Title: Charitable

Author: [info]dracosoftie

Pairing: Harry/Draco (side pairing, Neville/Pansy)

Rating: PG-13

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Warnings: None

Summary: Surprising things happen when the Wizarding world's celebrities Neville Longbottom, Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy put themselves up for auction to benefit relief efforts in a disaster-torn country. What started as an effort to help others will actually ending helping them, as well.~10K words

A/N: I'm auctioning off three fics to benefit the relief effort in Japan, so I thought I'd toss out a bit of a teaser for that (to prove I can still get my H/D groove on!) . See my note at the end of the fic for more information. Thanks to [info]faeryqueen07 for the beta!

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"It's against policy," Neville said sternly, full lips downturned as he watched Hermione's fingers fly across her keyboard.

"Policy is well and good most of the time, Nev, but this is an extreme situation." Hermione squinted at the screen, scrolling through the long list of donor information files. Most people who gave to the Fund for Magical Children wanted recognition, or at the very least a tax break. But the donor they were arguing about now had never sought either. Hermione didn't even know if the donor was male or female – just that the person made a sizeable donation to the fund each year, always in the form of an anonymous bank draft.

Neville and Hermione had begun the now-prestigious charity in the aftermath of the war as a means to help children who had been orphaned or abandoned, writing up the mission and bylaws in basement of Grimmauld Place and funding it with money from the inheritance Sirius had left Harry, which he had been more than happy to give over to the cause. Over time, as the popularity of the charity – and its coffers – grew, they'd been able to expand the mission to helping families who couldn't make ends meet as well as providing support in times of natural disaster, like the devastating earthquake and tsunami that had hit Japan the week earlier.

Japan's Ministry of Magic had sent out an appeal to all of the charities that operated in the earthquake-torn country a few days earlier, asking for assistance for both the magical and non-magical communities there. The Fund for Magical Children had already donated a sizable amount to a children's charity they'd partnered with before in Japan, everything they could spare without hurting their own mission, but it wasn't nearly enough. There was a surprisingly large concentration of magical children in the small country, and many of them had parents who were currently missing or unable to provide for them. After spending hours crunching numbers and going over the budget with a fine-toothed comb trying to find more money to send, Hermione had admitted defeat. Until her latest idea.

"Mouse has been very good to the Fund," Neville said, using the nickname they'd given the donor after the third year in a row the donation had come in. Anonymous Donor sounded too rigid and cold for the scope of good work they were able to do with the person's money, and it didn't differentiate that donor from the scores of other anonymous checks that came in, so George had started calling the donor "Anon Y Mouse," which had somehow morphed into "Mouse" over the years. "Us calling up and soliciting more money would be in poor taste."

Despite going along with the cutesy name, Mouse's identity was no secret to Neville. The checks never had any identification aside from an account number, and Neville was quite sure that the account that was used for the donations was a decoy one that had no ties to the actual donor aside from being funded by that person. It was the same set up he had when donating funds from one of his vaults anonymously to other charities, though he'd never told Hermione that. No, Neville had found out Mouse's identity quite by accident years earlier, and he'd taken pains to make sure no one else at the foundation could make the same leap. Early on, the donations had come in accompanied by a hand-written note asking that they be used to start an endowment that would cover the Hogwarts fees for any Muggleborn child who couldn't afford to attend, as well as establish a primary school of sorts for those who had no knowledge of their future place in the wizarding world. It was a novel concept, and one that it had taken years to work out with the headmasters and headmistresses of Europe's wizarding schools, none of whom had been eager to share the names of the Muggleborn who would be

notified of their abilities when their letters went out at age 11.

Actually establishing a school for the children would have been too costly, so Neville and Hermione had used Mouse's donations to start a summer camp for magical children of all backgrounds. Muggleborn children attended for free, while those with wizarding parents paid on a sliding scale depending on how much they could afford. The camp was well-attended, guaranteeing that Muggleborn children got an education about what the magical world was and that half-bloods and pure bloods had some exposure to the Muggle world and got to interact with Muggleborn witches and wizards before they started school. The camp served children ages five to twelve, with many of the children who'd grown up going to the camp coming back as counselors.

It was a great system, and something Neville was extremely proud of. It was also something that might be jeopardized if they lost their funding from Mouse, which Neville worried might happen if Mouse knew that anyone – especially him -- knew who the donations were coming from. Whether or not to contact Mouse and confess that he knew who the donations were coming from had been something that had weighed heavily on Neville's mind over the years, but he'd chosen not to compromise Mouse's anonymity. The handwriting on the note, which had been addressed to him, had been unmistakable, though, and part of Neville wondered if that had been part of the reason for the note, to be known to Neville but anonymous to the world.

"I'm just not comfortable with it. Mouse deserves privacy," Neville said, knowing it was futile but putting up an effort anyway.

Hermione tuned out his protests, still pouring through the logs. This year, Mouse's donation had come in via wire transfer from Gringotts, which gave her a fighting chance of tracing it back to the original account. She wanted to identify Mouse so she could call and personally ask them for a donation toward relief efforts in Japan. Or rather, she wanted to identify them so Harry could personally ask for a donation. Harry wasn't involved in the day-to-day running of the charity, but he was the public face for their fundraising campaigns. He also gave a sizable donation himself every year and ran the Quidditch program at the summer camp on the years he could get enough leave from the Auror Department to spend several weeks there on the grounds .

"He doesn't mind trading on his name to raise money, but this is different," Neville argued,

perched on the edge of the desk so he could look over Hermione's shoulder as she wove her way through a complicated web of files.

And Harry really didn't mind, not when the publicity was for a good cause. He'd already done several pleas for donations on public service announcements over the Wizarding Wireless urging people to donate to charities involved in the relief effort, and just yesterday he'd agreed to offer himself up for auction in a multi-charity event that was being organized – a night out on the town with Harry Potter, with proceeds benefiting the Japanese affiliate of the Fund for Magical Children. Many celebrities were getting involved; Neville had even heard that Draco Malfoy, of all people, was joining the auction on behalf of the Red Cross.

