled out into the chill of the hallway. His heart was breaking. Literally breaking in his chest, into a thousand pieces. How could he have been so bloody stupid! Of course it’d been the potion! Draco Malfoy hated his guts and always had. The abrupt turn-around made it clear that it could’ve been nothing else but the Amortentia. Shocked past the point of tears, he staggered down the stairs into the kitchen, Hermione right behind him.

“Harry,” she said worriedly. “You still care for him, don’t you? It really wasn’t just the potion for you, was it?”

Harry nodded, too stunned to speak. If he did, he knew all the secrets and all the pain and all the pleas would tumble out. He’d tried to tell her . . .

“Oh God,” Hermione said. “Poor Harry! I had no idea! I’m so sorry . . . .”

This time Harry shook his head and reached for a piece of parchment on the kitchen table. With as steady a hand as he could manage, he wrote:

It isn’t your fault. It’s my stupid fault. I should have known better. I should have known there was nothing good in him and that the potion was just a mask. It’s MY OWN STUPID FAULT!

Hermione reached out her hand, but Harry found he couldn’t bear to be touched. He shook his head again, mute with grief and humiliation. He wanted to tell Hermione why and how he’d been led to believe it wasn’t the potion; that they’d talked about their hopes and dreams and fears and cheered for bootball clubs and swam in coldwater springs and made love countless times in Draco’s bed – that in fact they’d made love twice just the night before, but just then Ron burst in. A quill was balanced behind his ear, and he was waving a piece of parchment around.

“Bloody hell!” he cried beaming as though he’d just won the Tri-Wizard Cup. “I finally finished my bloody poem!”

Christmas Eve, an hour before midnight, 1999

Cats are fun, cats are great

You always know what they ate

You find it on your doorstep after the hunt

A mouse or a bird missing its . . . .

“NO!” shrieked Ron. “Not only can I tell who wrote that, but I most definitely do not want to hear what the mouse was missing!”

“Nor do I,” Seamus agreed whole-heartedly. “Some of these poems are far too revealing.”

Hermione seemed to agree as she folded the parchment into a tiny square and placed it on the table – on the farthest corner. “Here,” she said, “let’s draw another one, shall we?”

“Yes, please!” the room responded, almost unanimously.

“Wait!” cried Justin. “That cat poem was my present. I want to hear the rest. Besides, I think the word was going to be ‘rump.’ ‘Rump’ rhymes with ‘hunt.’ Sort of . . .”

“No,” said Ron emphatically. “‘Hunt’ only rhymes with one body part. Draw another one, Hermione.”

Not needing to be asked twice, Hermione reached into the hat and groped around for a few seconds. At last she drew another parchment, and glanced at the name in the bottom corner. Harry watched her face

grow pale beneath its dusting of freckles.

“It’s for Ginny,” she said, glancing up at him, trying to read his reaction. Even from across the room, Harry knew Draco had witnessed the subtle exchange. Harry shook his head. It was a gesture that could either mean “yes, read it,” or “no, don’t.” Neither one exonerated him, but it seemed the only appropriate reaction. Please, his brain said, nothing more. He could take nothing more going wrong. Hermione took a deep breath and started to read:

We’ve known each other since I was eleven and you were ten.

This is not the first time I’ve sung your praises with the ink of my pen.

Your eyes, your lips, your sublime kiss,

Your beauties are too numerous to list . . .

“Ooohhh,” said Ron. “Rhyming ‘list’ and ‘kiss,’ mate. I’m very impressed.”

Harry’s heart stuttered and skipped a beat, leaving his breaths short and painful. “I thought,” he said, as nonchalantly as he could, “that you said I wrote your poem.” His cheeks were flaming, and he could do nothing about it. “It seems,” he said and had to clear his throat, “that Ginny has a secret admirer.”

Seamus smirked at him. “Right,” he said. “Whatever you say, Harry.”

“Ssshhhh, Hermione hasn’t finished yet,” said Dean, and Harry dropped his face into his hands. This was not good. In fact, it was even worse than he’d imagined.

“Yes,” said Draco, his voice low and contrasting sharply with the barely contained emotion in it. “Granger isn’t finished yet, Potter.” He spat Harry’s name out like a cherry pit. “Let’s hear what else you have to say to the lovely Miss Ginevra Weasley.”

Totally and heartbreakingly oblivious to what was transpiring around her, Ginny blushed and kissed

Harry's cheek, obviously relieved that the loss of her ring had been due to the Amortentia and nothing more.

"Even Malfoy wants to hear it," said Ginny. "Please continue, Hermione, before my boyfriend loses his nerve and Incendio's it."

Glancing fleetingly at Harry's face, Hermione swallowed back evident hesitation and continued.

. . . You've always been there when I've needed you most, You've always fought back the demons and the ghosts That haunted my life before I met you. You've painted my world with a thousand hues . . .

"Oooohhh," said Ron, interrupting yet again. "'You' and 'hues.' I'm truly impressed, mate. You are a poetry stud."

"Shut up," said Dean. "Let Hermione read."

