Alohomora Society:

A Young Wizard's Guide to Etiquette

Part One: Overture(s)

We wish to remind the Muggle-born and/or -Raised that a Pure-blood will be most likely Offended if you identify a Muggle or Half-blood relative in common. Be sure to memorize Appendix Three, Wizarding Connections, both to simplify conversation and to know what relatives to avoid mentioning. Half-bloods' names are in silver in the index, and Muggle-borns are listed in copper. Pure-bloods are inscribed in gold. The differences in colour are of course purely a Mnemonic, and do not reflect the Authors' opinions of relative Blood Value.-- Alohomora Society: A Young Wizard's Guide to Etiquette, Black-Smith and Weasley, 3rd edition, 2000. Used by permission.

Nothing could look less like the house he'd grown up in. Tightly attached to its neighbours, the brick was so old only magic could keep it from crumbling or make it any colour other than sooty black. Its windows looked as if they'd been there since the 18th century, when the house was new. Presumably clear glass, on this beautiful summer day they were empty. With the glass missing, no doubt they bristled with multiple spells to keep out unwanted visitors, from gnats to assassins.

Little though it resembled any house in Little Whinging, it looked even less like 12 Grimmauld Place, the only Wizarding house Harry'd ever lived in. The high windows marched in a row across the front, and those and a glass roof promised full daylight inside. The entry garden was small, but exquisite. A wrought-iron trellis covered by white roses arched as high as the first storey windows. The brick surface betrayed not a single weed, its muted red as smooth as if it had been laid yesterday.

Harry stood at the arched garden gate and admired the view. Unlike the suburban Little Whinging homes, whose lawns melted into each other as if they had all been planted as one, the side roses and pots of fuchsia made the place look like a hidden garden. There were a few old pieces of wooden furniture, softened with cushions, scattered about. The soft sound of wind chimes covered street noise. He opened the gate, hearing it jingle like a bicycle bell, and closed it behind him, suddenly less sure. This seemed more like a home than a safe house. A Wizarding home, admittedly, though definitely not the Burrow.

The street noises completely disappeared, presumably from an ongoing silencing charm. Even the wind chimes were quieter. He took a deep breath, reminding himself that he was not the one on probation

here. Probably. Maybe. Even if he were, he definitely was visiting someone infinitely more in trouble than he was.

“For Merlin’s sake, Potter, it’s not jinxed,” said a familiar and annoying voice. “Come over here.”

Sitting on an oak bench sat his former Quidditch rival. Malfoy looked like some Wizarding Cricket player, if there were such a thing, in white trousers and shirt with a short white robe thrown over them. Clean as the garden brick – Harry suspected he’d learned the appropriate cleaning spells at his mother’s knee, and used them every hour. Ponce. Sprawled over the cushions as if to emphasize his ease and comfort. Born to rule.

Born to rue, Harry corrected himself, trying not to feel smug about it. On probation with a 10 year’s sentence hanging over him for his part in the first Hogwarts invasion and the death of Dumbledore, the Malfoy vaults were tied up in litigation among the Ministry, victims, and Malfoy himself. And he was under house arrest, even though it appeared to be rather an attractive house – one of his mother’s properties, presumably. Narcissa Malfoy herself had quietly left for somewhere else, presumably a location with no extradition treaties with Wizarding England.

Harry sat on a stone bench. “Why are you even here, Malfoy?”

“Gave in to blandishments, of course.” Malfoy tapped his wand on the stone table next to the bench, and a glass of lemonade appeared. He pulled it toward him without inquiring if Harry would like one as well. “And the challenge, of course. Attempting to civilize you may well be impossible.”

In revenge, Harry conjured a Singapore Sling for himself, and dropped the tiny pink umbrella into Malfoy’s glass.

Malfoy took the umbrella out and twirled it upside down on the table like a top, taking a swig of lemonade at the same time. Harry decided he had to be using magic. Since age 5, when Harry had started rescuing them from the Dursleys’ dirty glasses after parties, in lieu of any other toys, he had been trying to twirl them by hand. He’d never gotten farther than two spins.

As Malfoy babbled on about “sissy drinks” Harry reminded himself that he was “learning the ropes,” and “fitting into society,” as Kingsley had (unnecessarily emphatically) told him yesterday.

Kingsley had locked his office door and thrown off several silencing and privacy charms before he began talking. “You cannot – I repeat, CANNOT – act as a Muggle rent boy to entrap a suspect. You are an Auror, Potter, not a strumpet.”

“But sir, I—“

“Merlin’s pants, don’t call me sir! You only call me sir when you’re trying to excuse something inexcusable.”

Harry reflected that Kingsley only called him “Potter” when he was too furious to be thinking well, but kept that thought private. There, I’ll show him no self control.

“Do please notice, sir.. er, Kingsley, that I didn’t argue back just now.”

Kingsley slowly took his wand out of his sleeve’s sheath, and laid it on the bookcase by the door. Then he walked back to his desk, sat down, and banged his head on it several times, loudly.

Harry might have been concerned, had Kingsley not let slip during one of their occasional pub visits that in his spare time he liked to volunteer for Wizarding community theatre, and that he had two star parts last year, one as Algernon in The Importance of Being Earnest and one as Henry Higgins in Pygmalion. Clearly, Kingsley enjoyed dramatic Muggle fluff. So Harry just stood there staring at him, waiting for the scene to end.

Kingsley finally raised his head. “Sit down, Potter.”

Harry sat down gingerly on the office visitors’ chair, which looked elegant but had several springs poking out, presumably intentionally to give Kingsley sheer pleasure from the squirming of whatever idiot

annoyed the Minister for Magic (no longer acting, except in the community theatre sense) by visiting him. Office gossip reported that when there were more visitors, he would conjure more chairs, but each one was, in its own way, quite uncomfortable. Probably Kingsley spent time pondering new ways to make chairs uncomfortable.

Harry waited for Kingsley's next line.

Surprisingly, it sounded less like community theatre and more like a harried1 boss."Harry, why do you think I don't just fire your ass?"

"Er… because I'm the Chosen One?"

"You were. If you're chosen now, it was by me, not Fate."

"Chosen for what?"

"Someday, Harry, you're going to be Chief Auror, if you don't strangle yourself by shoving your foot down your throat too hard. With your background – and your intelligence, I might add, much as it hurts for me to recognize it at this point – you could easily become Minister for Magic."

Harry recoiled. "Minister, I don't want the job. You have nothing to worry –"

Kingsley rolled his eyes, back to some play rather more contemporary than the 1920s. Unless it was the Wilde play. Who knew what closeted wits might have invented in the Victorian age?

"I'm not worried. I want you to be Minister for Magic someday. You're incorruptible, and that would be quite a novel experience for us all. There will no doubt be several people qualified to be Chief Auror in 10 years, but I can't imagine anyone better for Minister."

Harry felt as though Nagini had come back to life and was breathing down the back of his neck. It was not pleasant.

“But I don’t want to be Minister, Kingsley.”

“I suppose I should be pleased to hear that, since I don’t see you having a chance in hell of even being a member of the Wizengamot at your present level of social ability. The prostitute scam was bad enough – but taking down Camber the way you did…”

“But I was just – I mean, Camber is one of the Bad Guys, Minister. So I used a vulgar spell? I mean, it wasn’t one of the Unforgivables, and it took Camber down.”

“In Diagon Alley. During Hogwarts shopping season.”

“It’s not as though they’d never seen a Crabs hex before.”

“We’re not going to discuss it. You have no polish, Harry. No pure-blood would have done such a thing.”

Thank Merlin I’m not a pure-blood, then. “Sorry, sir. As you know, I was Muggle raised. I won’t do it again.”

“You’re right – you won’t.” Kingsley stood up and looked through bushy brows, with eyes that ripped a hole through Harry on their way to the wall. “And do you know why, Potter? Because I’m sending you back to get more training.”

“What? But sir, I was top of my class. I got commendations in defensive curses and tracing suspects. In fact, they’re talking about me teaching the defensive curses workshops.”

“It won’t be that kind of training, Harry. You need training in how to get along with pure-bloods.”

Harry thought that really, considering Voldemort and all, the pure-bloods needed training in how to get along with him.

“With all due respect, sir –“ he began. Kingsley interrupted.

“Stop that sentence right there, Potter, unless you want to see me cry in my own office.”

Harry moved a hip off the broken spring. It seemed to be growing larger and sharper the longer they talked. “Yes, sir. What kind of training, sir?”

Kingsley for some reason had his head in his hands. “I’ve… er… made a deal with a pure-blood to coach you in pure-blood social activities and traditions. He’s at least 20th generation pure-blood, and does not admire your heroism, at least to the point that he’d let you off the hook when you’re wrong. Those requirements narrowed the search down somewhat.”

“What kind of deal?”

“He… is on probation currently, for Death Eater activities during the war. I told him that if he succeeded in training you, he would receive a full pardon. That would restore his Wizarding citizenship and assist his ambitions – he wants to be somebody important someday, I’m guessing, possibly even Minister for Magic – and this would clear his name and the path to his ambition. If he fails, he goes back to Azkaban.”

A chill ran down Harry’s neck. There were very, very few Death Eaters on probation – almost all of them were already in Azkaban. In fact, he only knew one – and that had been due to some furious argument with the Wizengamot, while the prisoner sat in that horrible chair with the chains, staring at his left arm. Looking beaten. Looking terrified. Harry saw that image almost every night. He wished he didn’t.

“Are you talking about Draco Malfoy?”

“Think of it, Harry – it’s perfect. He has strong motivation for good Slytherin reasons, and you practically saved his life. He’s your age, so will be a fitting companion to the balls and dinners and…” Shacklebolt trailed off, as he watch Harry’s face, and then visibly drew himself together. “Very well, you are allowed to be an adolescent for one more year, according to the psychological theories my wife occasionally passes on to me. So, go ahead and maintain your school resentments – it’s not as if you were a professional, after all.”

When Kingsley got passive aggressive, he was dangerously near to making statements he would not rescind in a better mood. Statements like, “You’re fired.” In this case, the message was clear: “Last chance, Potter.”

“How long?”

“Until New Year’s should be enough.”

Harry winced. Five months in close proximity with Malfoy. Who would just loooove having Harry in his power. Being tested on only responding in a “pure-blood appropriate” manner. Being tested, period. Malfoy was like a 13 year old – constantly testing, and thinking he was a grownup now. Come to think of it, he was probably exactly like the 13-year old Malfoy who had mocked Harry on a constant basis. He gritted his teeth.

“And don’t forget, Harry, try to be polite to the git. It will be good practice. Swear you won’t make him cry.”

“Don’t worry, Kingsley, he only cries when he’s running away. I’ll try not to scare him.”

After that, they’d talked – or rather, Harry listened as Kingsley lectured on basic rules of courtesy, including the fact he should not insult anyone back until he learned how to insult pure-bloods. As though six years of classes with Slytherins had not taught him how to insult. Especially how to insult Malfoy, at present talking about an urgent shopping trip. Next they’d be picking out curtains together. Hell, he’d

managed to annoy Snape, by being more insulting than the Professor was. He might not have good manners, but he was fine on insults.

There was one consolation. Even allowing for Malfoy's usual snippiness, Harry concluded that Malfoy seemed no happier about the assignment than he was.

Part Two: Stop Being a Common Idiot

Young Wizards should wear traditional black robes, which indicate availability as a partner. After he has made an Arrangement with Another, a Wizard may wear the brightly coloured robes and brocaded fabrics appropriate to the happily-coupled and happily-singled. A tie is not appropriate for formal wear; wear a cravat. A modest set of bracelets in the colours of one's House is quite appropriate. -- Alohomora Society: A Young Wizard's Guide to Etiquette. Black-Smith and Weasley, 3rd edition, 2000. Used by permission.

Their first trip together was to a shop so pretentious it had only a single drape of brocade in its window.

"Not Madam Malkin's?"

"That's for school clothes, Potter. Don't tell me you've still been buying robes from her."

"Haven't bought any robes since I left Hogwarts. Finally figured out I wasn't going to grow any more."

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Well, it's Twillfit and Tattings for decent everyday robes, and Master Humble for formal ones. We'll get you measured for those first."

"I still have –"

"If you are about to say you still have your old formal robes, don't. Styles change, Potter, and at any rate, you own robes for what are euphemistically called "young men." Which is to say, boys. You are not a boy.

Stop arguing."

Harry opened his mouth to point out that he wasn't arguing, simply providing information, but fortunately his sense of when he was pushing too far had grown more than his height. He bit his tongue and obediently trailed Malfoy into Master Humble's shop, which unlike the outside seemed to have been designed to illustrate Master rather than Humble. Hammered gold lined the walls and ceiling, and the floors were black, but designed so that they reflected everyone who walked over them. There were no robes of any sort in sight, just several comfortable-looking black leather couches, one or two chairs, and a heavily carved box, about seven feet high and five feet square.

Malfoy fell onto one of the couches, stretching and yawning. Harry was about to question what they should do next, when a man slithered out a door he hadn't noticed before.

The man looked as if he had been made to set up a contrast with Horace Slughorn. He was slight, almost bald, with a queue at the back of his neck. He had thin eyebrows and a sharp, thin nose. His robes were a deep dark brown, almost matching the wood of the cupboard, and peeking out from under them were matching shoes with a small, discreet gold chain around the heel. Harry would have guessed from the colours that the proprietor would be a Hufflepuff, but it turned out that, if so, he was a self-effacing one.

Humble also looked very expensive. Harry wasn't sure how one robe and shoes could achieve that, but it did.

"Mr. Draco, a pleasure to see you again," he said, and bowed. "And you are…?" he looked closely and blinked. "Harry Potter, surely?"

"He is," Malfoy said impatiently. "And we need some decent dress robes. Mr. Potter is finally coming out to Society."

Humble looked pleased. He bowed again. "Please step into the Measuring Cabinet, sir," he said, gesturing at the wardrobe.

Harry obeyed, and was immediately surrounded by a cloud of sparkling blue dots, rather like the confetti

Aunt Petunia always bought for Dursley birthdays, even her own. One of little Harry's many chores had been to sweep up afterwards, and he'd managed to purloin some of it and keep it to play with when he was shut up for holidays. Fortunately, none of the Dursleys had summer birthdays, so once he went to Hogwarts he never again had to sweep up after other people's celebrations.

He watched as the air glittered around him, for almost a minute. Then it drifted to the floor and settled there. He stared at it, wondering what would happen next, and heard Master Humble say, "You may join us again, Mr. Potter."