Before Neville could protest further, though, Hermione made a triumphant noise and pumped her fist in the air.

"Mouse has a pretty heavily guarded account at Gringotts," she said, brow furrowed even in her glee. "All I could get was the number of the personal banker that handles that account. But it's a place to start."

Neville nodded glumly, making a wordless sound of agreement. He wouldn't have expected anything else – after all, "Mouse" had a good reason to be so guarded. He didn't even glance at the paper she shoved into his hand with the banker's number written on it. Neville knew calling Gringotts would get him nowhere; discretion was tantamount to all else at the goblin bank. He also knew that Hermione wouldn't stop until she got what she wanted, and in this case it was an audience with Mouse. At least she wasn't insisting on going along; that was the one saving grace.

"I'll call in the morning," Neville said, knowing that she'd think he was talking about the banker.

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Neville passed the cardboard cup between his hands, fidgeting as he waited at a small table in the courtyard of a popular coffee house just outside of the boundaries of Diagon Alley. The Muggles who frequented it had no idea it was owned by wizards, never guessing that the lines moved faster at that particular coffee shop because the espresso machines were fueled by spells, not steam.

He'd toyed with the idea of leaving Harry out of it completely, but he knew that Hermione would ask Harry about it the next time she saw him, and he didn't want Harry to have to lie for him. Still, he wished he could be sure that Harry being the one asking would make a difference; it was just as likely that "Mouse" would deny them simply because Harry was involved. It was a risk Neville had to take, though, and he had to admit that part of him felt better knowing that he'd have a trained Auror by his side in case Mouse reacted badly.

"Coffee, Nev? Really?" Harry quirked a brow at Neville as he slid into the seat next to him, Harry's own hands wrapped around a steaming cardboard cup. Hermione often joked that Harry lived on coffee, which was at least partially true. Everyone knew not to bother him until he'd had his first cup in the morning, and Ron never went on a stake out with Harry without bringing a thermos of strong coffee to appease his partner.

"Well, it might be a difficult discussion. I wanted you fortified," Neville said, a small self-deprecating smile on his lips. He hated coffee, but the tea the restaurant served was vile. His stomach was too tied up in knots to drink anything, anyway, so he'd settled on the coffee just to give himself something to toy with while he waited.

"What's this about, anyway? All Hermione would tell me is that we're meeting with a donor," Harry said, licking a bit of foam off his lip.

Neville snickered. He knew it was killing Hermione not to know Mouse's identity, but he'd been resolute on that; if they were going to compromise the anonymous donor's privacy, only a minimum of people were to be involved. She'd agreed reluctantly, but Neville knew it really bothered her that she wasn't one of the two in the know.

"We are. Remember that anonymous donor who gave us the money to start the summer camp?" Harry nodded at Neville's words, taking another sip of his latte and gesturing for

Neville to continue. “Well, that’s who we’re meeting with today.”

Harry’s green eyes widened slightly, growing almost comically large when a third person joined them at the small wrought iron table.

“Potter. Still looking adorably naïve as ever, I see,” their guest drawled, digging into a pocket and coming up with a silver lighter that had an intricate pattern of snakes engraved on it. The snakes’ emerald eyes glinted in the late afternoon sun, casting geometric patterns on the slender, pale-skinned fingers that held it.

Harry’s eyes narrowed and flicked down to study the hand holding the lighter, his lips curling with contempt when he saw the wedding ring that sparkled unnaturally, probably due to a spell. Merlin forbid anyone not notice the six carat monstrosity.

“Parkinson,” he snarled. “Or do you go by your married name? Should I call you –”

“I’d really prefer if you didn’t address me by either,” Pansy said, taking a delicate drag off her cigarette. Harry’s jaw tightened at her interruption, but she merely inclined a shoulder in his direction lazily and turned toward Neville. “You didn’t mention he’d be with you when you called yesterday, Longbottom. I assume he’s here for a reason?”

“Aside from annoying you? Yes. He’s technically the director of fundraising outreach for the Fund for Magical Children, so he’s usually present when we talk with our larger donors,” Neville said, taking some enjoyment from the way Harry’s mouth dropped open at his words, the look on his face going from righteous anger to shock.

Pansy nodded tightly, flicking the ash from her cigarette onto the tabletop with little regard, too busy appraising Neville with a look that held a glimmer of respect to notice where the ashes fell. Neville knew he’d come a long way from being the scared, clumsy Gryffindor that had so often been Pansy’s lab partner in Potions, but he couldn’t help but squirm a bit under her gaze.

“You?” Harry’s tone was incredulous. “You’re Mouse?”

As far as Harry knew, Pansy Parkinson didn’t have an altruistic bone in her body. She’d proven that the year after they’d left Hogwarts when she’d nullified the marriage contract her parents had negotiated for her with Anthony Goldstein. While Harry held a dim view of arranged marriages, it had been a huge blow for the Goldsteins, who were a prominent pureblood family that had been neutral through both of the Voldemort Wars. The fact that she’d sworn that Anthony was impotent – one of the only ways to break a magical marriage contract – had left Harry seeing red. He and Anthony had been partners in Auror Academy together at the time, and the scorn and derision Pansy’s lies had resulted in had been awful to witness; he couldn’t imagine what it would have been like to have to live through it, like Anthony. Six weeks after nullifying the marriage contract with Anthony, Pansy had married Augustus Trefoil – who was both ridiculously rich and ridiculously old. Though Harry had no proof, he suspected the humiliation had been the real reason Anthony had dropped out of the academy and left England a few months after the contract had been broken.

“Mouse?” she inquired, raising one brow delicately. Neville shrugged. “If that’s the name you’ve given to the benefactor who has anonymously donated about four million Galleons to your charity over the last ten years, then yes. I’m Mouse.”