Glancing up at Harry again, Hermione must have seen the look of resignation on his face. She took a deep breath and continued.

. . . Once I was blind, but now I see, My dearest, I want you to marry me. . .

Draco rose abruptly to his feet and swayed unsteadily for a moment. "I feel sick," he said, and then swallowed hard against what everyone else probably thought was vomit, but which Harry – knowing him better than anyone else – knew was tears. "Good night," he said to the room at large. "Happy fucking Christmas." He ran out without looking at Harry. If he had, he would have seen the plea in Harry's eyes.

"Blimey," said Seamus. "Who pissed in his eggnog?"

Christmas morning at dawn, 1999

Tomorrow you will see me leave

And don’t pretend that you will grieve.

Perhaps it’s all my fault you never knew

How much I’ve loved you and how long it grew.

Since we were young and little boys

Our world full of Snitches and rowdy noise,

I have loved you from afar

As though you were the moon and I a star.

Never once did you turn your face

To see anything but my disgrace.

The only solace that potion gave

Was touching you before the grave

Swallows me whole and bears my bones

But you never were mine to own.

I’m sorry and you know it’s true,

I never wanted to hurt you.

You were the only thing good I’d ever had

And now you’re gone and I am sad

Even though you were sitting there across the room,

The end was near, I felt it loom.

To her bed you’ll go tonight

And I will surrender without a fight.

If I have not earned you yet, I never will

No matter how many dragons I were to kill

To steal your kiss and beg your touch

To drop to my knees your hand to clutch.

You have spurned me and I deserve it,

But that does not mean that I can take it.

So I'm leaving now, and if you want me back

You'll have to wait until I've found my tack

Across the seas I will have to stray

Before beside you I may lay.

If you love something set it free,

And many times you've said to me:

Draco Malfoy, it's a heart you lack,

But, Harry, if I ever come back,

I'll be yours and you'll be mine

Our lives we may yet entwine.

But for now I know that I must fly

Or watch you love her until I die.

You know how to find me, you've always known

And remember you are not alone.

Though miles away I may be,

I will be with you and you with me.

So this is the gift I give to you

This Christmas morn, this year so new –

Good-bye, my love. I wish you well

And may you forever burn in hell.

Sitting on the bottom stair in the front hall, his robe thrown over his pyjamas, Harry shivered in the gloom and reread the poem he'd found under his pillow for the hundredth time. What was he to make of it? And why oh why hadn't Draco waited around to discover that the very first poem Hermione had read, the one that was for Draco was from Harry? Instead he'd left it crumpled on the floor. How could everything have gone so disastrously wrong? Wasn't love supposed to conquer all things? Now Harry's only hope was that he could catch Draco before he slipped out the door and went . . . and went who knew where. His poem had insinuated it was far away from Harry, and that was the only thing that really mattered.

Not to Voldemort. Despite everything, Harry knew in his heart of heart of hearts that Draco would not go to Voldemort, would not give him away. If the poem he'd given Harry showed anything, it showed that Draco still cared for him enough that he would not hurt him – or create a situation through which others could hurt him. No, clearly Draco was planning to leave England – and who knew? Maybe even Europe! And if Draco didn't want to be found, how would Harry ever accomplish it?

Harry had to stop him. If for no other reason than to tell him that he loved him, and that – if he really desired to be set free – Harry would do it. Because he did love Draco. God, how he loved him!

Suddenly, Harry heard footsteps creak on the landing behind him and turned just in time to see a cloaked and hooded figure dash down the back stairs and out into the garden. There were glass shards embedded in the tops of the walls, Harry knew. And Draco's wand had been confiscated as soon as they'd arrived in September – both as a means of clipping his wings and a way of testing his motives. Draco, it seemed, had seen Harry and was ready to climb through broken glass rather than let Harry catch him.

Forgetting for a moment the "if you love something set it free" shite, Harry flew after him, vaulting over sacks of tinned vegetables and galoshes and chairs with evergreen garnishes and wrapped gifts on them. Just in the nick of time, he flew through the door to the back garden and struck Draco with an Incarcerous. Draco tumbled into the frost-covered grass with a helpless sob.

“That’s not fair!” he cried. “I’m unarmed. I don’t even have a wand anymore!”

Harry came to stand over him, his emotions racing.

“Did you mean it?” he asked, out of all the things he could ask. “Did you mean it when you said you’ve loved me since we were children?”

From his bound and vulnerable position on the ground at Harry’s feet, Draco did his best to sneer around the look of anguish in his eyes. “No,” he said. But then his chin wobbled, and Harry thought he might cry. “Yes. Maybe. But not now. I hate you for what you did to me! Not even being under the potion yourself and telling me all those things – all those lies! You made me into a fool,” he gulped around a sob. “An even bigger fool than I already was. Go back to your Weaselette. I’m sure she misses you. Have fun asking her to marry you . . . ”

The last words were spat as viciously as any that he’d said the night before. Harry dropped to his knees beside him and touched his cheek with his fingertips – just a light caress to show him that Harry wasn’t going to hurt him. That, if he really and truly wanted it, Harry would let him go.