Harry checked his hair to make sure the confetti stayed inside the wardrobe. He felt nothing but hair. He stepped out, and Master Humble gestured him to a couch.

Harry sat, wondering what the mysterious ritual was about.

Master Humble twitched his wand and three robes appeared. They floated just at Harry's height.

They were significantly different from each other. The first was a deep forest green, nearly black. It reminded Harry of the Forbidden Forest. It had pleats on the back and seemed just a trifle shorter than the others. The second was a dark blue, with gold on sleeves and hem; understated, but clearly incredibly expensive. And the third was bright pink – simply cut, with no additional colours.

Harry stared at the pink gown and blinked. He couldn't help thinking that Dumbledore would have really liked that gown. He was distracted when Malfoy thumped him on the head.

"No, Potter, that's not appropriate. I didn't bring you here to make a fool of yourself. You can wear that after you're engaged – unless it's to someone gingerhaired. On second thought, considering who that would be, go ahead and wear it on your honeymoon. She'll divorce you, which would benefit you both."

Harry, who would not have worn a bright pink gown if it had a million galleons coming with it, simply glared. "I was thinking that robe would look nice on you, Malfoy. With pink boots."

Malfoy looked horrified for an instant, then simply smirked. He turned to Mr. Humble. “That won’t do, Mr. Humble. Not for Mr. Potter’s debut. He has no commitments yet.”

“Oh dear,” the owner replied, Vanishing the pink robe. “I heard… well, otherwise. There are so many false rumours about you, Mr. Potter. The difficulty is, there are some true ones as well.”

Harry turned his attention to the blue gown. He’d always liked colours, and blue was his favourite. Sometimes he thought he’d got his first crush on Cho not only because she was pretty, but because the Ravenclaw blue suited her. This was a different shade, though he didn’t know a name for it – warmer somehow. He stroked the sleeve and it felt wonderful; soft and warm.

“Not that one either, Potter,” his irritating tutor said into his ear. “Royal blue’s too bright for a young, unattached wizard.”

“But –“ Harry looked at the robe longingly. “It doesn’t look that bright. And I like it.”

Master Humble, sensing a sale, helped him try it on.

Malfoy backed a bit and frowned. “It’s good on you,” he said. “But wizards never wear robes that bright until they’ve got a steady companion. That one’s borderline – much more conservative than some – “ he made a face and Harry knew he was thinking of the pink one – “but on the wrong side of the border.”

“I want it, Malfoy,” Harry said. His voice was whinging a little, and he flushed. He was a grown person, after all. He could wear what he wanted. (A very hidden part of him added, “Because Malfoy after all does think it’s good on you and it’s borderline, so you’d probably look okay.”) He ejected whinge from his voice and said firmly, “I can afford more than one robe, after all.”

“Can you,” Malfoy replied, and it was not a question. He looked thoughtful for a few moments, then drew Harry out of hearing distance of Master Humble. “All right, Potter, fine. Buy it if you like – I don’t care if you own a robe you can’t wear. But if you want my help to keep Shacklebolt off your case, you will

listen to me when I say that it'll be a scandal if you wear it, and keep it in your cupboard." He sneered. "I hear you keep other things in the cupboard as well."

Harry's eyes narrowed, and then he nodded. "Very well, Malfoy." He made a mental note to confront Malfoy's insinuations as soon as possible. He was not at all ashamed – but he wasn't going to be sneered at, either. Especially by a pointy little blond bloke with a murky past.

Master Humble was preparing to help Harry on with the green robe when Malfoy stopped him. "No," he said authoritatively. "That robe has promise. Do a full try-on."

Harry stared at him as Master Humble bowed. "I'll be wearing clothes like this underneath them."

"No," Malfoy said, "you won't." He waved Master Humble toward the dressing room and leaned closer to Harry. He smelled of something herbal – rosemary, perhaps, or thyme. "Potter, you will go in the dressing room, observing that Humble has left your robe on a rather nice cedar hanger. He takes pride in his work, so you will thank him courteously and ask to be alone to change. You will then strip --- every inch of you – and will then put on the robes. At that point, call us in – with your wand, not your voice. We will discuss fit and anything else needed. You will then not be discussed in other fittings, with proper pure-bloods, as 'Harry Potter, quite nice really. It's a shame he isn't precisely … one of us.'

"Take off my pants? That's insane."

"No, it's tradition. You want to get along in wizarding society? You won't wear pants under your more formal robes."

Harry gritted his teeth and followed Malfoy's … recommendations almost to the letter. After all, how would Malfoy know if he kept his pants on?

Malfoy and Master Humble had an amazingly detailed conversation about length, fit, pockets, and wand holster. Harry knew many wizards, and it had not occurred to him that anyone except Lucius Malfoy, that evil ponce, did or needed to do more than go into a store, try on whatever appealed to their aesthetic, and make sure it was short enough they wouldn't trip, and long enough their legs didn't show anything

nobby or extremely hairy – at least, those with ambitions to grandeur.

There were other robes then, three hours' worth, which ended with the dark green, a dark navy, and four sets of black robes which seemed all the same to Harry but which apparently both Mr. Humble and Malfoy considered different from each other and every other set of robes Harry tried.

He jibbed at the first robes, the green, because they were indeed somewhat shorter than the others and they revealed his calves, halfway to his knees. Master Humble seemed surprised at this plaint.

"Used to school robes," Malfoy said quickly. "Likes Muggle fashions."

That was a lie. Harry didn't care about Muggle fashion any more than he cared about wizarding fashion. His recent revelation that he could actually buy clothes for himself, and they wouldn't have to be 10 sizes too big was the extent of his ambitions.

Malfoy was still babbling on. He had a pleasant voice, but it contained far too much content of the wrong kind; that was the trouble with him.

"Boots next," he said. "Of course you wear the shorter robes with boots, Potter. Then less formal robes, then we will fill your heart with joy and relief and buy you a few pairs of wizarding pants. They are worn occasionally. Only informally, of course."

The nightmare continued. Harry gave the proprietor quite a staggering amount of Galleons, and Malfoy gave him Harry's address.

"They'll get there much faster if…" Harry began, and Malfoy shoved him out the door.

"Do not say we carry them, Potter. Nobody carries purchases home." He put a surprisingly strong hand on Harry's shoulder and pushed him up the street.

Boots, knee high, black and shiny, somehow more dazzling than Quidditch boots. “Less formal” robes, where Malfoy allowed him to add a very dark Gryffindor red to what Malfoy called his “palate.” Discreet jewellery, appropriate for a man, Malfoy said, although Harry thought earrings, necklaces, and bracelets were definitely not appropriate for THIS man.

He studied the small section of Twillfit and Tattings devoted to what it called “Crossover Muggle fashions.” There were a pair of black leather trousers he thought would look pretty good under some of his robes and, after all, were for sale in an elegant wizarding store. He sneaked a glance at Malfoy, who was currently wrangling snippily with the manager about changing the metal on the fastenings of Harry’s new hunter green cloak from silver to gold. He slid into the dressing room and, after quite a struggle, pulled them up.

His bits felt mashed, but he looked in the mirror and thought he might actually go home with someone the next time he went to Stones, wearing these. They looked even better with his shirt off. He preened in front of the mirror, imagining himself finally getting looked at in a Muggle club. He didn’t have much luck, what with glasses and height and being not quite sure how to chat someone up. Not to mention always panicking and refusing if invited.

Gay wizarding pubs were out for reasons of privacy and, of course, celebrity. If they even existed – he’d never investigated.

“Oh. My. God.” Harry jumped. Malfoy was behind him in the dressing room, staring at his groin.

“Are you supposed to walk in when I’m half dressed?” Harry asked, crankily pulling his shirt back on.

“Apparently,” Malfoy said, his trademark sneer in place, “I would only have to Apparate to Knockturn Alley to see you half dressed, regularly.”

“What?”

“I don’t know where to begin. Ah, I’ll begin where the trousers do – the top eight … no, nine inches or so. If I cared to know what your bits looked like, I was certainly able to ascertain quickly.”

Harry blushed and stepped behind the room’s chair.

Malfoy was circling him, still looking at the trousers Harry had been admiring. Malfoy’s face did not look admiring at all.

“I supposed comfort to be important to you, but apparently not. You will sweat. Leather shrinks when wet. It can only get tighter. I do hope you were not planning to father children. On the other hand, considering them as a condom, I might find them more acceptable. When you sweat, leather sticks to you, so don’t plan on abandoning it at the end of the evening. In fact, plan to make those trousers a permanent fixture of dress, like your scar. Fifty years from now, when you are Minister for Magic, people will point you out to their children so they remember seeing you, and say, “Wave, dear, it’s Harry Potter, the Chosen One in his youth and now Minister for Magic. Don’t go too close, however; he smells very odd, but it’s not his fault.”

Harry was torn between laughter and annoyance. Malfoy hadn’t improved one bit from his school days – except that he’d gotten funnier.

“Anything else wrong with them?” Shit. He was encouraging Malfoy. It was kind of fun to hear him insult someone, even if it was – as usual – Harry.

“Wrong colour, wrong size, wrong material, wrong for the Wizarding world, and horrible to wear? No, that’s about it.”

“I thought when I went to clubs…”

“That’s another thing, Potter. The wizarding world does not have clubs.”

Harry was reminded of something Hermione had said several times during her feminist studies. “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution… I mean society,” he said. Then kicked himself.

Malfoy smirked. “You like to dance, Potter? That’s good. You’ll have to learn wizarding dances, though. We don’t all just wiggle our wobbly parts as we pretend to stomp out a fire and call it dancing.”

Harry felt insulted. However, he’d brought it on himself. “Fine, Malfoy. Whatever you like. I just want to go home.”

“One more stop.”

At Flourish and Blots, Malfoy led Harry straight to a front table, took a book, and ambled to the cashier queue. “Come on, Potter, you’re paying.”

Harry reluctantly dropped the new edition of Quidditch Through the Ages and bought the book. They Apparated out of there, back to Malfoy’s home.

“I thought you were on probation. House arrest.”

“I was.” Malfoy looked weary. He didn’t even smirk. “Shacklebolt gave me a limited pass. He didn’t want you wandering alone without backup.”

Harry snorted. “Backup? If we had run into a Dark wizard…”

“Not that kind of backup, Potter. The physical is your job. Someone to make sure you didn’t ruin your reputation by the wrong choices.”

“Good lord, you’re my designated Maiden Aunt.” Harry couldn’t help laughing, getting a sudden picture of Malfoy dressed in vulture hat and scarf, as the boggart Snape had, so memorably. But he dropped it

quickly. Disturbingly, Malfoy in Neville's grandmother's clothes looked rather hot.

Malfoy handed him the book he'd bought. It was a combination of maroon and pink, and Harry winced when he saw the scrolls and ornaments decorating the words.

" Alohomora Society: A Young Wizard's Guide to Etiquette, 3rd edition," he read aloud. "What the f… what is this?"

"A fairly basic introduction which will at least give you some idea on pure-blood Society's expectations," Malfoy said casually. He smiled, without the trace of a sneer, at Harry. "After all, you need someone besides me you can trust to obey. And one of the writers of this edition is a Gryffindor."

Harry opened the book. "Ohmigod, it's written by Percy Weasley. And Spirea Black-Smith? Is she a pure-blood?"

"Technically, she is considered one. Personally, I think her mother must have had illicit relations with a dodo many years ago. Spirea's ancient. And Weasley, of course, is busily trying to prove he's not One of Those Weasleys, and not doing too bad a job of it. It's a truly stupid book. But not inaccurate."

Harry sighed. "All right, I'll read it. Within a month or so."

"Start tonight, Potter," Draco said, so sternly he sounded like Severus Snape in one of the Potions classes where a cauldron exploded. "We have work to do tomorrow."

"What this time?"

"Tomorrow, Potter, if I'm not saved by an unexpected cataclysmic event, I need to teach you to dance. The Minister for Magic is having a dance for those just coming out, and you will attend."

Harry wondered if this might be a convenient time to go on emergency leave and try panning for gold in the Yukon. He'd wanted to as a little boy. Now he had a wand, he might actually find some.

Part Three: I Couldn't Dance All Night

A Young Person wishing to dance has a responsibility to make that Clear. For Wizards, this is simple; he may walk to his selected partner, bow, and say, "Would you like to dance?" No well-brought up young Witch would refuse…."A Young Wizard's Guide (AYWG), Section: Appropriate Topics of Greeting and Introductions.

"If you're going to keep trying to lead, Potter, this isn't going to work."

"Imagine I'm a pure-blood witch, Malfoy. I'm sure when you dance, they always lead."

Meanly, Harry enjoyed it as Draco began to splutter, then remembered his cool "I'm in control here" façade and looked disdainful.

"Think of it this way, then, Potter. If you maintain this attitude, you will never fit in."

"You remind me of my aunt Petunia."

Impressively, Draco coaxed Harry's feet back to a box step while looking directly into his eyes and making a disgusted face.

"This is your Muggle Aunt Petunia?"

"I don't have any others."

"Well, fitting into Wizarding Society is a much more appropriate goal for a wizard then trying to fit into

Muggle society."

Harry rolled his eyes. "How silly of me – I'd never thought of that. If only you'd been there to guide my footsteps and tell me what I should say."

"I did offer once."

This was puzzling, but Harry finally remembered the scene when Draco had insulted Ron and offered to help Harry know who was worth knowing.

"This must be a pleasure for you, for me to take you up on your offer after all these years."

"Oh, a very great pleasure, Potter. Especially the part where you're ruining my dancing shoes, not to mention my sore toes."

"Ever taught a girl to dance, Malfoy?"

"Believe it or not, Millicent Bulstrode."

Harry tripped, and Draco caught him and set him back into rhythm without even seeming to try. "Millicent B—why?"

"Fellow Slytherin, brought up by a father who'd always wanted a son. The boys in our year tried to help her fit in, and dancing and small talk were the biggest problems. It was agreed that I'd teach her dancing, Zabini would teach her small talk, Nott would teach her to flirt, and Crabbe and Goyle would let her practice whatever she was learning on them."

Harry was fascinated. He didn't even notice especially when Malfoy switched to a two-step and began

encouraging him to move around the room. “Did it work?”

“Surely you noticed the improvement in grace and charm as she grew?”

Harry looked at Draco suspiciously, and finally laughed. “Well… you tried.”

“So did she. Perhaps Nott was the best teacher. She became very good at flirting with him.”

“She did?”

“To the point that they’re married now.”

“Wow. I wonder how he fit in –“

“Yes, well, Potter, we will not speculate. Besides, it’s time you learned a circle dance, and there’s no room for conversation.”