“Good of you to spend the money your dearly departed husband left you on such a worthy cause. Guilty conscience much?” Harry’s cold smile didn’t seem to have much effect on Pansy, but it had Neville bristling with unease. He’d forgotten that Harry’s dislike of Pansy went deeper than old school rivalries, but seeing them together brought back memories of the few encounters the two of them had had in the first few months after Pansy had married Trefoil, back when Harry had still been actively trying to get Anthony to return home and re-join the academy.

Pansy shrugged, refusing to be baited. If anything, she looked outright bored, which seemed to infuriate Harry even more.

“Your donations have made a huge difference in the way Muggleborn learn about the Wizarding world, Lady Parkinson,” Neville said before Harry could interject anything else. He knew that Pansy hadn’t taken her husband’s title when he’d died; she’d let it pass to his daughter – along with Trefoil’s fortune, if the quiet rumors Neville picked up on in the elite circles his own name and title could get him into were to be believed. Neville had taken an

interest in Pansy after he'd realized who the donations were coming from, recognizing his old lab partner's hand writing almost immediately. All of his discreet research seemed to indicate that not only was she not using Trefoil's money in her donations to the fund, she wasn't using it for anything. From what he could ascertain, she'd been donating money from her own vaults, a suspicion that was bolstered by the fact that the size of the donations had increased greatly after her parents had died a few years earlier, leaving her both her current title and full access to the Parkinson fortune.

Pansy's cool veneer faltered for the first time since she'd joined them, a flicker of some emotion Neville couldn't identify passing over her features before she had a chance to smooth them out again. If he hadn't been watching her closely he wouldn't have noticed, and Harry obviously hadn't, since he was snorting to himself and glaring daggers into the table.

"As I explained on the phone, I'm sorry to have compromised your anonymity like this. But there's a charity we work with in Japan that has a grave need for donations right now, and we felt strongly enough about it to ask all of our regular donors to consider supporting the relief effort there in whatever way they can," Neville said, launching into the speech Hermione had prepared for him. They'd called all the smaller donors themselves, bringing Harry in for the top tier. So far most of the donors had been moved to help at least a little, and every Galleon they raised made it worth the effort and embarrassment of begging for money.

Pansy's thoughtful look turned scheming when Harry snorted again, muttering about wasting their time.

"Of course," she said smoothly, drawing out her Blackberry. The case was covered in glittering crystals that most Muggles would assume were for show, but really were to block the ambient magic that surrounded witches and wizards. It was the reason electronics never worked correctly in the Wizarding world unless they were properly warded and shielded.

"That's it?" Harry asked, astonished. "You're going to agree to donate to the charity, just like that?"

Pansy smirked, and Neville's stomach plummeted at the absolutely feral glint in her eye.

“I’ll expect something in return for my generous donation, of course,” she said, and Harry’s shoulders tightened in indignation even as his eyes flared with triumph at being right about her. “You’re offering Mr. Potter up for auction, are you not?”

Harry gaped at her, face turning purple with rage, and Neville moved his foot to rest on top of Harry’s shoe, hoping that would ground him a bit.

“He’s one of several bachelors who agreed to be auctioned off for various charities, yes,” Neville said, barely containing a stammer that hadn’t surfaced in years.

Pansy wasn’t listening; she’d already dialed the phone, launching immediately into instructions without preamble. Neville assumed she was talking to the personal banker Hermione had unearthed when she’d tracked Pansy’s account the day before.

“Ragnok, I need you to handle another bid in that ridiculous charity auction. This one will be a wire transfer to the Fund for Magical Children. No, no need to funnel it through the dummy account. I think it’s about time to stop jumping through all those hoops,” she said, giving Neville a faintly amused smile.

“Let’s say – hold on,” she said, leaning away from her Blackberry a bit. “Longbottom, what’s the current top bid on Potter?”

The auction wasn’t a traditional one; people were allowed to bid up until the deadline, with all of the details being handled online or by phone instead of at a physical auction. The idea was to allow as many donors as possible to participate, something that would have been difficult if they’d had an actual auction that took place at a specific time and place.

“Er, last I saw it was up to 10,000 Galleons,” Neville said, blushing slightly when Harry shot him a betrayed glare. “Bidding ends Saturday.”

Pansy laughed.

“I’m pretty sure bidding ends today, at least for Potter.” She cradled the phone back to her ear, her tone all business again. “Let’s make it 250,000 Galleons,” she said to the banker, who must have squawked in protest, because she rolled her eyes. “Yes, that’s in addition to the donation to the Red Cross. Trust me, Ragnok, I know exactly what I’m doing. I’m nothing if not charitable, right?”

Neville’s throat went dry at the number she threw out, but he felt obligated to force himself to speak.

“You shouldn’t have him transfer the money until you’ve officially won the auction,” he squeaked, knowing that Hermione would kill him for refusing a donation like Pansy’s. Still, he didn’t want her to donate and then not win – that would be unfair to her and unethical to boot.

“Oh, I’ll win, Longbottom,” she said, her lips twisted into a satisfied smile. “Ragnok, I want you to monitor Harry Potter’s auction in addition to the other one. Make sure my bid wins both. Go ahead and transfer the funds for both auctions, and raise the amount as needed if the bids have to go higher.”

Neville swallowed, his chest tight at the thought of how much good Pansy’s donation would do in the disaster-torn country. Something must have shown on his face, because her expression softened again slightly.

“Ragnok? Put in a bid for Neville Longbottom, too. It’s for the Fund for Magical Children, same as Potter. This one’s for 50,000 Galleons.”

Neville gaped at her, mouth open in disbelief. Hermione had forced him to enter the auction as well, and so far the only person who’d bid on him was Susan Bones, who’d thrown in a token 100 Galleon bid to get things started.