It’d snowed sometime during the night, a thin dusting. It traced the branches of the tree and the ice-bowed stems of the witch hazel. On the tops of the walls, the same wall that Draco had been so keen to climb over just minutes ago, frost gilded the shards of glass and left them sparkling in the rising sun. Blue green and purple, their reflections reminded Harry of pictures he’d seen when he was a child of the northern lights, Aurora Borealis. In the soft light, they danced on Draco’s pale hair and his even paler face. The air was cold and the sky clear. Somewhere in the distance a bell rang for Christmas morning.

“You arse,” he said. “You complete arse. I didn’t write that bloody poem for Ginny. Dean did. And before you say anything else, let me just say that I didn’t write that bloody stupid poem for Ron either. I wrote yours, Draco. I wrote that poem you practically tore into shreds. Justin had drawn your name from the hat, and I bribed him with a promise that I’d do his month of washing up . . .”

Draco looked startled for a second. “Finch-Fletchley wanted to write me a love poem?”

Suddenly, Harry felt giddy with possibility and the beauty of the dawn that was slowly lightening the sky over their heads. “No, you barmy git,” he replied, rolling his eyes fondly. “He just saw how badly I wanted your name and made me pay for my request through the nose. Little does he know, though, that I would have willing offered a year of washing up duty if that’d been his terms.”

Draco stared at him.

“You love me,” he said slowly. “You really do love me. You have to if you’d have offered to do a whole year of dishes! Nothing else could explain such a thing.” He sounded awe-struck by the very concept.

“Of course I do,” Harry cried. “Why else would I ever make the offer at all? A year would have been nothing worse than a day if that’d been his terms.”

Banishing the ropes as fast as he could, Harry helped Draco to his feet, brushed the snow off his cloak and kissed its melting rivulets off his cheeks.

“Yeah, I do,” he whispered, “love you, I mean. And it appears the feeling is mutual . . .”

Draco turned his face away, and Harry’s ebullient mood faltered for a moment.

“I . . .” Draco began. “I need to go away. I . . . I’ll . . . I’ll come back, though.” He looked pleadingly at Harry as though it was Harry’s choice to make, not his.

Harry seized his shoulders. “You are not going anywhere,” he said. “Not if I have any say in the matter.” He glanced at Draco’s down-turned face, and softened his tone. Draco, he knew, was not someone he could shove around or bend to his will – no matter how benevolent the request. He never had been. Cupping Draco’s chin tenderly in his hand, Harry lifted it until Draco had nowhere to look but into Harry’s eyes. Harry tried again. One last time. He had to get this one right.

“Please,” he whispered against Draco’s cool but yielding mouth. “Please don’t go, but if you do – if you

think you have to – please don't go on Christmas Day."

Slumping against Harry's chest with obvious exhaustion, Draco found his hands and held them in his, weaving his fingers through Harry's They stood like that for several minutes as the sun rose to its place in the solstice horizon.

"No new rings," he murmured into a chaste kiss.

"No," Harry replied. "Not unless you're the one giving it to me, and not without us both saying 'I do.'"

Draco drew back startled. "You can't be serious!" he said.

"Oh, but I am," said Harry. "Believe me, I am. Go away if you must, Draco. Leave through the front door tomorrow. But give me one last night. One last chance to convince you that I want this – that I want you."

Draco swallowed hard, and pulled back far enough to look Harry straight in the eyes. "I can't promise," he said, although his expression suggested that he'd like to do exactly that. "I've been enthralled for so long to somebody or another. First my father and then Voldemort and then a potion. . . and then you, Harry. I need to be on my own – if even for a little while. Do you understand? Please say that you understand."

Harry kissed him tenderly. "Yes, I do," he said. "I feel much the same way about my life – the enthralled part. I've never felt I've lived the life I wanted to live. I was enthralled to a dozen different masters and a thousand fans I'd never seen, let alone met. But I never felt myself enthralled to you, Draco. Just the opposite. You were the one who set me free. And here I am. This is what it looks like; this is me coming back to you."

Slipping his hands free of Harry's and sliding them up his arms to his shoulders, Draco pulled him into a deeper kiss that was far more urgent and less tender than Harry's had been. He did not promise, but he also did not resist when Harry slipped the gold ring into his pocket for him to find wherever it was his dreams might take him, whenever he was ready. A token of Harry's undying affection. A symbol of his hope that setting Draco free would let him return of his own accord and on his own terms. A gold ring

wrapped in a simple piece of parchment:

They say there's a potion
For whatever it is that ails you –
Pain, sickness, loss, fear –
For everything that fails you.
The healers may not believe it,
But I know something stronger
And ten times safer too.
It works for hours longer,
Does things no else can do.
It's sweet and it is bitter,
Depending on the day
It's the only thing I think
Could ever make you stay.
And if you have not guessed it yet,
I don't know what to do,
So on my knees I'll get
And just say it: I love you.

fin.

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