Harry had not thought he would like learning to dance. He remembered his horrible performance at the Yule Ball. He was convinced that the dance had scarred him for life – well, it wasn’t a lightning bolt, so maybe scared for life was more appropriate. At any rate, he avoided ever dancing in public except at clubs, where, as far as he could tell, anything went.

But this was actually… not bad. Malfoy was at minimum snark. He was insulting, but it was almost friendly, like one of the Gryffindors in Harry’s year. He was also remarkably good at dancing, and apparently that made a difference. Harry thought, Should have taken Malfoy to the Yule Ball and then, horrified at himself, blushed and concentrated on his dancing.

“Potter, why are you suddenly lurching all over?”

“Sorry, I was trying to do it right.”

“That’s the problem, then. You don’t try. You relax and pay attention to your partner and just do.”

“Yessir, Yoda.”

“Who?”

“A fighter for the Light long, long ago in a galaxy far, far away.” And wasn’t it delightful to know something Malfoy didn’t, judging from his bewildered look?

The room they were dancing in suddenly felt colder. Harry figured it out. For the circle dance, the steps Malfoy was showing him did not include body heat. They’d turn toward each other, then turn away, never touching.

“This isn’t as much fun.”

“You think not? I always enjoyed it. Much more fun than being pressed against those squishy breasts.”

Harry processed this. “Are you gay, Malfoy?”

“Not especially cheerful at the moment. Why?”

Harry found his eyes rolling again, involuntarily. Then he realized Malfoy was not joking.

“Gay is… well, apparently the Muggle word for males who prefer sex with other males.”

“Ohhhh,” Malfoy responded, enlightened. “We just call them Gentlemen, or Ladies . In Weasley and Black-Smith’s Etiquette, they specify “same sex relationships,” but then, the current editors are a pompous duo.”

“And you prefer?”

Malfoy grinned unselfconsciously. “Sometimes, anything that moves. Mostly, though, men. Because of the squishy breast factor.”

“Yeah, I can see that would also have eliminated Goyle for you.”

Malfoy ignored Harry’s attempt to annoy him. “Anything’s allowed, so long as it doesn’t interfere with breeding more pure-bloods, most especially heirs.”

“So, you going to set up a liaison any time?”

“Once you understand more about pure-blood Society, you will see precisely how limited my choices are.”

Harry had nothing to say to this. “Do we have to do this again?” He tried not to let a hopeful tone creep into his voice. Trying to follow Malfoy’s steps, and working up a sweat keeping up with him, was far more fun than shopping.

“Yes, we will, Potter. Practice makes perfect – or in your case, imperfect, but better.”

Harry sighed, and allowed himself to be twirled.

Part Four: The Strain of the Day

A Man who socializes with Cronies more than occasionally will surely fail in his ambitions. A Man who associates primarily with Friends will be safe, secure, and ultimately Successful; which is to say, Happy. –(AN: Attributed to Salazar Slytherin, probably erroneously. Quoted extensively in AYWG in Chapter 13, Friends and Cronies.

Harry glowered at his wardrobe. Tonight was a Birthday Party (he'd started thinking in Capitals, he noted gloomily, after working his way only a quarter through that bizarre etiquette book) and Malfoy had said it was the sort of party to which one had to bring a date.

"How do you know?" Harry asked. Malfoy thought about this for three whole minutes, apparently seriously.

"Everyone knows," he said finally, just a little puzzled. "It's a Birthday Party in a Wizarding restaurant during the courting season. There will be lots of the Best People, it's public, it's excellent for a first or second date with someone, and … why not?"

"Can I bring a friend instead?"

"They'll think you're his date."

"He could handle it." One of the things Harry liked best about Ron was that as the youngest member of a large family of boys, he didn't much care about other people's opinions of his masculinity. "But can't I just come with you?"

There was an arrested look on Malfoy's face. Something in what Harry had asked seemed to astonish him. But he said firmly, "Absolutely not. Everyone knows by now that Weasley is straight, and everyone assumes you are too. If you came with me, all sorts of rumours would start – mostly about you, because I've been semi-written off anyway. I'm not going to be the one to wreck your reputation – Shacklebolt would hustle me off to Azkaban."

Harry had nodded, resigned. “Just make sure you sit near me enough you can kick me when I’m making a mistake.”

“My pleasure.”

Harry wondered absently whether Malfoy had meant that politely or obnoxiously. It depended on whether he was agreeing to the closeness or to the kicking. He wished Malfoy were here helping him dress. The stupid cravat wouldn’t go right with either magic or hand.

Ron walked in without knocking. Harry liked that; it was as if his townhouse were also Ron’s, just as Harry never knocked in the Burrow except to announce his presence. Other than that, he found it depressing – a smallish townhouse, with a third floor augmented by wizarding space and much the same décor as the Room of Requirement when he’d been teaching the DA.

He grinned at Ron, who looked quite nice in Twilfitt and Tatting’s formal robes, and returned to the mirror. “How’d you get your tie so perfect?”

“Mum tied it,” Ron admitted. “She has a no-fail spell, but I can never get it to work.”

Harry decided that when they got to the restaurant, bizarrely named “Snitches,” he would hang around outside and see if Malfoy could tie it for him. He had no doubt Malfoy had learned to tie every sort of appropriate knot before he was 10.

Snitch had an Apparition lounge. By now, that was not unusual in the more expensive wizarding restaurants. However, Snitch had been the first to build one, nearly a hundred years ago. Malfoy had told Harry that Snitch was not only the oldest restaurant still in operation, but THE place to take one’s guests.

Conversely, he’d added, it was also THE place to ruin your reputation. Upper class Wizarding society revolved around Snitch, Quidditch, and Balls, and Harry had better remember that.

Ron, who had never been to Snitch before, any more than Harry, froze in place when they arrived and stared. Harry, who as usual felt a little queasy from Apparition, got his balance and adjusted his robes before he looked to see what Ron was staring at.

The Apparition room had a ceiling much like the Great Hall at Hogwarts, but enchanted to reflect the changing sky of an island somewhere south of the equator, judging from the Southern Cross over Harry's head. Snitch, in fact, looked more like a tropical island than a Quidditch-themed restaurant. Apparently it had moved on from its early days. Harry, who had never visited the tropics, felt rather intimidated. It didn't help that his wool dress robes and the heat of the Apparition room did not fit well together.

Ron had wandered off, and was standing under a large palm tree, staring at the coconuts, which were green. "Aren't coconuts brown?"

"Only when ripe, Weasley," came the familiar drawl from under a banana cluster. Malfoy moved into the "moonlight" and glanced at Harry, then looked again and snatched him by his cravat. Harry was dragged to a darker area of the room, Malfoy's wand was at his throat.

Sheer quick reflexes saved Malfoy from a rather nasty hex. The first reflex was to his own wand, but Harry's brain managed to process that the wand was not a threat, but an attempt on his cravat. His wand was in his hand, but not yet out of its holster, when he moved to freeze its progress.

Malfoy glanced at him, and produced a familiar smirk. "While cutting the throat of someone wearing a cravat like that would be justifiable, Shacklebolt might not like it," he said, and continued silently, producing some charm which dewrinkled, tied, and adjusted Harry's pale gray cravat so that it didn't feel as though it were choking him any more.

"Thanks." He looked around for Ron and found him staring open-mouthed at a group of Tahitian dancers demonstrating their craft. "Ron, time to go in."

Ron glanced at Malfoy, who returned it with a curled lip. "Nice party clothes, Weasley."

Ron generally knew when he was being insulted, and Malfoy was never anything but insulting anyway. But Harry's best friend was no longer fourteen.

"Thanks, Malfoy. That means a lot, coming from you." Ron grinned, apparently taking the compliment at face value, though Harry knew damn well Ron didn't. Malfoy raised an eyebrow and looked…just a little… impressed at the riposte.

"Where's your date, Malfoy?" After all, Harry was an Auror, and couldn't just leave Malfoy alone, even though it was breaking the terms of probation, just a little, to have met him at this point instead of fetching him from his house.

"I see no need for one."

"But you said—"

Malfoy's hand pressed against the small of Harry's back, propelling him into the main restaurant. "Potter, one of my parents is incarcerated, the other might be if she were available; most of our assets are frozen, and the Malfoys have now acquired an extremely bad reputation by backing the losing side. That does not an attractive escort make among pure-bloods. You, on the other hand, are a highly desirable escort - at least, until you open your mouth. Remember, do not talk tonight except about weather, school, Quidditch, friends in common, and places you've travelled. And don't boast."

Harry was noticing that Malfoy's hand felt . . . right. He couldn't quite say why – just that suddenly his general anxiety about this stupid assignment of Shacklebolt's diminished. He was with someone who knew what they were doing. That was an unfamiliar feeling, since Dumbledore died. He hadn't even realized how much he missed someone else occasionally having his back in non-deadly situations.

He let Malfoy keep lightly pushing, and didn't argue about the topics or the historically verifiable fact that Harry never boasted unless he was being threatened by some Slytherin git.

A young and attractive couple were standing at the entrance to the dining room. They smiled as the three wizards stopped near them, particularly at Harry.

“Nice to meet you at last, Mr. Potter,” the host said. “I’m so glad you could come to this event. And of course, I recognize Mr. Weasley as well. Welcome, Ron. I read Granger’s history of the War with a great deal of interest, and was so pleased to tell all my friends I was actually acquainted with one of the greatest heroes of the war.”

Ron was speechless. He shook hands and mumbled, “Thanks.”

“I do hope sometime we can meet each other at a less formal occasion,” the witch said graciously – in fact, just a trifle too graciously, as if Ron and Harry were prizes to display from a competition. “Bottleby will seat you, of course. We left the table arrangements to him. Why make guesses when Bottleby is the best at knowing all the social nuances?” She gestured to an older, balding wizard with a neatly trimmed beard, who bowed in acknowledgment of her praise.

“Good evening, Mr. Potter.” Bottleby looked at the three of them, assessing. “Please do us the honour of joining the most honoured guests at our first table. With Mr. Weasley, of course.”

Harry processed this. “Mr. Malfoy is dining with us,” he said, trying to keep any edge from his voice. Come to think of it, their hosts had not even acknowledged Malfoy’s presence.

The owner frowned, and took moments longer to respond than Harry thought was polite, although when he spoke, his voice was neutral. “By all means, then, the three of you.”

As he led them to their seats, Malfoy moved a little closer and murmured in his ear, “I can’t believe it. You actually answered just as you should.”

“Enjoy it, Malfoy, it’s probably not going to happen again,” Harry growled, as the owner pulled out a chair for him facing an excellent view of a window overlooking an (imaginary) garden.

Ron was looking at the chair offered him, next to a man a few years older than they were, with what looked like a permanent frown marked on his face. He glanced at Harry's empty other side, where the guest was a no-longer-young woman who wore more glamour charms and cosmetics than his sister and sister in law had worn combined in their lifetimes so far – though admittedly their lifetimes combined were probably about the same as hers. He made a decision, and sat hastily next to the frowning man.

Draco produced his trademark smirk and then pulled out his own chair and sat down next to the aging socialite, since it was clear Bottleby felt only Harry and Ron deserved that attention. Harry still wasn't used to being treated as though he had saved the Wizarding world, even if in fact he supposed he had. He was dimly pleased that this restaurateur had recognized Ron's contributions as well; that didn't always happen. He stared at the napkin folded into a rearing dragon in front of him, trying to get his confidence back. It was Malfoy who courteously thanked the owner – courteously, if one didn't recognize the satirical tone. It was rather to his shock that Harry recognized it – he didn't know, or want to know, Malfoy that well.

For a few minutes, as they worked through introductions and their first course (grilled pickled veg, which Ron poked at suspiciously before setting his fork down, and Harry gamely ate) things went well. Harry knew they were going well because Malfoy hadn't frowned on him once. The group was friendly, and Harry knew the right table manners, thanks to Hermione's nagging about them for more than six years. He put his fork down between bites, always waited until his mouth was empty to respond (easy, with the appetizer) and remembered to say everyone's name. He'd always been pretty good with names, and his post-hero stint had given him lots of practice.

Ron had never fully surrendered to Hermione's training, even though he was nearly living with her now, keeping his residence at the Burrow public so that Skeeter and the others would leave them out of the gossip sheets.

Unfortunately, since Ron lived at his mother's and came with Harry to an affair which always assumed one was with a potential or actual romantic liaison until there was direct reason to know otherwise, it was easy for strangers to assume the obvious.

Ron, as always, was a trifle oblivious.

“So, Mr. Weasley, how long have you known Mr. Potter?” asked the aging socialite, turning the full force of her sparkling eyelids on him.

Ron replied, “Since the Hogwarts Express, in our first year.”

“That’s quite a long time relationship.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, looking embarrassed, as he always did, at the word “relationship.” Harry grinned inwardly, gathering ammunition for later.

“You’re currently with Acropolis, aren’t you, Wisteria?” Malfoy said, so smoothly that it seemed just a continuation of the the topic. “I was concerned not to see him here tonight. I hope he isn’t ill.”

A faint frown passed across Wisteria’s features, but apparently she remembered that frowns contributed to wrinkles and her face was blank again. “Crop’s on a business trip, so Girard kindly offered to be my escort instead.”

Girard, surely at least 10 years younger than Wisteria, wore robes which, while correct for the occasion, looked just a little tatty. From Malfoy’s constant lectures, Harry recognized them as ready to wear and therefore not done. Harry had pointed out that some people couldn’t afford clothes fit to them, and Malfoy had said, with his usual arrogance, “Then they shouldn’t go out in public.”

Girard however, smiled back at Wisteria, showing just a little too much teeth but no self-consciousness. “Of course I would take any opportunity to be near you, my dear,” he said, and she smiled back, a more spontaneous gesture.

“Being an escort can be embarrassing, occasionally,” Malfoy continued. “For example, last year I myself had volunteered to take a good friend to an exhibition at the BWM she wanted to see…” he continued with what Harry found to be a long and pointless story, full of references to people he’d never heard of. It seemed to go down well with all but one young wizard, hunching next to his chatty and rather attractive date. Capricorn and Mel, those were their names. Mel, who’d been introduced by an incredibly long Latin name which Harry had clearly misfiled as Melanoma, had grinned at him, said, “I’m so honoured to

meet you, Mr. Potter. Please, call me Mel." Now she was adding bits to her own story of going to her Leaving Ball at Beauxbatons, inveigling a cousin into escorting her who had later turned out to think it was "a real date" and made a (funny) nuisance of himself for months.