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“Are you sure this is the address she gave you?”

Neville scrunched up a shoulder to hold the phone against his ear as he dug through a pile of papers on his desk, searching for the Post-it note Pansy had given him. He found it under a stack of invoices, and his heart sped a bit at seeing the familiar handwriting again. He and Pansy had had their “date” the night before. She’d surprised him by taking him to Wizarding section of the Chelsea Physic Garden for a private tour. He’d surprised himself by not only having a wonderful time with her but asking her for a real date after he’d seen her to her Floo. It had been an impulse, and he still couldn’t quite believe that he’d done it. Or that she’d said yes.

Neville read the address aloud, stretching out the crick in his neck as he took the phone back in his hand.

“That’s where I am, but this doesn’t look like a cooking school.” The building must have been on a busy street, because Neville could hear the unmistakable sound of heavy traffic through the phone, which must have meant Harry was standing on the sidewalk outside the address.

“Let me Google it,” Neville said, reaching for his laptop. Though Pansy had refused to say who Harry was meeting for his “date,” aside from a promise that it wasn’t her, she’d quizzed him on his interests and chosen something that Harry actually enjoyed – cookery lessons.

Neville blinked as he clicked on a link for the address in his search results. The address was listed as a residence, not a cooking school. Before he could tell Harry that, though, he heard Harry hiss and mutter obscenities into the phone.

“Oh, she wouldn’t have. Fucking Parkinson,” Harry spat, and suddenly Neville had a very good idea who Harry was going to be spending the afternoon with. There was only one person other

than Pansy that could still illicit that much of a reaction from Harry.

“Don’t tell me it’s Malfoy,” Neville said, horrified.

“Well, it’s not Father fucking Christmas, that’s for sure,” Harry muttered right before ending the call.

Neville stared at the screen of his laptop for a few seconds before shaking his head and navigating through the Google results to try to find out more about the place Harry would be spending the afternoon with Draco Malfoy. Without thinking, he dialed Pansy’s number. They’d had several phone conversations before their “date,” just catching up on what had been happening since school, and it was surprisingly easy to call her now.

“Trust me, Neville, this is going to be brilliant,” she said, picking up after the second ring.

“Do you ever actually answer the phone with a greeting?” he asked, unable to keep the smile out of his voice.

Pansy laughed. “That just wastes time.”

“What if you don’t know who’s calling?” Neville toyed absently with the Post-it Note she’d given him, bending the edges so they framed her handwriting.

“I always know who’s calling. I don’t pick up if I don’t know the number,” she said, her voice just a shade too casual.

“So when I called two weeks ago, you knew it was me already? I wasn’t calling from the Fund. I was calling from my personal cell phone. Which, by the way, is an unpublished number. ”

“I might have done,” she said, and Neville fancied he could hear her start to blush. The undefeatable Pansy Parkinson, embarrassed.

“So, along the lines of other things that are brilliant, too,” he said, and she laughed again, “you were telling me not to worry about Harry and Malfoy?”

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The cookery lesson, which had turned out to be the first of five “dates” Pansy had arranged for them to have in her bids in the auction, had gone astoundingly well. Harry had expected to be in a proper class, and when he’d found that it was a personal lesson for the two of them with a wizened Italian woman who apparently taught out of her home, he’d been more than apprehensive. But it turned out that Malfoy loved to cook just as much as Harry did, and he was surprisingly competent in the kitchen and seemed to enjoy the lesson every bit as much as Harry had.

They continued to meet up one afternoon a week to take a lesson in a different cuisine, never knowing where they'd be going, thanks to Pansy's secretiveness about their "dates." Sometimes they were enrolled in an actual class with other students, and other times they took private lessons in homes or restaurants.

By the time their fifth – and last – session rolled around, they were at ease with each other, chatting about ingredients and shooting questions rapid-fire at the chef, who honestly seemed a bit out of his depth with having two such knowledgeable students. Both men had even brought their own knives, something usually only professional chefs did.

“Will we be eating in the dining area or is there a spot for us in here?” Harry asked, looking around the small but pristine kitchen. It was usual for their lessons to end with sharing a meal together, and Harry had almost come to look forward to it, as strange as the concept of enjoying a meal with Draco Malfoy sounded.

The day's lesson was at a restaurant with a French name, one Harry had never heard of. He imagined that the dining room would be quite pretentious, which really didn’t appeal to him,

but he didn't see any tables set up in the industrial space. It was easy to talk to Malfoy in the close confines of a kitchen, but Harry worried that the formality of a dining room might bring out Malfoy's inner prat.

"The dining room, Mr. Potter."

Harry hadn't been able to convince the chef to call him by his first name. Even though the man was a Muggle, he'd been strangely deferential to both Harry and Malfoy, much like they were treated in the Wizarding world. Harry had thought it odd until Malfoy had whispered that he, at least, was well-known in the Muggle world, since Malfoy Enterprises was one of Britain's top companies. Harry had privately thought Malfoy must be beside himself with joy at being the more famous of the two of them for once, but Malfoy had seemed to shrug it off.

Harry wasn't quite sure what to make of this older, more mature Malfoy. He still had an undeniably haughty air about him, but he didn't hesitate when the chef instructed him to peel vegetables, something Harry was quite sure the Malfoy he'd known in school would have balked at. Over the weeks they'd been thrown together for the lessons, Malfoy had also seemed genuinely interested in Harry's stories about his friends and his work, though they'd had to couch that in terms of him working for Scotland Yard, since the classes were always in the Muggle world. Harry surprised himself by talking freely with Malfoy about things he'd only shared with friends before, like the fact that he was considering retiring from the Auror Corps to explore other careers.

"I envy you that," Malfoy had told him baldly, and they'd discussed his role at Malfoy Enterprises and the pressure he was under to continue his father's legacy now that Lucius had stepped down as chairman and ceded the seat to him.

Once they'd prepped most of the three course meal, the chef ushered them out toward the dining room, telling them the serving staff would get them seated. It seemed oddly formal to Harry, since he and Malfoy had been the ones to cook the food, but Malfoy seemed nonplussed by it, so Harry just followed his lead.

"I was a bit surprised we weren't cooking something French," Harry said as they waited in a lushly decorated ante room for the hostess to seat them. The doors to the actual dining room

were closed, which didn't strike him as strange, since it wasn't technically open until dinner service.

Malfoy gave him a sidelong look and then threw his head back and laughed, and Harry was struck not for the first time by how beautiful Draco Malfoy was. His Adam's apple bobbed, drawing Harry's attention to the long stretch of Malfoy's throat, and Harry felt a tinge of the old arousal he used to feel around Malfoy at school. It had been years since he'd thought of Malfoy in that way, and he was surprised to find that instead of the self loathing and anger that had accompanied those thoughts in the past, he felt nothing but a warm glow.

"This isn't a French restaurant, Potter," he said, but there was no condescension in his tone.

Harry blinked. "But the name, it's French. Dans le something or other."

Malfoy laughed again, shaking his head. "Dans le Noir," he said, his accent perfect. It didn't surprise Harry in the least that he spoke French, though the way the sibilant sound of his honey-rich voice speaking it made Harry's stomach tighten was a bit of a shock. "It means 'In the Dark.' It's a concept restaurant."

Harry looked around the ante room for any clue it could give him about the restaurant, but found none. It wasn't until the door to the dining area swung open and the hostess appeared from the pitch black depths inside that he caught on.

"We're eating in the dark?" he asked, a fine tremor of fear sliding down his spine. He hated the dark. Even now, decades after the punishments that had left him alone in the cupboard under the stairs with no light bulb in the bare socket hanging over his head, he still slept with a light on.

Malfoy seemed to sense his unease, stepping closer and reaching out to cup Harry's elbow. The intimate gesture would have had Harry stepping away even minutes before, but he was too focused on not hyperventilating to balk at the warm, grounding contact.

“Is there a problem?” the hostess asked softly, and Harry realized as she turned in their direction that she was blind.

“N-no,” he stammered, hating himself for his weakness. “Just surprised, is all.”

“It’s a wonderful dining experience,” she promised, holding her hand out to wrap around Harry’s forearm. Another server appeared at the door to guide Malfoy. “Muting one sensory input makes the others stronger. Your taste buds will come alive in ways they never have before. Are you ready?”

Harry nodded, mentally kicking himself when she didn’t move. “Yes,” he forced himself to say, his throat dry, when he realized she couldn’t see his nod of agreement. “Thank you.”

Harry managed to keep a lid on his panic as they slowly navigated through the dark dining room. There wasn’t the tiniest sliver of light to see by, and he could feel a thin sheen of sweat covering his skin. His breathing must have given him away, because the moment they’d been seated and the server and hostess had left them, he felt Malfoy’s warm hand on his arm again.

“Are you really alright, Potter?” he asked, and the frank concern in his voice made Harry’s stomach flutter again.

“Just dandy,” Harry answered, his voice shaking slightly.

The hand on his arm tightened, and he heard chair legs scrape across the floor. Seconds later, Malfoy’s body was pressed up against his from shoulder to thigh, their chairs pushed all the way together. The contact had an almost immediate effect, and Harry’s racing heart started to calm a bit.

“We can leave,” Malfoy said, and Harry shivered a bit at the feel of his warm breath against the shell of his ear. “Say the word and we’ll call the server back and have them escort us

out.”

“And miss out on the feast we cooked?” Harry joked feebly, hating himself.

“Look, Potter, there’s no reason to stay. You’re obviously uncomfortable, and –”

“You know, you should really call me Harry. It’s a privilege I extend to anyone who sees me hyperventilate.”

Malfoy laughed, some of the tension flowing out of his body. Harry relaxed a bit more as the change pressed them closer together. He could feel the heat radiating off the other man, seeping through their clothes and easing the cold panic that coursed through his veins.

“We all have triggers, Harry,” he answered, sliding his hand down Harry’s still trembling arm and twining their fingers together. “Mine is fire. Damned inconvenient, especially in the winter, since I hate the way Muggle furnaces dry out the air. Can’t even Floo.”

Harry made a strangled sound of sympathy, his hand tightening on Malfoy’s. It felt like the darkness had weight, pressing in on him from all sides. Despite Malfoy’s presence next to him, he wasn’t sure he was going to be able to handle eating a meal in the pitch blackness.

“Right,” Malfoy said, letting go of Harry’s hand. Harry reached out, desperate to regain the contact, and nearly whimpered in relief when he felt Malfoy’s arm go around his shoulders. “You should call me Draco, by the way. Everyone I break magical secrecy laws for does.”

And with that, he Apparated them out of the restaurant.

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For once, Harry's stomach didn't twist wretchedly from the squeeze of Apparition, but he attributed that more to the fact that he was already sick with panic than that he was finally getting the hang of it. Draco's Side-Along Apparition had taken him by surprise, but he was too grateful to berate him for taking him somewhere without permission.

Their destination was brightly lit compared to the darkness they'd been in a second earlier, and even though Harry's eyes stung from the abrupt shift, he was ecstatic to be able to see again. It took a few seconds of rapid blinking before his surroundings came into focus, but when they did, he realized they were standing in the middle of a huge solarium. Light poured into the enclosure, coloring the stone floor with reflections from the green-tinted glass. The air was thick with heat and humidity, showing no trace of the chill March weather outside, despite the fact that Harry could plainly see they were still in England from the brown-thatched grass outside and the slight drizzle that spotted the ceiling panes.

"Is this Malfoy Manor?" Harry's voice cracked slightly, giving away his still-panicked state. He felt much better than he had ensconced in the velvety darkness of the restaurant, but his fight-or-flight reflex hadn't quite settled down from the anxiety attack he'd had there or the unexpected Apparition.