Capricorn was spending most of his time glaring at Malfoy, who didn't seem to notice and was almost indulgently providing Mel with verbal cues to continue her story. Perhaps it was that which Capricorn resented, because she blossomed under the attention.

The social discussion continued, with Ron and Harry as audience, until their pickled veg was removed and a fish course provided. This, in the British tradition, was a cutlet of some unknown white fish with white sauce on it. Harry began to wonder why the restaurant had lasted so long.

The others seemed to find it delightful, however. "It's always nice to get a course of good old fashioned home cooking," Wisteria commented. "My mother's cook always made this on Tuesdays."

"Snitch is so reliable about always doing one course the old-fashioned way," Malfoy agreed, and there was no edge to his voice. "It almost makes me homesick."

Harry, whose concept of upper class meals included French sauces and lavish use of obscure cooking equipment, was appalled. This was how Petunia prepared fish. If there were company over, she as a matter of course would add a sprig of parsley to the side, and for special guests, cross two strips of pimento on the top, but the fish provided here, while admittedly not boiled, as Petunia preferred, was unornamented at all.

He spent the next minute tasting his fish and meditating on his assumption that the Rich were Different, until he heard a familiar annoying voice speak his name. "Harry, come back to us. Mel's asked you a question."

He blinked and hastily focused, shocked at Malfoy's use of his name. When he looked up, he saw there was a meaningful look in his eyes. What had he missed?

"Mr. Potter, I'm sorry. I just asked you if it was really true, that you died and came back to defeat the

Dark Lord."

"Ummm…" Blast, he was reverting to his pre-coached self. And Malfoy was still looking at him meaningfully. Ron had stopped inhaling his fish and was grinning at him.

As Harry mentally thumbed through the ridiculous etiquette book, Malfoy LOOKED at him. "Yes, do tell us, Harry."

It dawned on him – Malfoy was using his first name. He found the appropriate page in Alohomora Society: A Young Wizard's Guide to Etiquette . "I guess it's true. I didn't know I would come back, though. But I had the choice of staying dead or not, and Voldemort had a lot to do with what I decided. Oh, and please everyone, call me Harry." They were looking intensely at him, but that brought a smile from them. "And call him Ron, too," he added, reasonably certain Ron wouldn't take any number of hints.

Ron finished his last forkful of fish and returned to the conversation. "Absolutely. Draco, pass the rolls, please." 2

Through the filet, salad, and pudding (which Mel called "dessert," but without the French accent) conversation flowed well. In the sense that four of the other six chatted cheerfully about mutual friends and acquaintances, and Draco and Harry listened. The conversations went like this:

"That reminds me, I saw Kingsley Shacklebolt the other day at a lecture on forensic spells given by Dr. Granger. You know, the young witch everyone's predicting great things for? I love Kingsley's return to tradition, don't you? Seemed for quite a few years that the only people learning theoretical magic were at Hogwarts. Now he's got the British Wizarding Museum involved."

Harry glanced at Ron, then winked at him. Ron was violently blushing, as was usual whenever anyone mentioned Hermione, whatever the context. Well, if it had been negative, he'd have blushed, but then gotten angry.

"How is Kingsley?"

“Doing his usual fine job. At Hogwarts, I always thought him far too easygoing, but that seems to be needed at the Ministry these days. And he’s not overturning too many conventions, like his predecessor. Shows that Aurors can be good statesmen.”

“Granger’s Muggle-born. Shacklebolt’s Muggle Action Program is really getting new blood into the machinery of the Wizarding world. She’s a credit to all Muggle-borns, I think.”

“Yes. She was important in the War, wasn’t she, Harry?”

They all looked at him, then, which always made Harry feel acutely uncomfortable. But this was Hermione.

“What she did – I’d be dead at least half a dozen times that last year without her. She was the brains, and I was the brawn.”

Unfortunately this drew their attention to Ron. “And you, Ron? We knew you were there, like the famous break in – and break out – of Gringotts.”

Ron looked alarmed. “Ermm… I guess my job was backup. Hermione and Harry were the heroes.”

“Ron saved my life more than once, too, so don’t let him fool you – he was a hero too,” Harry said. “So… Mel, how did you weather the war?”

“I was still at Beauxbatons – my seventh year, as yours was supposed to be. My parents thought I’d be safer there, and I certainly was. But Capricorn” – she slipped a hand through his arm, and he actually forgot to glare at Mal… Draco for a minute and looked at her besottedly – “Capricorn was in London, most of the time. He kept sending me terrible Owls about what was going on.”

“The Dark Lord was clearly insane, but his followers weren’t,” Capricorn growled, returning to his glare. “They should have been shut in Azkaban and left to rot, I say.”

Harry took a deep breath, preparing to defend Draco’s lack of incarceration loudly, though quite reasonably, he thought. The git he was protecting, however, brought a hard boot heel down on his instep, and his breath – and concentration – focused instead on not yelping from the pain. By the time he could return to the conversation, the conversation had somehow turned to Quidditch instead.

That’s when the civilized dinner went pear shaped. Quidditch was on both A Young Wizard's Guide and Malfoy’s list of acceptable topics – but perhaps they presumed less-passionate followers of Quidditch than Ron.

“Broomstick racing?” Ron snorted. “That’s not a sport; it’s a joke. Show me the strategy, the interaction between players, the… the teamwork! Quidditch is the great sport of the ages, and always will be.”

Girard sneered at him, quite suddenly no longer the rather-too-charming dinner guest. He had teeth like a pike, but a much shinier white.

“No doubt some of the lesser pure-blood families here cannot imagine a world beyond the Quidditch pitch, but for those of a more cosmopolitan bent, other sports have more to offer.”

Mel and Wisteria both laughed, and Girard smirked, clearly basking in female attention. Capricorn frowned, but then he’d been frowning most of the evening. Harry glared at the speaker, sorting through the words he wished to say, which included toady, slimy, gigolo and slacker, none of which he thought Draco would accept as tactful. He felt a brush of another boot on his instep, and knew Draco was prepared to take drastic measures again. He had to say something, though. Ron was his best mate, and he was being ganged up on, even though it was in that chilly, careful, courteous way that the meanest things seemed to be said among pure-bloods.

He prudently shifted his feet and slid them under Ron’s chair, then coughed. “I think perhaps we’re getting a bit carried away here.”

Ron glanced at him and then, bless him, shut his mouth. Harry scratched an eyebrow, a theatrical gesture he had just decided to borrow from Kingsley Shacklebolt. “I’m kind of confused. Ron just gave his opinion – it was a neutral statement, not at all insulting – and Girard attacks him through innuendo and a smarmy voice. Why? Maybe Girard doesn’t like Aurors? Because Ron was honoured last year for his contributions against the dark by the Ministry. Or perhaps Girard’s sympathy is with the Dark?”

At this, Capricorn turned his gaze to Girard, and the scowl he’d been giving Draco precisely matched the scowl he was directing at the slimy little git now. Mel looked horrified, and Wisteria personally insulted.

“Girard is a fine, fine man,” she said, “and very experienced. You are insulting him, Mr. Potter.”

“Well, he insulted my best friend, ma’am,” Harry retorted, and viciously enjoyed her flinching at the word “ma’am.” “Should I stand by and say nothing?”

Draco’s face showed a furious scowl. Harry could well-remember the lecture Malfoy had given three days ago. “Never, never, ever draw attention to any insinuation or innuendo, Potter. Not another word, or I’ll hex you silent. You can say what you feel IF you do it in a way that it can be taken for a joke or a general observation. Stop arg -- that does it – Silencio. I’ll undo it when I feel that you are, in fact, listening. All right, let me try again. The whole point of pure-blood Society, Potter, is that no one – no one – is supposed to make anyone else uncomfortable in public. That’s your cardinal sin, Potter. You’re so self-righteous, you don’t care about audience or milieu. Well, get over yourself. You can be as snotty as you like, but you have to pretend that it’s purely theoretical. Someone says you’re an idiot, you don’t call him a bastard and hit him. You laugh and say, ‘I appreciate an insider’s point of view.’ Insult is an art, Potter, like duelling.”

Harry had sputtered and argued as soon as the silencing charm was off, but Malfoy simply ignored him. It had been quite effective.

Knowing therefore that he’d committed a faux pas unlikely to be forgiven, he decided to push it further. “You know, you’ve been very kind to us, I presume because you didn’t support Voldemort, and I appreciate that. But letting someone be rude, and then encouraging him by laughing, isn’t the mark of a civilized society. Voldemort was able to return and wreak havoc because no one did the things to try to stop him early on. Even Dumbledore – he was a great strategist, but he was one of you, and it limited him. I learned a long time ago that friends should be permanent, and enemies temporary. So I’m not

threatening Girard or anything – for one thing, he's obviously harmless – but I do think we do need to call people on being rude to each other for no reason."

Capricorn had stopped frowning. He cocked his head and then, incredibly, smiled at Harry. "I'd never considered it that way," he said. "I'll have to think on that. Do you think that should apply to people who really are permanent enemies?"

Ron replied, placidly peeling an apple. "Obviously, Harry doesn't, or Draco wouldn't be sitting at the same table with us. Everyone else has acted like he smelled bad or is wearing an invisibility cloak."

"Yeah," Harry said, and moved his feet back under his own chair rather guiltily. "You're right, Ron. I should have said something about that, too. Sorry, Draco." He turned and looked into startled grey eyes, which immediately closed.

"So, that's that, then," Ron said, biting into the peeled apple. "Sounds like at least one of you likes broom racing better than Quidditch. So what makes it so good?"

An hour later Harry, sauntering in step with Ron, left the restaurant with Mel and Cap's Floo address tucked into his robe breast pocket. Malf… oh, hell, Draco, might as well be permanent… walked with easy grace behind them, uncharacteristically silent.

They stopped in the Apparation room. "I'm going to Hermione's," Ron said apologetically. "No late night tonight, Harry. She'll want to hear every word about what an aristocratic pure-blood dinner party is like."

Harry waited for a rude comment from Malfoy, but none was forthcoming. Whatever was in his head seemed to be capturing most of his attention.

Ron took the Auror's Apparation stance (it was always possible they'd be landing in the middle of chaos, and although at Hermione's house that was unlikely, it was second nature to him and Harry these days). Draco moved up near him and held out his hand.

“Good night, Weasley.”

Ron took the hand instinctively, then grinned. “We’ll have to do this again sometime. Very nice dinner. Thanks for the invite, Harry. Interesting people you’re meeting.” Then there was the familiar crack! and he was gone.

Harry turned to Malfoy, and noticed that his eyelids drooped and he was a trifle green. “You okay, Draco?”

“Just… a little tired. Tonight was… interesting.”

“You should probably use a Floo.” The Apparation room had several Floos, both for firecalls and those customers who were not comfortable with Apparition.

“I’ll be fine. I hate Floos.”

Harry put a hand on Draco’s shoulder. It was thinner than it had been when they were playing Quidditch against each other, and for some reason, that bothered him. A lot. “I’m coming with you.”

“Potter, I’ll be perfectly –“

“Not negotiable, Malfoy. I’m the Auror responsible for you, remember? You splinch yourself, or get lost, and I’m the one who gets ripped to shreds by my boss.”

He pulled Malfoy close and Apparated.

When they got to Malfoy’s elegant house, Harry let go reluctantly. Malfoy seemed a trifle frail tonight,

and it was stirring his Auror's protective instincts. Or so he told himself.

"You'll be okay now?"

Malfoy's face softened. His mouth twisted in rather an odd smile. "Yeah, yeah, go away, Potter. Isn't there a damsel in distress somewhere you need to save later tonight?"

"Hope not. I'm knackered. Do we dance again tomorrow?"

"Can it be afternoon?"

"Better than morning. Good night then." He had an odd impulse; he wanted to kiss Malfoy, just a gentle good night kiss, as though they'd been on their first date. But he flourished his wand instead, and Apparated.

Part Five: The Strain of the Day

For a young Wizard, the ball will be the place perhaps to meet his Mate; to establish himself as a Mature and Accomplished young Man, and to make the first Contacts which will eventually provide him with his Life's Work.

With these Laudable and Lifechanging goals, a first Impression must be essentially perfect. This is not the evening to Display Eccentricity, Skimp on one's Grooming Spells, or Converse like a Poet. – AYWG, Ch 31, Dances and Balls. Black-Smith and Weasley, 3rd edition, 2000. Used by permission.

I don't think he'll notice. Harry turned around and tried to get a good angle on his bum, regretting for once that he'd bought a Muggle mirror. His own magical mirror had nagged too much. "Are you going out with your hair looking like that?" "Are you sure you want to be wearing trousers under your robes?"

Come to think of it, the mirror had been in the Black home on Grimmauld Place. It was in an unused bedroom there now. Harry had never figured out what he should do with the house, so it remained, magically in stasis, waiting for him to decide. It had been two years since he'd set foot in the place.

Kreacher was, of course, still with him. Even Hermione had admitted that it would be cruel to give him clothes.

Perhaps Malfoy was the spiritual heir to whatever incredibly fussy person had charmed the mirror. In which case, the mirror might very well have been able to tell if his pants were obvious underneath his robe.

Harry didn't care what the rules for formal dress were. He was willing to give up trousers under his robes to fit in, but he wasn't going to run around in robes without backup, and that meant pants. Wizarding underwear had turned out to be lightweight, silken, and nearly to the knees, and he liked it. He couldn't see how anything would reveal his … er, lack of nakedness short of being flung into the air by a curse – and if that happened, he definitely preferred to have that second line of defence. Even if he'd had the usual second Auror around, a man simply had to keep his dignity in dangerous situations.

Besides, they were sexy. He'd rather like to see other wizards wearing these pants – and nothing else. They'd look particularly good on blond wizards, whose hair would be less visible …. He wasn't going there. Nor was he going to ask Kingsley if other Aurors wore pants on duty. There were parts of the Wizarding world he simply didn't want to know about.

That's your Muggle mother talking, Snape's voice sneered in his head.

"Shut up, she was smarter than you were," Harry snapped, and then, recollecting himself, couldn't help saying, "Besides, you're dead." He firmly shut off his own brooding before Snape could retaliate, "So is she."

Snape in his head was nasty about his parents; the real life Snape had only been nasty about his father. Why did memories of adult figures always come back to haunt one? Some were highly welcome, as his parents had been; some were distressing, simply saying nasty, insulting things, and then some, like Dumbledore, made him twist inside with no retaliation or forgiveness. They were simply dead. Nothing could change. He could never ask Dumbledore why, if he loved Harry, he could allow him to be abused, wizarding world or not. Of course, The Chosen One understood necessity; but the little boy who had grown up in a cupboard never would.