Draco huffed out an amused laugh, his arm still tightly slung around Harry's shoulders.

"No," he said, lips curved up into a genuine smile. "This is my home. I don't know where you live, or I'd have taken you there."

The sudden tentativeness in Draco's tone sounded almost apologetic, and Harry took a deep breath, drawing the humid air into his lungs and letting it warm him.

"This is –" Harry looked around as much as he could without breaking free of Draco's arm, which was helping his racing heart slow more than anything else. "– infinitely better than taking me home. Not a lot of light at Grimmauld, I'm afraid."

“Grimmauld as in Grimmauld Place?” Draco arched a brow, and Harry shrugged, Draco’s arm still heavy on his shoulders. “I shouldn’t be surprised, I suppose. That was your godfather’s family home, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. I’ve had a lot of work done on it over the years, but it’s still pretty dreary inside. Comes from being smack dab in the middle of the city, I suppose.” Harry reached an arm out, stroking a finger down the thick, glossy frond of a fern that was nearly as tall as he was. “I thought you lived at the Manor.”

Draco squeezed Harry’s shoulders and then dropped his arm, tucking his hands into the pockets of his trousers. He started across the stone floor, the heels of his Italian leather shoes ringing against the stone. Harry had dressed for comfort, wearing trainers and jeans so his feet wouldn’t hurt after hours standing in a kitchen, but Draco never dressed down for their classes, seemingly unbothered by shoes that pinched or wool trousers that were too warm to wear standing in front of the range.

“Let’s cook,” he said, looking over his shoulder and nodding toward the door invitingly. When Harry started to follow, he quickened his steps so he could reach the door first, drawing his wand out of its wrist holster and tapping it against the frosted glass panes. Harry saw the air in front of the door shimmer slightly before Draco opened it, and he assumed Draco must have been adding him to the wards so he could pass through safely. The Auror in him approved of the security measure, especially for a man like Draco who had so many admirers – and detractors.

“I had this place built while I was at university,” Draco said as they walked down a short corridor that opened into an enormous kitchen. Everything in it was state of the art, but it was obviously well-used. It wasn’t too far off from the kitchen Harry had had put in at Grimmauld when he’d decided that while the kitchen in the basement worked fine for Kreacher, it was too cramped and ill-outfitted for him. “Living at home chafed a bit, and being so far outside of London was an inconvenience for someone who doesn’t Floo. Apparating that distance twice a day to get to classes really drained me, but I didn’t really fancy living on the campus. We’re about 20 minutes outside of the city here in St. Albans.”

“Where did you study?” Harry leaned against the marble countertop as Draco started shuffling through drawers and cupboards, gathering cutting boards and pots before opening the

refrigerator and pulling out ingredients.

“LSE,” Draco said, wrinkling his nose. “Not my choice, but the future chairman of Malfoy Enterprises couldn’t be without an MBA, now could he?”

He dismissed the rhetorical question with a shake of his head, focused on filling a pot with water and putting it on the range. Harry washed his hands at the prep sink, taking a cutting board from the stack and settling it on the counter. He grabbed the colander of vegetables Draco had taken out of the fridge next, rooting around in the nearby drawer to find a peeler. The familiar routine of cooking side by side with Draco eased the last of his lingering panic, and they made quick work of fixing lunch.

Harry waited until they’d cleared the plates and started a pot of coffee before bringing the conversation back to more serious matters.

“Thank you, by the way. I don’t think I said it at the time, but thank you for getting me out of there and not asking me any questions,” he said quietly, eyes focused on the simple French press Draco was using to make their coffee. Before seeing Draco’s house for himself, Harry would have figured him for the type to have a ridiculously expensive Espresso machine, but he was beginning to see that most of his preconceived notions about Draco Malfoy were nowhere near the mark.

“Ah, well.” Draco seemed uncomfortable with the gratitude. He fiddled with the press a bit more before turning away to grab mugs. “It wasn’t difficult to see the signs of a panic attack, not to someone who has them himself. I just did what anyone in that situation would have done.”

Normally Harry would have jumped on the dismissal like a lifeline, happily moving on to some other topic of conversation that didn’t lay his feelings and his past quite so bare. Even his closest friends didn’t truly know how much the dark bothered Harry, and they certainly didn’t know why. For some inexplicable reason, though, Harry wanted Draco to understand.

“It was much more than that,” he said with a self-deprecating smile. “You knew exactly what

to do, and what's more, you didn't press for information. I don't know anyone else who could have witnessed that and not demanded an explanation."

Draco shrugged. "Like I said, it takes one to know one. And since I don't make a habit of exposing my most personal traumas to other people, I didn't figure you'd take kindly to being asked to do that, either."

Harry's chest tightened, remembering Draco's hushed words about his own fear of fire when he'd been trying to talk Harry through his attack. Draco's house, from what he'd seen of it, didn't have any fireplaces, at least not in the areas that a Wizarding household usually did, like the entry way and the kitchen. Even the range, which was top of the line, was electric, not gas, to avoid having an open flame.

"But you did tell me," Harry said softly, unsure of why knowing what was likely Draco's most closely guarded secret – and having Draco know his -- made heat blossom in his stomach.

"I did," Draco agreed, his back still to Harry as he leaned over the counter. He no longer even bothered with the pretense of preparing their coffee, instead just hanging his head a bit and avoiding eye contact. "I can't explain it. I just – I don't know."

Harry took a step forward, resting a hand between Draco's shoulder blades. Draco stiffened at the contact but quickly relaxed into it, head still hung as he faced the counter. Wondering if he was absolutely insane, Harry slid his hand up Draco's spine, curving it around the column of his neck and grazing his fingers against Draco's jaw, exerting just enough pressure to make Draco turn. He expected some resistance, but Draco surprised him yet again, turning around fully with no protest, legs shoulder width apart to allow Harry room to stand between them.