He shook off his unhappy thoughts, checked his arse one more time to reassure himself anything under the robes was invisible, and Apparated to Malfoy's garden.

Malfoy was sitting on his favourite bench, looking incredibly perfect in midnight blue robes and… probably… nothing else. A hunter's moon was rising, and it was warmer in the garden than was natural in London in September. Harry wanted to throw him into a comfortable garden chair, Accio an ale, and just lounge about. The Minister's Ball had never felt less attractive. Maybe Malfoy would be in a good mood and they could discuss something other than pure-blood society, just for a change.

Malfoy, however, was not in a good mood. "I told you not to wear pants."

"What makes you think I am?"

"Experience, knowledge, and good eyesight. I know you, Potter. If you're not, prove it."

"Come on, Malfoy, you think I'd lift my robes for you, either way? You haven't even bought me dinner yet." To Harry's surprise, Malfoy blushed at this. He filed that away for future conversations.

Malfoy quickly recovered verbally. "Very well, you seemed to be able to handle yourself at the restaurant, despite breaking one or two rules of polite discourse. And the Equinox Ball is usually held outside, so the light won't be as revealing as it would be indoors. I suppose People will just think you were hideously disfigured during the war, and are determined to hide it at all costs."

Malfoy paused then, and actually looked concerned. "You weren't, were you, Potter? Because if so… I mean, I didn't intend to…"

Harry saved him. It was unusual to see an embarrassed Malfoy, but for some reason he didn't feel like exploiting it. "I wasn't, thank you very much. As you would see – if you bought me dinner, or at least a drink."

Malfoy seemed relieved, and took the line tossed to him. “I’d have never identified you as easy, Potter.”

“You never tried.”

Malfoy jumped up at that. “Well, you’re as ready as you’ll ever be. Don’t forget – ask witches to dance almost every dance. You can stand with me for the rest, and do male conversational sorts of things. Stick to Quidditch if possible, though I suppose people will ask about the war. Just be the modest hero.”

“I can do modest.”

“Potter, you can do flustered. It’s not the same thing.”

“Just stop treading on my instep. I found bruises on it a day after the dinner.”

“I wouldn’t do that while our feet are visible. Trust me, though, I’ll find something.”

In this, at least, Harry trusted him.

The Minister’s Ball took place on the equinox, of course. Harry had learned that pre-Christian ways took priority for pure-bloods; only the “New People” (i.e., Muggle-borns) preferred Halloween and Christmas to Equinoxes and Solstices. As Malfoy pointed out to him, Dumbledore had introduced the new traditions to coincide with Muggle experiences. Halloween in the wizarding world, for example, was as much a memorial to all those who’d been killed for being witches or wizards as a fall celebration. The equinox was the more familiar feast, celebrating harvest and the change of seasons both.

The Minister’s garden was brightly lit by a million fairies, who had been charmed not to wander off too far. Since they generally had the attention span of a toddler, the lighting shifted accordingly, from romantically dim to near-daylight. The heat from their tiny wings kept the garden warmer than Malfoy’s –the dance floor actually had a cooling charm or two to counteract them.

The Minister was stationed at the ceremonial entrance, with a grand display of straw and fall flowers forming an arch over him and his Auror guards and family. Harry stopped before him and nodded the deep nod Malfoy had made him practice; the modern version of a court bow.

"Harry, my boy," Kingsley intoned, and reached to shake his hand. That was apparently a signal to a dozen cameras to snap a picture. "You're looking… well." He winked then. "You clean up nicely, as they say." He sounded a bit surprised.

"Thanks, Kingsley," Harry said cheerfully. Somehow it hadn't previously occurred to him that this was one party which a friend was throwing, not a nameless, affectionless entity.

Kingsley bowed graciously, triggering another set of camera flashes. Harry turned and put a hand on Draco's shoulder. "I think you already know Draco Malfoy?"

Kingsley, who had searched Malfoy Mansion while Draco was there, presided in the Wizengamot when he was tried, and gone privately to his home to blackmail him into coaching Harry, nodded his head politely, as if he remembered him from the Daily Prophet. "Hello, Mr. Malfoy, I'm glad you could come to my party. I do hope you will enjoy yourself."

As the cameras clicked away for a third round (which Harry would later discover featured Kingsley smiling slightly at Draco, and Harry still absent-mindedly resting a hand on his shoulder, for which Draco would give him hell) he felt Draco raise his chin and look up at the Minister. "I'm sure I will, Minister," he said, without either smirk or implication, but the entire line of his body suggested old aristocratic pride. Kingsley smiled a little, and patted Harry on the shoulder, pushing him gently toward the gathering. That of course triggered more flashes (Harry by now had lost count of the rounds) and Harry moved quickly toward the true entrance to the party, a hedge of roses with fairy lights all over them held among the leaves by the usual charms.

Draco was just behind him, a warmth at his shoulder. Even in the heated garden Harry could sense his presence. He slowed down till Draco caught up. "What now?"

“Now,” his coach replied, “we greet friends and slide into groups of acquaintances.”

The first sounded more enjoyable to Harry, but he doubted he’d know many people at this event. Still, he allowed Draco to lead him to the bar, where they (or rather, Draco) ordered cherry wine over ice.

It was quite sweet, although the ice diluted it to drinkable.

“One thing not in the etiquette books, as far as I know,” Draco drawled, and paused to lick the inside edge of his glass, removing the cherry and alcohol syrup masquerading as wine that had splashed away from it ice base. His tongue went down two inches, then up, in a systematic sweep of every inch of the glass. The fairy lights glistened on his hair and added shadow and light to his tongue in the glass. Harry found himself very glad he had decided to ignore formal dress wear rules concerning underwear.

“Huh?” he asked, realizing that Draco had presumably finished the sentence and was looking at him. He must have been staring into space – or the glass – for awhile.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “The guide to etiquette,” he said, enunciating carefully, “Does not mention the dangers inherent in getting snockered at a pure-blood event. They are real, occasionally immediate, and can have lifetime consequences.”

“That’s why we’re drinking cherry syrup?”

“That’s right, Pot… Harry, that’s why. I assure you it’s not because my palate craves it… though this might be good served over ice cream. But because it’s so appalling – even you don’t seem to care for it – we will be protected from making fools of ourselves.” He stared into his glass a few seconds. “Well, I will, at any rate.”

Harry had recognized that there was an insult coming, and grinned. The more he understood Malfoy’s comic timing, the more he was certain that Malfoy probably was as much an actor at heart as Shacklebolt. In fact, they would probably deal extremely well together … if Malfoy weren’t a criminal.

He pondered this as Malfoy led him around, punching him lightly in the sleeve to force him to pay attentions to introductions. As always, gossip about people he'd never met and didn't want was the primary conversation. People seemed pleased to meet him, and then dragged him along to introduce him to friends. His name was italicized for every introduction by anyone but Draco: "Gentlemen, this is Harry Potter. This is Harry's first unofficial function."

They would look at his robes first, assessing, then at his hands and wrists. He started longing for a pair of trousers to shove them into. Robes had plenty of inside pockets, but none where he could reach easily and not look like an idiot. He'd say "Hello," they'd say their names, he'd say "Call me Harry" and chat for a minute or so about weather, Quidditch or what a nice party it was, then move on. Malfoy stood quite close to him, his arm draped with Harry's robes. Harry figured out quickly why. At first, Malfoy surreptitiously elbowed him in the ribs whenever he failed a cue. Eventually, Harry had finally internalized the routine and kept going, but Malfoy stayed quite close, presumably to be able to continue to elbow him if necessary.

Draco wasn't introduced, generally. He was ignored so thoroughly that Harry decided he was being shunned. Gradually, he began to realize that the former Death Eater wannabe (or maybe, didn't wannabe? He'd have to ask sometime) hadn't poked him in the ribs for half an hour or more, but was still staying close.

Harry finally connected that knowledge with the observation that, in fact, Draco's temperature had dropped a little. His face was paler than usual, and his lips firmly pressed together in an expression Harry had named years ago "the nasty git." He had names for the other familiar ones too – "spoiled brat," "King of the Universe," and so forth. He'd never labelled the one where Draco was crying and frantic – he'd only seen it once, and was not at all proud of what he'd done to make that expression change. But "nasty git" was most familiar, and easily morphed into "King of the Universe" and back, depending on Malfoy's temper.

Harry sighed, and stopped. "What's the matter, Draco?"

Malfoy looked surprised and glared at him. "Why do you think something's the matter, Potter?"

Harry remembered all the rules he would break: Don't bring up personal matters in public, don't suggest

that anyone is anything less than happy and content; don't try to get them to talk about anything personal; don't make observations about their appearance directly.

"You're looking like the first person who comes up to us you're going to hex."

"I might."

"Why?"

Malfoy, predictably, rolled his eyes. "You may not have noticed, Potter, but I'm wearing that invisibility cloak again."

"Could be worse."

"In what possible way could anything be worse than my social milieu deciding that I have ceased to exist?"

Harry opened his mouth, but he didn't need to say anything. A slightly drunken former Gryffindor staggered up to them. No one from the DA, fortunately.

"Hi, McLaggen," he said, resigning himself to another round of polite and meaningless interaction. "Draco Malfoy, do you know –"

"Do not" -- Cormac stumbled, then drew himself up – "do NOT introduce me to that traitor. He let a werewolf into Hogwarts." He squinted in the general direction of Draco's face. "You can't deny that."

Draco was extremely pale, but composed, and looked more arrogant than ever. "I have no intention of denying it."

McLaggen grabbed the front of Draco's robes. Draco made no move to defend himself. Harry suddenly remembered that his wand use was restricted, and put a hand on McLaggen's shoulder. "McLaggen, stop it."

McLaggen slapped his hand away. "The great Harry Potter, the Chosen One," he sneered. "Can't even share your Death Eaters."

Draco was backing a little, his hands up and open in front of him. "I don't want to fight you, Mr. McLaggen."

For some reason, that inflamed McLaggen. He pulled out his wand and pointed it at Draco threateningly. Draco looked as though he wanted to hide behind Harry.

"No duels in public, Potter," Malfoy had drawled last week. "No little hexes, no unpleasant charms – you will lose all respect if you draw your wand for anything but improving your comfort or someone else's. Swear to me you won't draw a wand."

"I'm an Auror, Malfoy," Harry'd told him. "I can't swear. But I'll do my best not to."

And here he was, having to decide whether to bring McLaggen down or not. He would certainly be within his rights to disarm him, but a drunken wizard was not precisely a dangerous wizard, generally. Until the hexes flew, anyway.

He slid his wand back into its holster; it had never even left his sleeve. McLaggen was circling now, jeering at Draco. Harry was experienced enough to know that he was working himself up enough to attack.

Harry sighed, moved in front of McLaggen, and hit him with all the force he had in his right arm and hand. McLaggen proved himself no better at Muggle fighting than he was at Quidditch. His jaw gave a

crack as he went over backwards, and lay out cold on the ground.

Harry decided not to heal his arm just yet. He didn't want to offend anyone. Several were coming up now, to check.

"Mr. McLaggen seems to have fainted," Draco said blandly to a strapping man who by his muscles might be a professional Quidditch player. "Poor man. A little under the weather, of course."

"Shall I call the Minister over?"

"No, no, of course not. We don't want to interrupt his party. But if you would notify security to take charge of this poor wizard, and see that he is taken to St. Mungo's, I think Mr. Potter is a bit upset, and I would like to stay with him for awhile."

Harry wondered if he should faint or not, but decided that two faints would be suspicious. Trust Malfoy to make me the weakling, he thought grumpily. But he had to admit that Malfoy had it covered, and everyone seemed to believe him, so Harry had not disgraced himself this time.

Draco took him by the arm. His hand was clammy. Harry waved it off.

"No, Potter, I'm holding on. We're going to Apparate the fuck out of here, and if you don't like it –"

"I like it," Harry replied. "Why wouldn't I like it? Why would you think I wanted to spend a Friday evening in a place like this? It's not exactly my idea of a weekend."

Draco sighed. "Okay, Potter, you can escort me home and then do whatever you want."

"Well, that doesn't entail you going home first," Harry said, glad to see the nasty gitface turning back to the familiar spoiled brat. Who would have thought most of Draco's public arrogance was faked when he

felt threatened? Harry filed that away.

“What in Merlin’s name do you mean? Where else would I go?”

“With me.” Harry didn’t wait for Draco to argue. He grabbed him tightly around the waist and Apparated.

Part Six: When Temptation Comes

Let us especially underline the importance of No Physical or Magical Contact. Duels, hexes and jinxes, and worst of all, Fisticuffs must be avoided. Hostile magic is simply not done. Punching someone is, of course, not Magical and implies a reversion to Muggle behaviours. (It also brings up the connotation of not having a wand, which is disgraceful by itself.) –Black-Smith and Weasley, 3rd edition.

“It’s always pleasant to know old acquaintances haven’t changed,” Draco drawled, as they landed and staggered a little, thanks to Harry’s imperfect Apparition stance. “I never actually had to use a trip jinx on you, Potter. You went tripping down the hallways, grabbing onto air –“

Harry was relieved that Draco’s snark was back. He’d been worried the other would break down, and he didn’t know what to do about it. He jabbed Draco lightly in the ribs. “I got us here, didn’t I?”

“And where, Potter, do you define as ‘here’? We’re on an empty street just outside Diagon Alley –“

“Here is ‘here.’ The Leaky.”

Only Malfoy could make him feel self conscious about having underwear on. No one else in the wizarding world could push Harry’s buttons – even the ones he’d never known he had – so well. That was the only explanation for why, when they walked into the Leaky in formal robes while everyone else was dressed haphazardly, it was the fact he was dressed underneath his robes, and not the robes themselves, which made him blush.

“Potter, no one goes to the Leaky Cauldron after dark. No one.”

Draco of course had to emphasize this with a broad, dramatic hand gesture. Harry looked around at the crowded pub. “Of course not, Malfoy. We’re in an empty room. How distressing. I wonder where they keep their firewhisky.”

Miraculously, this silenced Draco. Harry waved at the bartender – and the 2/3 of the clientele waving at him – and snabbled the last empty table. He ordered two and handed one to Draco. “Here you go. You’ve earned it.”

Draco sipped his cautiously, and looked surprised. “This isn’t bad.”

“Never had firewhisky before?”

“Oh, come on. Never had good firewhisky before, though.”