"I don't know either," Harry said softly, tightening his fingers on Draco's jaw as he leaned in and brushed their lips together. He pulled back almost immediately, holding Draco's steady grey gaze. He saw the same fear and uncertainty there that he felt himself, and it reassured him like nothing else could have. "But I'm glad you did."

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Two months later

“I know she’s your friend, Draco, but I don’t like how close she and Neville have gotten,” Harry said, scowling at the pan of Spanish palmeritas he’d spent most of the afternoon baking. They’d over caramelized, and he huffed in disgust as he Banished them with a flick of his wand, the odor of burnt sugar lingering in the kitchen.

“I think Pansy and Neville are perfectly lovely together, and I also think it’s none of your business,” Draco said, not looking up from his inventory of the pantry. They were having a dinner party that evening to celebrate Draco’s birthday, and the two of them had been cooking most of the day in preparation.

Harry bit his lip, not wanting to start a fight right before their friends were due. He’d all but moved in to Draco’s house in the last few weeks, spending much more time there than at his own house in the city. Their friends had taken to the two of them dating surprisingly well, and they’d already had several successful parties mingling the two groups.

“I just don’t trust her. Not after what she did to Anthony.” Harry swallowed, waiting for Draco’s response. He’d hedged around the topic but never come straight out and said it before, but Pansy and Neville were getting closer and closer, and he couldn’t stand the thought of Pansy hurting Neville the way she’d hurt Anthony.

Draco let out a frustrated sigh and sat back on his heels, abandoning the pantry.

“Alright, listen. I’m going to do something I shouldn’t, but only because I know that you’ll drive yourself mad about this unless you know the truth.” Draco waited until Harry slid down to sit next to him, scattering the ingredients he’d already taken out of the pantry and turning the kitchen into an even bigger mess.

“Pansy and Anthony were betrothed when they were babies. It’s not an uncommon pureblood practice,” Draco began, and Harry nodded. He knew that part of the story already. “Well,

sometimes you get lucky. Sometimes you fall in love with the person you're betrothed to. It happened with my parents. And it happened to Pansy."

Harry's eyes narrowed. Pansy had been in love with Anthony?

"I know. Don't look at me like that. It's true, though. They spent most summers together growing up, and by the time we were about fourteen, she'd fallen hard for him. It was awful for her at Hogwarts, since they were in different houses and he refused to be seen with her. But they still had their summers and breaks, and she loved him enough to do as he wished and keep their relationship a secret during the school year."

Harry had never heard a peep about their betrothal before Pansy had so publicly broken it, so they'd obviously done a good job of hiding it. For years he'd thought she and Draco had been dating – most of the school had.

"Anthony never dated anyone, and that wasn't that unusual for a Ravenclaw. But Pansy, she had would-be suitors all the time, which is why she liked to hang all over me. There was no danger there, because she knew I was gay and I knew she was engaged. And it helped keep people off my back about dating, too. My father would never have allowed me to be open about my sexuality at that age. Hell, he's not entirely pleased about it even now."

The elder Malfoy made no secret about the fact that he fully expected his son's "dalliances with men" to be a temporary phase. Duty to family came before almost everything else in Lucius' mind, and Draco's duty was clear: Produce an heir. In their two months together, Harry had already witnessed three fights between father and son about their relationship. Draco's mother was quietly supportive of her son but never said anything to contradict his father, and Harry knew that hurt Draco almost as much as Lucius' words.

"Everything changed during the war. The Goldsteins were a neutral family, and they went into hiding with most of the other neutral families to avoid having to take sides in the war. With their money and status, they'd have been prime targets for the Dark Lord, but they didn't wholly agree with the Order, either, which made retreat the most sensible choice."

Harry nodded. There were many families who'd made the same choice, and while he didn't agree with it, he could understand their reluctance to get involved in the war. Several pureblood families on both sides of the conflict had been entirely wiped out during the war, and others, like the Weasleys, had suffered grave losses. He couldn't blame Anthony's family for hiding, not when the cost otherwise could have been so great.

"The Goldsteins wanted Anthony out of Europe entirely. There was no telling how far the Dark Lord's reach would get, and they wanted to ensure the safety of their bloodline and their fortune. So they moved him to Canada, hiding him at a Muggle boarding school because it would have been too easy to track him if he'd taken refuge in a magical community," Draco continued, and Harry's stomach dropped as he began to see where the story was going. "His parents went to Switzerland with his younger brother."

"Pansy, of course, was here. Her father was a Death Eater, and she had no choice to but to remain at Hogwarts. She wasn't allowed to know where Anthony had been taken, since there was always a chance that the information could have been forced out of her. So she spent over a year sick with worry, and the only reassurance she got of his continued safety was not seeing the Goldsteins' names appear on the lists of blood traitors who'd been executed."

"He met someone, didn't he?" Harry never thought he'd be capable of feeling sorry for Pansy Parkinson, but his heart was breaking for her now.

"He did. Her name is Elise, and she's lovely. They married about seven years ago. They have a son, and I think maybe another on the way," Draco's voice was level, but Harry could see the way his jaw tightened fractionally as he said the other woman's name.

"So she came out with that story to humiliate him, then? Why not just tell the truth, that he'd broken the contract himself by being unfaithful?"

"Because his parents would have disowned him," Draco said softly, and the final piece clicked in Harry's mind.

“She’s a Muggle,” he said, the words barely more than a breath.

Draco nodded grimly. “Anthony confessed everything to Pansy when his parents brought him back. I think he might have loved her, at some point, but whatever it was he found with Elise, that was stronger. He was willing to go through with the marriage to Pansy, but she couldn’t do that to him,” he said. “His parents still don’t know. They think he chose to return to Canada out of shame, and they were more than happy to let him, since it was a dishonor to their family name.”