“Tom keeps it hidden. But he likes me.”

Draco sipped again. Harry could actually see the tension leaving his shoulders. “You know, Potter, people do like you. But I’ve never figured out why.”

Harry dipped his finger in his drink, then sucked it thoughtfully. “I don’t know why either. I mean, I was the Boy who Lived and then I was the Chosen One and now I’m the Man Who Beat Voldemort, so I can understand the people who fawn. But yeah – like is different. Florean Fortescue used to give me free ice creams. I think he just did it because he liked me. It’s … odd.”

Draco was staring at his finger, now circling the glass. There was a silence. “Draco?”

He blinked. “Oh, sorry. You’re so not a Slytherin, Potter. I tell you something you could take umbrage at,

and you just concede the point."

Harry downed the drink and held his glass up for Tom. "I took enough Umbridge fifth year, thank you very much. And it's true – why not concede? I could just as well say, "Thank you for the insight. I'd never thought of that." He sipped the new drink and grinned at Draco.

Draco had kept up with him, and clicked his glass lightly. "So why the hell don't you take it for granted people will like you, Potter? Since you have evidence they will."

The firewhisky began to warm Harry all through. "You try spending your first 11 years in a cupboard, Draco, and see how much you trust the world."

"Oh, I'm not terribly sanguine about the world, just my place in it…" Draco took a gulp, and then his eyes narrowed. "Wait a minute. Eleven years in a cupboard? Is that symbolic?"

"Nope. That's where my relatives kept me safe." Harry wasn't bitter, he wasn't. He just felt like drinking himself to oblivion all of a sudden. He raised his empty glass again. Oblivion, here he came.

"Go easy on the whisky, Potter. They kept you there on purpose? Didn't Dumbledore know?"

"My first letter from Hogwarts was addressed to me at 'The Cupboard under the Stairs.' He knew."

Draco was mercifully silent. When the third round arrived, he handed the pub owner a couple of galleons and said something to him far too quietly for Harry to catch. Then he reached out and took a sip of Harry's whisky.

"Wha – why you doin' that, Malfoy? I bought you one too."

“Drank it too fast.” Draco tapped his empty glass to demonstrate. “I’ll share with you.”

“Thassss – that’s silly. I’ll order you another one.”

“No, let’s share this one and keep even with each other, all right?”

Harry frowned. He wasn’t quite at his best, especially with Draco’s hand and his own both wrapped around the whisky glass, but the math of that seemed off. Oh well. He had plenty of galleons. “Okay then.”

“So you grew up with Muggle relatives?”

“How did you know?”

Draco gave a loud sigh. “Potter, everything you say and do has been covered by the Prophet and the Quibbler – with the Quibbler admittedly being a trifle more accurate. I couldn’t avoid reading about you, no matter how hard I tried.”

Harry felt the room was just a trifle hazy. He squinted at Draco. “You tried?”

“Well…” Draco stuck his little finger in the whisky glass and licked it thoughtfully, as if practicing Harry’s mannerism. Harry found it unbearably sexy. He knew when he did it, it had probably merely looked rude. “I didn’t really try that hard. Know your enemy, you know.”

“I wasn’t your enemy,” Harry said. “At eleven, maybe. Even then, you were kind of secondary to my cousin and his minions. By 13, you were a minor annoyance, nothing more. I knew what enemies really were, by then.”

“You wound me, Potter.”

“Sorry.” Harry felt bad for hurting Draco’s feelings, even if he seemed to be smiling a bit – not his usual smiles, but one Harry had no label for. “So, tell me something which will wound me back.”

“Hmmmm.” Draco was silent, clearly trying to recall something. “Nope. I was your enemy for sure. Especially after 5th year, when my father was arrested.”

“You mean, ‘when you got my father arrested.’”

“I’m not stupid, Potter. I was angry, yes. Angry enough to agree when the Dark Lord offered me his freedom and my mother’s safety to get you captured. But… well, you’re right. Childhood enmity is nothing compared to what the Dark Lord felt – and did. When you’re forced to cast Crucio over and over, wanting to cause pain because only if you do it right will you or your parents survive the day, and forced to watch your own teacher murdered before your eyes after you tortured her – well, saying snotty things to me and refusing to be my friend kind of paled. Even beating me at Quidditch wasn’t that bad.” Draco snorted and took a drink of the emptying glass.

“I’m sorry I refused. I’ll be your friend now, if you like.”

The expression Harry was beginning to see fairly often on Draco’s face appeared again. It was one he was fond of – a little wistful, a little ironic, and a bit surprised. Harry reached up and patted his cheek, at the place the lines were curving up instead of their usual down.

“Potter, you’re drunk.”

“You think I only offer friendship when I’m drunk?” Harry asked indignantly. “I can be friends sober! Really good friends!”

“Shhhh. Yes, I know you can. I mean, again, the entire Wizarding world knows that, after interviews with

every Gryffindor you ever played Exploding Snap with."

"Chess. Ron likes chess."

"Or that. Whatever you like."

Harry, mollified, put his hand over Draco's on the glass. "There. You see. I'm taking your hand in friendship."

Draco sighed again, but he didn't have his heart in the exasperation. "Fine. Thank you. I'm going to take it back now." He slid it out from under Harry's, and instead reached out and took the glass.

"We missed all the hors d'oeuvres at the Minister's Ball," he said. "Does the Leaky offer anything edible?"

Harry turned away to look at the glittering board. It was almost as hard to read as Draco. He took off his glasses and started polishing them on his sleeve.

"For Merlin's sake, Potter!" Draco snatched them away and quickly flourished his wand over them. "I may not have mentioned that you should not use your clothes as cleaning rags, but that is only because every child past the age of two should know that. Even properly brought-up Muggle children, I would imagine. Didn't your relatives teach you anything?

Harry thought of Aunt Petunia scolding him for wiping his nose on his sleeve when he was a little boy, crying because Uncle Vernon seemed to enjoy spanking him hard. He flushed, because even Aunt Petunia had known better, but the message had been, "Not in front of us, because I do your laundry and that's disgusting," not "don't do that because people will think bad things of you." But that would have been true, apparently. He stared at Malfoy, wondering how he could unerringly push buttons neither of them knew existed, and tried to think of the sort of events which called forth his Patronus.

Draco was cursing, which was actually quite distracting, since it was clearly wizard cursing. “Merlin and Arthur! How did I get so good at putting my hand on the hexed bit! Muggle pants and bonfires. Fuck, fuck, fuck the Muggle queen!”

That, now. That was incredibly shocking. Everyone in Little Whinging would have been horrified. A glow spread through him. Yes, Draco would upset the Dursleys far more than Dumbledore had. It was worth being friends with him, just for that. He smiled approvingly, and Draco stopped suddenly.

“My mother would kill me if she heard that,” he admitted. “She hexed my mouth full of soap when I said ‘Mudblood’ once.”

Harry thought that was the funniest thing he ever heard. He roared, and was rewarded by Draco’s surprising strong hand over his mouth. “Shut it, Potter.”

He waited to talk until his mouth was released. “Sorry, Draco. Forgot that you’re my Designated Maiden Aunt.”

Draco mumbled something, and then brightened. “Weren’t we talking about food?”

“I’ll go get it.” Harry stood and found that Malfoy must have sneakily cast a trip jinx when he wasn’t looking. No, a jelly legs hex. He wobbled uncertainly.

“Sit, Potter.” There was warm breath in his ear, and sinewy arms pulled him back into his chair. He wished that Draco had stood there for awhile with him. It was rather nice. He smelled good, like whisky and that herbal stuff. But the hand didn’t leave his shoulder, anyway, and Draco didn’t sit down.

“I’m thinking a bowl of stew, Merlin help us both. Harry, for both our sakes, look at me. All right, good. Would you eat something nice and starchy and greasy for me?”

Harry thought about this. “Okay. But their shepherd’s pie is better.”

“I should have known. Do they have treacle tart?”

Harry brightened. “Yes, they started carrying it years ago.”

“Coinciding with your selecting the pub as your hole in the corner, I suppose. All right, stay here. I mean it. Stay.”

As Draco stepped to the bar, Tom brought over two very large glasses filled with water. “These are for you, Harry.”

“Huh?”

“You are to drink them both.”

“Draco’s going to get more to drink for us.”

“Yes, he did. This is what you’re drinking. Both glasses.”

“But…”

“Argue with your friend, Harry, not me. I’m just delivering what was ordered.”

Harry stared at the water. Draco hadn’t even gotten to the bar yet, presumably having taken a detour to the loo. It was all very puzzling. Perhaps it was Legilimency.

He sipped the water. It wasn't bad. And if Draco said so, he was probably right. He usually was. Harry sighed and chugged the whole thing, then started more slowly on the second glass.

By the time he'd finished dinner and the water, the world seemed to have speeded up again till normal time. He ate the last of the treacle tart with pleasure too, until he noticed Draco wasn't eating any.

"Aren't you going to have some?"

"That stuff is so sweet it makes cherry wine taste like a nice semi-sec Chenin Blanc. Thank you, no. I don't care much for sweets."

"You might be sweeter if you did."

"Thank you, no, Potter," Malfoy said in his driest voice. "I'll leave the sweet to you."

"Just as well. More for me."

"True." Malfoy leaned back lazily, apparently approving his shepherd's pie and tea. "Well, I admit their food and drink is edible, and Tom's a nice bloke. I like your party better than the Minister's."

"So do I. I hope he didn't notice we were gone."

"It doesn't matter. We showed, we were seen, we left without – much – incident. Now Samhain is over, we're free until Yule from the very stiffest official functions."

"Samhain, what's that?"

“Samhain, you Muggle-raised innocent, is the second most important holiday of the wizarding year. The principal pure-blood holiday is Beltane, and Samhain is the close second to that. Halloween is a poor replacement for real holidays. Halloween is what that Muggle-lov. . . sorry. Dumbledore introduced Halloween to Hogwarts to make the Muggles feel at home.” 3

“What’s wrong with that? Why not Halloween?”

“Because, Potter,” – and here Malfoy’s eyes narrowed – “even you should have enough brains to figure that out. It’s a Muggle holiday, not a Wizarding one. Wizarding traditions are important – not just to pure-bloods. They’re what keep us a Wizarding World, as opposed to Muggles with Magic. And Halloween is at best a good day to have a fancy dress ball.”

Harry thought about this. Malfoy was right. It was important to celebrate one’s own holidays.

“Why wouldn’t Dumbledore see that?” he asked, mostly to himself.

“My father said –“ Harry braced himself for the usual venom – “when I asked, my first year, that he thought Dumbledore still felt guilty about Grindelwald. This was his way of memorializing all the Muggles who were killed before Dumbledore took Grindelwald down.”

Harry bowed his head, too shocked to process this. Dumbledore with a guilt like Harry’s? Lucius Malfoy with insight? The world turned upside down.

He thought about this awhile, and looked up after several minutes to see Draco watching him, looking a little amused. Since even Harry was socially competent enough to know that discussing Draco’s father was offlimits, he cast about for a change of topic.

“You remember the restaurant dinner last week?”

“Every minute is carved into my cornea.”

“Ewwww. Don’t do that. At any rate, I was really angry at one point. Maybe you noticed.”

“Potter, I remember at least three times you looked huffy. Which time was this?”

“Well, our very nice hosts were complimenting Hermione.”

“Yes, I picked up on that. My father would have refused them Malfoy Mansion as blood traitors, if he still had such powers. They made it really clear that they were approving of her as a Muggle, not an exception.”

“A ‘credit to all Muggle-borns,’ I think they said.”

“Something like that.”

“Didn’t you think that was rather… erm, patronizing? How can one person be a credit to everyone in the group she’s born in?”

“It was exceedingly patronizing, Potter. Let it go.”

“But they were insulting – “

“Really, let it go. They didn’t mean to be insulting – they meant to be approving. As I said, my father would have hated it, because they spoke about her as a proof that Muggle-borns can have amazing abilities too. The secret message is, ‘If she can do it, others can too.’ That’s a fairly radical thought for

pure-bloods."

Harry thought about this. "You're saying that it isn't patronizing?"

"No, Harry, do keep up. Of course it's patronizing. It's just… well, how do you change a hidebound culture which feels threatened by change? You reward them for the small concessions they make, encouraging them to keep making them. It just works better than cruciating them for not going far enough. You don't stop pushing, but there's got to be honey with the potion."

"You're pretty smart, Malfoy. You'd make a much better Minister than I would."

"I agree. Unfortunately, achieving a Ministerial post is not based on intellect. Potter, you have your uses, but you just don't stop and think when there's injustice to be addressed."

"I would have been dead multiple times if I stopped and thought."

"Yes. And what that taught you was that stopping and thinking is an anti-survival tool. Which is ridiculous. No wonder Shacklebolt can't stand you going out in public." He drank the last of his mug of tea – Harry'd had to listen to Draco complain about the fact that a) it was a mug and b) it was earthenware – and stood. "Should we be leaving?"

"Know anywhere to go dancing?"

Malfoy laughed shortly. "Harry, you're not going dancing in a public place, except for formal balls, until you've gotten the sex lecture."

Harry was horrified. "What?"

“Trust me, you need it. Let’s go – we can Floo to my house.”

“Let’s Apparate.”

“Although you appear singularly sober compared to yourself an hour ago, I don’t think either of us could trust ourselves to Apparate after three whiskies.”

“Don’t be sh… silly. I’m fine – I’ll be glad to side along you.”

“Trust me, Potter, I drank less than you, and even I know I’m not the perfect Apparator I was before the whisky.”

“Well, I’m going to.” Malfoy was implying that he was incompetent to Apparate? Hah. He was a wizard, not a Muggle, and he damn well could…

At that point, he noticed that his wand holster was empty, and Malfoy was sliding a holly into his sleeve next to the hawthorn wand. “How? How’d you do that?”

“Your judgment is clouded. It was easy. Now do you believe me?”

While Harry was thinking about this, Malfoy pushed him to the Floo, and threw some powder in. “Rue des Jardins,” he said, and pushed Harry in.

Harry landed, as was his wont, on the hearth, and groaned as one of his knees tested the slate and found it hard. For some reason, he didn’t feel like standing up and walking away. He rolled a little in order to leave space for Malfoy.

Unfortunately, he didn’t leave enough. While Malfoy arrived with his usual grace, encountering Harry’s

leg was unexpected, and he landed sprawled fully on top of him.

Harry grabbed Draco's shoulders and rolled so that the other was beneath him. He told himself it was Auror instincts, but those, he knew, were really reflexes. This was simply old-fashioned instinct; he wanted Draco beneath him, pressed tightly to him, and he wanted it now.

Once he had him there, he felt less frantic. He was appreciating the effect of the "no pants" rule on his own body, and for an instant seriously wondered why he'd insisted on "backup" wear. Draco was writhing under him, and Harry moaned and held his arms down.

Slowly he began to realize that there were words being said, in his ear, loudly. "Potter! POTTER! Stop at once. Do you hear me? Stop lying on me."

Harry's pleasant euphoria wore off a little, and he sat up hastily. "Sorry, pure reflex," he lied.

"If so, obviously you have no reflexes for getting off of people, because you.are.sitting.on.my.groin." The last few words were said with a measured menace which made Harry jump off hastily.

"I'm really sorry, Malfoy. Really."

"Yeah, yeah. And I'm the Supreme Mugwump of the International Council of Wizards."

"Um… sorry?"

Malfoy brushed himself off, his back to Harry. It was quite a tempting back. Malfoy's cravat had come undone, and there was just a glimpse of white neck under his neatly clubbed hair. Harry almost went forward to nuzzle it, but he doubted if Malfoy would believe the "reflex" excuse again.

"Can I sleep here tonight?" he asked, not sure what exactly he meant by that. He just knew he really,

really did not want to go anywhere by Floo, and it appeared from his recent behaviour that, just perhaps, he was out of control enough he shouldn't Apparate.

"Yes, Potter, you can sleep here," Malfoy said wearily. "I'll show you to a guest room."

"We could share one bed and not dirty the linen."

"I have a house elf, Blandy. And if I didn't, I would still not share a bed with you in this condition."

"I'm sorry." Harry knew he was pouting, but couldn't quite seem to control his face.

Fortunately, Malfoy looked more amused than anything, as he led Harry to a very nice second floor bedroom which looked out over the garden.

That reminded Harry of Malfoy's Floo directions. "Rude Day Jar Dance?"

Malfoy blinked. Then he looked enlightened, and amused again. "My mother named it. She liked this house best of all our properties, because everyone on this street works in their garden. That's why, when told I could keep any residence but the Manor, but only one, I picked it. I always felt at home here."

"What does it mean?"

"Garden Street, basically."

"Nice name."

Malfoy flicked his wand, and a pitcher filled with ice and a little water, accompanied by a cut crystal

glass, appeared on the Georgian table by the bed. “I like it. Drink at least a glass of that before you go to sleep, and again when you wake up.”

“You have a thing about water.”

“I have a thing about hangovers. Good night, Harry.”

“’Night, Draco. Thank you.”

Draco sighed, hesitated, shook his head, and left. Harry climbed into the bed Draco had apparently turned down with the same swish and flick that brought his water, hugged one of the four pillows to himself, and closed his eyes.

Part Seven: It’s a Fine Life

What a Young Wizard emphatically must Not Do is violate the Rules of Public Affection. Kissing, holding hands, hugging, taking an arm, or even saying affectionate Words is viewed by Polite Society as offensive. Dancing together must only include Traditional dances (see appendix for list of acceptable dances). Black-Smith and Weasley, 3rd edition, 2000. Used by permission.

Harry sneaked out early leaving just a short note for Malfoy: “Thanks. I slept well. Shall we meet Tuesday?” When they met, his coach brought up something he’d hoped to forget.

“Okay, Potter, I can’t believe I’m doing this, but. . . what do you know about sex?”

“Errr. . . sex? What’s that got to do with. . . ”

“You know. Sexual etiquette.”

“Oh.” Harry felt his cheeks flame. “What’s to know? How to ask someone out?”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “I wouldn’t dream of teaching you courting practices until I’m sure I’m not letting a total inconsiderate outside dog loose on an unsuspecting wizardom. Don’t tell me all your previous sexual experimentation has been with Gryffindors.”

“What do you mean, ‘sexual experimentation?’”

For some reason Malfoy was pulling at his hair and moaning. “Whom have you fucked, Potter? How many, and from what house?”

“I was sort of busy staying alive. . . “

“Since school, then. How did you meet them, what was the first time like. . . “

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t – were you drunk every single time?”

“No, I wasn’t!” Harry replied, stung. “I mean. . . I’ve never been drunk before Friday night, and I don’t intend to ever get drunk again.”

“Intend. . . Harry Potter, you’re telling me you’ve never had sex – with anybody?”

“I told you, I was busy saving the world.”

“Saving the. . . how did you celebrate after you won?”

“Slept, mostly. Hung out with Ron and Hermione at Ministry parties. Slept some more. Started Auror training.” He looked up to see just how horrified Malfoy was. Harry knew he wasn’t a particularly good model of a conquering hero.

Malfoy was staring at him with an expression on his face which might have been. . . pity? It wasn’t disgust, or dislike, or contempt. In fact, Harry had never seen such an expression on that pointy, pasty face ever before, and he disliked it intensely. It made him itchy and uncomfortable. No one ever looked at him like that.

“Some of us have standards,” Harry said.

To his surprise, Malfoy didn’t punch him, or yell at him. In fact, Malfoy hadn’t changed his expression one iota – almost as if he weren’t listening to Harry at all.

That was not on. Malfoy was his enemy, for Merlin’s sake – his rival. “Stop looking at me like that.”

Malfoy’s eyebrows knitted. He seemed to come back from somewhere far away. “I take it your housemates were the same?”

Harry felt himself flushing again. “No, actually. After the war, there were a lot of parties at the house.”

“Wizarding parties?”

“Yes.”

“So a lot of dancing and sexual activity.”

“Is that a normal part of wizarding parties?”

“Potter, for Merlin’s sake! You were 18! What else is normal at parties at that age? What, for example, were you doing? Playing Exploding Snap?”

“I didn’t go,” Harry mumbled.

“Speak clearly; Hogwarts worked hard to give you a Hogwarts accent, remember, and that’s a pure wizarding accent. You didn’t go to your own parties?”

“They. . . they weren’t my idea. I had to train. I practiced my skills. Usually I could find someone else at the party who’d be willing to practice-duel with me.”

Malfoy paced awhile. Harry watched, admitting that Malfoy had turned out attractive. The pointy face had smoothed just a little into strong bones, and he still moved with the quick grace he’d shown at Quidditch.

Finally, Malfoy stopped and perched on a corner of the couch Harry was sitting on. He looked thoughtful, not hostile. A good look on him, Harry thought, and unfamiliar.

“You’re telling me, Potter, that after the war you had no urge to do crazy things -- experiment with sex, potions, and Edwardian Muggle music; fall in love, get married, have children, learn to meditate and visit an ashram, buy a house in the country, join a professional Quidditch team, see the world, practice Dark magic, live in a cave in Greece or. . . do anything different than what you did at Hogwarts, minus classes?”

“I had classes.” Harry felt defensive. “I hired coaches in Occlumency and duelling.”

“For battling the next Dark Lord?”

“There are always others.”

“And you see it as your job to fight them.”

“Well, I am an Auror, after all.”

“All right,” Malfoy said, the peculiar expression still on his face. “I suppose I’ll have the advantage of not having to fix any bad habits. Let’s begin. Just remember, if you want to court someone, you better be prepared.

“Courting practices in the wizarding world – the part of it which matters – work like this. It’s all about the magic – which means, it’s all about the power. A worthy companion will be at least your equal. You’ll know that when you start, so your goal is to prove that you’re a worthy companion too.

“You show absolutely no affectionate interest in the object of your desire. You are either challenging or indifferent. If they appear indifferent too, you will begin challenging them. You will question their values, their judgment, their friends, their physical appearance – whatever, in order to find their vulnerabilities. Then you hone in on the vulnerable parts so they can’t ignore you.

“That brings on the second phase of courting: proving you can hold your own. Your job is to get them to respect you, and perhaps fear you a little.”

“Why would you do that?” Harry asked. “People wouldn’t go out with someone they’re afraid of.”

That oddly pitying look returned. “Since you killed the Dark Lord, have you received any offers, Potter?”

Harry blushed. “Only about 50,000 or so. Both sexes.”

“Right. Wizards and witches want to go out with someone more powerful than they are, magically. Magic is attractive. Dumbledore probably had a wonderful time till he was a hundred or so, and he still could gather hangers on after that till. . . well, anyway. But magical power is. . . well, powerful, so knowing someone can beat you is also a bit scary – especially if someone is a proven killer.”

“Voldemort killed himself.”

“Right. You keep telling yourself that. A lot of people who hate you will also tell themselves that. But to most of the wizarding world, you’re a hero who killed a villain – a powerful wizard, and a fanciable one, to boot. And someone they know won’t draw the line at any risk for what he wants. So you’re scary.”

Harry blushed again, and found himself with no response.

“There, Potter, that’s the problem. You’re wonderful at the attacks, but rotten at taking compliments. The Wizarding world will eat you alive if you don’t practice retaliation.”

“How would I retaliate to a compliment? Why?”

Malfoy sighed and put his face in his hands for a minute. “I forgot – Shacklebolt hired me because he just couldn’t get through to you. Potter, I’ve just told you that the first stage of courting is finding your weak points. If your weakest point is that you can’t take a compliment, what do you think will happen?”

Harry scratched his head and waited.

Malfoy answered his own question. “You will be praised to death.”

He paused and thought, then continued in a silky voice. “It’s very good you’re staying quiet, Potter, quite intelligent. Silence is often taken as a sign of intelligence, especially when it’s on a pretty face. You know

your face is pretty, don't you?" He slipped Harry's glasses off, his tone completely objective. "You have long eyelashes framing dark green eyes – unusual, as well as attractive. And your mouth is just large enough to bring thoughts of kissing you, while mobile enough to make one wonder what it would feel like kissing me – or wrapped around my cock, moving gently."

Harry was quite sure his cheekbones were melting by now. He stared, mesmerised. Malfoy brought a hand to his head and lightly tangled it in his hair. "Yes, I thought so. Your hair is soft and silky, despite its wildness. You always look as if you'd just climbed out of bed, and were ready to go back any minute. It makes one want to make sure you don't have to back alone. The innocence in your face is endearing; as if you'd never hurt anyone, but are easily hurt. That would bring out the protectiveness in many women and men; we'd feel that we, only we, can understand the Harry who comes with the Harry Potter, saviour of the Wizarding World, and protect and defend him from his enemies. Then it stands in contrast to your strength – your well-controlled body, your always-at-the ready wand, your total focus on being a defender of the innocent and vulnerable."

Harry noticed two things. The first, was that he felt increasingly flustered and confused, nearly panicky. The second, was that he was harder than he'd ever been in his life, all from Draco Malfoy's purring voice. He shifted as unnoticeably as he could to adjust himself, hoping Malfoy did not notice.

But Malfoy had, and his trademark smirk appeared. He said nothing else, just looked at Harry hungrily with that smirk on his face and something else in his eyes, and Harry was not getting less hard at all. In fact, there was a possibility he'd be coming from Malfoy's seductive words alone.

Until Malfoy sighed, and shrugged. "Weak point," he said. "Clearly a weak point. You just lost the courting process, unless it was me going after you, and not the other way around."

Harry felt a mental whiplash. "Lost?" he squeaked, still focused on Malfoy's voice telling him how desirable he was.

"Lost. You're completely at my mercy, Potter. If I weren't courting you – and we started with the other scenario, so I'm not – I would be disgusted at your starting the challenge process and then failing at it badly. Now, granted, a lot of people will be courting you, but it still isn't attractive to fold up and die like that."

Malfoy's comments were like a large bucket of ice water on his private parts. Relieved, Harry could focus on other things. That brought his attention to the fact that Malfoy thought he'd lost the face-off.

That was not on. Harry's eyes narrowed. "So what should I have done?"

"Retaliate, of course. If it were someone courting you, and you weren't interested, you'd insult them – 'I'm glad you like my eyes. I have been wondering for the last five minutes what I'd do if I had muddy brown ones.' Obviously, you pick his or her eye colour to insult, because it's retaliation. If you're courting them, or willing to consider their offer, you counter-flirt, but with an edge: 'I got my eyes seeing the Avada Kedavra curse too many times. Funny, that, how magic affects us. Perhaps you saw too many romances, given that your eyes are the gold of the "strip me" charm?'"

Harry braced himself. He took a breath, stood up, and stalked over to stand over Draco, his legs spread on either side of him. "Surely for you, Malfoy, I'd be praising your hair? I've often wondered if hair like yours is what give Veela their attractions."

Malfoy turned a trifle pale, and Harry continued, not letting his opponent. . . Coach?... have time to respond. "But frankly, I'd rather praise your body. I like thinking about the white skin hidden under those robes; smooth and strong and silky all at once. And just below the waist. . . all those delights, waiting just for me."

He smiled, the twisted one Sirius had used when being ironic, and he heard an indrawn breath. Malfoy twisted away from him and stood, adjusting his robes.

"That wasn't fair, Potter."

"What do you mean, not fair? I was following your rules."

"Yes, but… yes…" Malfoy was breathing faster, and his face was the Evil Overlord of the Universe face, though he didn't stick out his tongue. "I won't allow you to be the little pricktease you so obviously are,

Potter. I was demonstrating, and you're straight, so we both knew that was not a real come-on. But yours… it… you… oh, get out of my house."

"Throw me out," Harry said, glaring the patented Auror Threat glare, "And I'll stay out, I promise you. It was totally fair."

Malfoy did not pick up on what Harry thought was the obvious implication. He turned his back and stormed toward the kitchen. Suddenly he stopped, whirled around, and yelled "Tace atque abi!"

Harry felt something like a cyclone of magic pick him up and whirl him out the door. It deposited him in a pile of leaves a next-door neighbour had raked from the garden. He swore and jumped up, while two garter snakes and a vole fled for their lives. He sent a hasty apology after the snakes, but the vole was a bit quicker and, of course, he didn't know their language.

He muttered Parseltongue to himself as he Apparated, and continued as he stalked through his kitchen, swearing. Malfoy was a total arsehole. Harry was a fool to have put himself in that evil git's hands. Fucking Malfoy, assuming Harry wasn't gay. How could he miss it, how Harry had acted towards him when drunk. Fucking stupid Malfoy. Harry'd never liked pure-bloods anyway. Nor people who had just turned 20 giving other people who had just turned 20 Sex Talks. Without follow-up. Any follow-up at all.