“And since his brother can continue the bloodline, there was no reason for them to force him to come home,” Harry said, shaking his head. “She made up that story about him being impotent not to embarrass him but to protect him.”

Bloodlines were more important than just about anything else to pureblood families. An eldest son who couldn’t produce an heir was useless. Harry was beginning to see just how lucky Draco was – even though Lucius disapproved of the Draco’s refusal to marry and produce an heir, he would never do something as drastic as to publicly shame him or disown him.

“The story was salacious enough to embarrass the family without ruining them, and it gave him the cover he needed to move away so he could be with Elise. His parents never would have allowed it; he’d have lost everything if he’d chosen her. I think he would have done it in a heartbeat if not for Pansy and the shame it would have caused her. So she took the decision out of his hands, breaking their contract and ensuring he could marry Elise and be happy.”

Anthony’s depression suddenly made much more sense. Thinking back on his interactions with his Auror Academy partner, Harry realized that Anthony had been quiet and withdrawn long before Pansy had publicly humiliated him and broken the engagement. He’d been miserable, but it hadn’t been Pansy’s fault. It had been for Pansy’s sake.

“Oh, God.” Harry leaned forward, putting his head into his hands. “I’ve been horrible to her. For years, I’ve been awful. And all this time – Jesus.”

Draco rubbed a hand up and down Harry’s back. “Don’t worry. She wanted to be treated like

that. If she had the public's scorn, they'd never guess that she'd been protecting Anthony. She's his son's godmother, you know. She and I – and his brother – we're the only ones in the Wizarding world that know the truth. She and Anthony are still close. She's forgiven him, and he's forgiven himself, finally. I still haven't forgiven him, but that's beside the point."

Harry laughed, looking up slightly to meet Draco's gaze under the fringe of his lashes.

"What about Trefoil?"

Draco grinned. "Ah, yes. The old fart. She really is a heartless bitch in that one, sorry. Totally used him. She never even pretended to love him."

Harry's mouth hung open, making Draco laugh.

"God, you're so easy. She didn't want to get roped into another arranged marriage, which is exactly what would have happened after the dust settled. So she took matters into her own hands and arranged a marriage for herself. Her parents weren't thrilled, since there was little chance of her conceiving a child and carrying on the Parkinson bloodline with him because of his age, but he was filthy rich, so that helped."

"So she really did marry him for his money?" Harry wrinkled his nose.

"No. I don't think she's ever used any of his money, aside from what she needed to spend to refurbish his estates. She held onto the title until her own parents died, since that gave her some protection, but as soon as her mother died she passed the title on to Trefoil's daughter."

"Protection against what?"

"You really don't know much about pureblood culture, do you? A daughter has pretty much no rights. She marries who the family tells her to marry. Period. But as a titled Lady in her own

right, she couldn't have been forced to marry someone else after Trefoil died. And now her parents are both gone, so she's the head of the Parkinson family and can do as she pleases."

"Did he know, though? That she was using him?" Harry's brow was furrowed, his mind racing to keep up with everything Draco was telling him. If it was all true, then he really couldn't ask for a better partner for Neville. Pansy seemed to be just as caring and kind as Neville was, though she took great pains to hide it.

"He did. Since he didn't have any sons, Trefoil's title would have passed to his brother. Archaic pureblood laws," Draco said with a shrug. "But since his wife – Pansy – outlived him, she got to keep the title as long as she was alive. His brother died about six months after Pansy's mother did, which when Pansy quietly ceded the family title to Trefoil's daughter. She'd already given her control of all the family vaults after he died, but there hadn't been a way to pass the title to her until Trefoil's brother died."

"So Trefoil was using her just as much as she was using him?" Harry wasn't a betting man, but if he had been, he'd have put money on Trefoil being a former Slytherin.

"Basically, you're saying I owe Pansy an enormous apology," Harry murmured, guilt crushing his chest again.

"God, no. She can be a real bitch when she wants to be. And she'd kill me if she knew I'd told you all this. I wanted you to understand what Neville sees in her," Draco said with a snicker. He stood gracefully, showing no signs of the pins and needles Harry felt in his own feet, and gathered up the forgotten canisters and boxes, taking them to the counter. "She's happy for the first time in years, and I want her to stay that way."

"You're not exactly the heinous bastard you purport yourself to be either, Draco," Harry said softly, easing up behind Draco and wrapping his arms around Draco's lean torso, pressing a kiss against the back of his neck.

Draco half-turned in his arms, giving him a mock stern look and brandishing the spatula he

was holding menacingly.

“Don’t spread that around.”

“What, the truth about Pansy or the fact that you’ve got a heart of gold?” Harry teased, leaning in to taste the sauce on the spatula and earning himself a swat from Draco.

“Either. And I don’t have a heart of gold. That would be vulgar,” he sniffed. “It’s platinum, thank you very much.”

Harry laughed, nestling his cheek against the curve of Draco’s neck and watching him stir the sauce.

“Neville knows, though?”

“What, that I am blessed with not only money, intelligence and good looks, but empathy and incredible sexual prowess too? No.” Draco made an undignified squeal when Harry pinched him. “About Pansy? Yes. I believe she told him everything before their first date.”

“Good,” Harry murmured, licking the shell of Draco’s ear. He pressed his groin against Draco’s arse when Draco shivered, grinding suggestively. “How much time do we have before everyone gets here? I need more data before I can accurately judge your assertion of sexual prowess.”

Draco leaned his head to the side, letting Harry suck at a patch of skin just under his ear. “Not enough. Does that mean you concede on my claims of wealth, attractiveness, intelligence and empathy?”

“Mmm,” Harry hummed, lips still pressed against Draco’s neck. He canted his hips forward,

and Draco bit back a groan.

“Well, it is my birthday,” he said, moving the pot from the burner and turning off the range. “If dinner’s late, it’s late.”

END