Harry paused in his hissing as he felt his shoulders droop. Well, that was the problem, wasn't it? If Malfoy had wanted him, had reciprocated, he wouldn't be pacing in the kitchen speaking Parseltongue when everyone thought he couldn't any more anyway. He'd have been hastily pulling Malfoy's oh-so-elegant robes and trousers (yes, damn him, he was wearing trousers today, and probably pants as well, just to frustrate Harry, if of course Harry had actually been able to persuade him to strip for… at this point Harry's train of thought, or at least sentence, got fully derailed.

Because, he admitted – only to himself, just between us, Potter – that what hurt was not the frustration, but the rejection. He hadn't gone over there to seduce Malfoy (Harry pushed away the part of his mind that whispered he'd been going over hoping Malfoy would seduce him, so he wouldn't have to initiate anything). He'd gone to have a LESSON, damnit. He was sober, he was in his right mind, he would never, ever, ever…

Harry looked in his Muggle mirror then. A young man with black bags under his eyes, unfortunate hair, grass-stained robes and face, and leaves sticking to odd bits of him, looked sadly back. Who could blame Malfoy? Would YOU want that? He knew he wouldn't. He wanted a disdainful, highly polished, arrogant and far too often funny blond wizard who renewed his Cleaning Charms every hour and never lost his poise, even when he was writhing under Harry in an effort to get away. Not the unpolished wizard who was good at defending against Dark spells and, really, not much else.

Harry locked his home with the strongest wards he knew, and slowly made his way upstairs.

The pounding on his door woke him. It was extremely loud pounding, like the kind Ron had used when Harry had occasionally locked the other Gryffindors out of their shared bedroom so he could mope in privacy. After all, they locked the door sometimes when they had a girl visiting. Why shouldn't Harry lock the door sometimes because his only visitor was the Dark Lord?

When the knocking wouldn't go away, Harry wearily went to the front floor and cast a "who's calling" spell.

It was Ron, of course. He had stopped for a moment and was rubbing his fists as if they hurt, then cast a small Healing Charm on them, and started again.

Harry opened the door mid-pound. "You nutter, why didn't you use your wand?"

"Doesn't sound as loud," Ron said simply, coming in and watching Harry spell the door shut behind them. "Where the fuck have you been?"

Harry scratched his head and headed for the kitchen. "Here. Why?"

"You've been out of contact with anyone for five days. Shacklebolt sent over a couple of Aurors to check on you, and they figured out you were in the house when nobody could get in. They tried every spell they knew; what the fuck did you use?"

Harry yawned and put on the kettle. “Remember Advanced Charms and Transfiguration class? Magic’s not so much the power of a spell, but the power of a wizard. And power is determined by intention. If you want something badly enough, and can focus enough, you could use nonsense words and get what you wanted.” 4

“Yeah, I remember that, but I also remember wanting to turn my shoe into a fish desperately, and failing.”

“Wrong reason for wanting, perhaps. I don’t know. Watch the tea. I’m going to take a shower.”

When he came back down 15 minutes later, dressed in the informal robes and trousers Malfoy had forced him to buy, and trying not to think about that, Ron had made the tea and found a forgotten tin of biscuits.

“Good timing, mate.” Ron poured him a cup of tea – a dark, rich brown liquid whose very smell made Harry more alert.

“So how long have I been gone? I lost track. Did a lot of sleeping.”

“Six days.”

“What!”

“Yeah, six days since anyone’s seen you, anyway. Including Malfoy.”

Harry flinched. “Did Malfoy report me?”

“Nah, just the opposite. Shacklebolt rescinded his probation and brought him in. He questioned him thoroughly about when he saw you last and put him in long term Holding.” 5

Harry paled. “Ron, thanks. I’ll talk later.” He Apparated without remembering to take his wand from its holster.

Harry might not be the most powerful wizard in history, but he had his moments. He had one now, when he Apparated directly into Kingsley’s office and landed panting, still wandless, at Kingsley’s desk.

Kingsley looked at him in mild surprise. “You’ve heard, then,” he said.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, sir? Why the hell did you gaol Malfoy when it was my failure?”

“You did leave him, then?”

Harry’s survival instincts prickled. “That’s not quite what happened, but for the sake of argument, pretend I did.”

To his surprise, Kingsley looked rather pleased. “Well, Harry, you know what the deal was. He would be pardoned if you were able to interact with pure-bloods and in general they accepted you. If, on the other hand, you failed to achieve that, he would lose his probation. He and I agreed to those terms.”

Harry’s world seemed to stop. Then Kingsley’s desk disintegrated, leaving a pile of bits of wood the size of peas, mixed in with legal and memo parchment, ink, quills, seals, and a small, partially carved block of wood which appeared to be going to be part of a toy train. Harry looked further in the pile, and saw four finished cars, all brightly paintcharmed, fixed together. He stared at it blankly.

“My youngest son’s Yule present,” Shacklebolt said placidly, still sitting on his chair. “I would not have been pleased if that were disintegrated.”

“Sorry,” Harry said truthfully. “I didn’t mean to disintegrate your desk, either. But you’ve got to let Draco go.”

Kingsley looked at him thoughtfully. “And what if Draco remained in Holding and was sent to Azkaban to join his father?”

“I won’t let you do that. I’ll break him out of there if I have to.”

“Really, Harry? And ruin your own chances?”

“It wasn’t his fault! I have a lousy temper! He doesn’t deserve this!”

“Harry, the agreement was that –“

“I’m going to keep that agreement, Kingsley. I’m already getting invitations to pure-blood homes and public functions. Sure, I’ve caused talk here or there, but no more talk than pure-bloods cause if they have a quick temper. The invitations didn’t stop in the last seven days.” Harry had checked every day and was certain of this, although the owl he wanted most never came. Not even a Howler.

“You can’t guarantee—“

“Fuck, Kingsley, I can. And I will. I’ll do whatever it takes to prove to you I’m a good fit with pure-bloods.”

“You did say you never wanted to be Minister.”

“Nor do I. Ever. I don’t give a fuck what happens to the Ministry. And if you do, you’d haul Draco out of Holding and make him your assistant. He’d be a hundred times better Minister than I am. He’s smart, he

thinks in long-term strategies, and by the time he hits the Wizengamot no one will remember much about the stupid things he did at school."

Kingsley blinked, his first sign of surprise. "You think Mr. Malfoy would be a competent Minister?"

"Yeah. Surprised? Not as much as me, I'll bet." Harry was calming down. He could hear Draco in his head, reminding him that stopping to think was not an anti-survival tool. Hermione had tried to teach him that as well. If he'd listened to Hermione, Sirius might be alive now. Though, considering that last battle…

Harry forced his attention back to the here-and-now." Tell you what, Kingsley. I will promise that I will be recognized as a part of pure-blood circles by Christmas. No, by the solstice. You figure out a fair way to test me, and I'll meet your standard, whatever it is."

Kingsley sighed, the heavy, much-put-upon, sigh he saved for Harry and his own family. "All right, Harry, and I even have a thought about the test." He wrote a note on parchment, touched his wand to it for the appropriate administrative spells, and handed it to Harry. "This will get you into Holding – the parts Aurors aren't normally allowed without special dispensation. I presume once you get there you'll know what to do. The release charms are simple; don't let them say you have to wait days for them to process."

"No fear of that," Harry growled. He slid the parchment into his robe. "But the moment I pass the test, you pardon Draco, right?"

"Yes. In fact, I'll set a timing spell so the inhibition charms on his movements will dissipate the exact same moment you pass the test." Kingsley hesitated, then added, "I would recommend that you not tell him; your failure would be an incredible disappointment if he'd been anticipating automatic release."

Harry considered demanding Kingsley's oath, or better yet, an unbreakable vow, but thought better of it. Kingsley had been his ally since Harry was 15, and seemed to be fond of him as a person. It seemed wrong to demand that his word be bound by magic.

"Thanks, Kingsley," he said instead, and Apparated to Holding, forgetting again that there was no

Apparation permitted inside the Ministry except for very special rooms in the Auror administrative offices.

Holding was just as dismal as he remembered. It was a small, squat building which somehow always reminded Harry of Umbridge, possibly because some benighted designer years ago had declared that the grey stone occasionally be lightened with mosaics in the pink to burgundy family. He had definitely changed, he noted. Only since that bloody shopping trip did he even know the word burgundy, other than as a fancy term for red wine. And Malfoy would give him hell for – but that thought cut short, as he remembered that Malfoy was inside this ugly building, and not sipping a dark red wine and declaiming on what wine from different regions, made with the same grapes, was called. And how red wines varied. Harry was surprised just how much that hurt. He missed Malfoy's snide comments.

Having arrived in the alley wizards kept off limits to Muggles, he took two steps at a time through the wizards' entrance and up to the administrative area. Startled faces looked up at him from behind the desk, but Harry ignored them and ran through the door marked "restricted." The door sensed an Auror and opened for him.

It was as if he'd cast a "point me" in his brain. His running feet took him to the left, down a dismal stone corridor, past four cells, and then out to a courtyard. Draco was there. Harry just had to find him.

At one end of the courtyard, next to a potted tree which seemed to be the only touch of green there, a small crowd was gathered around a blond wizard who looked extraordinarily arrogant and contemptuous. Draco must be terrified. That was his "I'm not scared of you" face, and Harry had learned that this face always lied.

His wand dropped into his hand as he Apparated into the group.

The noise of his arrival caused everyone to drop back a pace, except for Draco, who had nowhere to go. Harry half-turned and quickly assessed him. Black eye, bleeding lip, bruises on his face and neck at least as far as his red prison robe covered it. His trademark sneer dropped into place as Harry looked at him.

"Like what you see, Potter?" he snarled. Harry turned back to the threatening crowd, fully aware that

Draco might attack him with vicious words, but would not constitute a physical threat.

“What by Merlin’s beard do you think you’re doing, Auror?” yelled one of the guards. Now that Harry came to look, he saw that the hostile crowd was a mixture of prisoners and guards. He disapproved of that on principle, and pointed his wand directly at the guard, whose own wand was loose in his hand.

“Expelliarmus,” Harry growled, and his trademark spell worked as nicely as it had the day Voldemort died. He caught the wand and stuck it into his sleeve holster, then shook his head so that his fringe moved and showed his scar.

“I’m not joking here,” he said. “Next one’s going to be painful. Aurors are licensed for the Unforgivables, in case you all have forgotten.”

None of them seemed to want to test Harry Potter’s word. The scene at Hogwarts three years ago had been far too exaggerated by all the press – and, of course, many witnesses. They seemed to expect that he would next give off a green Avada Kedavra glow which killed anyone who touched him.

Harry was furious. He wished he could give off that glow. They were harming Draco Malfoy. Touching him, without permission. They all deserved to die.

Then the stupid git he was protecting put a hand on his shoulder. “Potter, stop it. They’re not going to cross you. Just do whatever you came to do.” Draco’s voice was shaking, but would sound calm to most observers.

“What I came to do? I came to get you out of here.” Before the guards could move (if they were going to, which Harry much doubted) he reached around, grabbed Draco, and Apparated to the front desk. There he dropped Shacklebolt’s parchment, said, “It’s all in order,” and “Accio Draco Malfoy’s wand” in one breath. Accio worked as well as always, and if the wand had been locked up, it wasn’t arguing which spell to obey.

Then one last Apparition, and they were in the small front garden of Rue des Jardins.

Draco by now was shaking so badly that Harry decided not to let go. He kept a firm arm around the other's waist. There was no snark from Draco about their difference in heights, which pretty much confirmed that Draco was nearly over the edge.

Harry hauled him indoors and into the master bedroom on the first floor. After a wordless spell for the bathroom, he made Draco sit on the edge of the bed, and began grimly stripping his robe off.

"What are you doing, Potter?" Draco asked hoarsely.

"Stripping you, what does it look like? You're in shock, and you're filthy and bleeding…"6

"You can solve all that with your wand."

Harry thought about that for precisely a nanosecond. "Nope, I can't. You need to feel clean, you need to wash gaol off you, and whatever else that's dirty on you."

"That would be every place a bruise formed, then."

"Yep, it would be. Also hot water offers almost three times the benefit of a warming charm – we got lots of first aid training in the Aurors. So don't argue."

The bathtub was full when he hustled Draco in, and quick wandwork brought it to an acceptable temperature. He was watching Draco's face, so all Harry noticed concerning Draco's nude body was that there were a lot more bruises, most of them new, but enough shading to green that it was clear he'd been beaten several times since the first day he ended up in gaol. If Draco hadn't been needing his attention quite so much, he'd have Apparated straight back to let Kingsley know what he thought of him for putting someone so vulnerable in gaol, deal or no deal.

As it was, he located what could only be Draco's washcloth, clearly left there by his house-elf, soaked it in hot water, and set himself to using it to wipe off the dirt – had they thrown him to the ground naked? – and rub what were no doubt sore muscles.

"You'll make someone a fine husband someday, Potter," Draco commented stiffly after five minutes, while Harry was rubbing shampoo into what was now brownish-red streaked blond hair. When he used his wand to rinse it a few minutes later, the hair returned to blond and the water Draco was sitting in turned muddy. He vanished the mud absently.

In the meantime, he didn't answer Draco. He was far too angry at the world, and the not very inventive insult showed that Draco didn't feel safely back yet.

When Draco's skin seemed the warm white it usually was, and then flushed pink, Harry hauled him out the tub and walked him back into the bedroom. He rummaged in his chest of drawers for night clothes. To his surprise, he found cotton flannel plaid bottoms. He helped Draco pull them on.

Draco's eyes were half closed by then, occasionally opening with obvious struggle. He obediently lay down as Harry urged him to. Harry unrolled the large, fluffy duvet at the bed's foot and wrapped it around him.

"Are you hungry, Draco? Thirsty?"

"No, just tired… just tired." He was clearly drifting off. His hand had somehow become tangled in Harry's shirt and wouldn't let go.

"I should go," Harry said softly, in case Draco was already asleep.

The hand jerked hard, and Harry nearly overbalanced into the bed. "No.. no!" Draco's eyes opened wide, then, and looked into his own. "Don't do that, Potter. Don't leave." And then, as an afterthought, "Please."

Harry thought about what staying might entail. But he couldn't refuse that request – especially since it included a "please." He gently detached Draco's hand. "I won't leave, Draco, I promise."

As he started to tiptoe out of the room, he heard Draco's voice again. "Don't leave. Stay with me."

It didn't sound in the least sexy, but it did sound desperate. He sighed, and said "I'll be right back."

He dealt with his usual nightly routine, minus the wank, and returned to the darkened room a few minutes later. This time, he was certain Draco was asleep. Harry sighed, pulled off his robe, and climbed into bed wearing nothing but boxers (he hadn't been exactly carefully dressing himself, brooding around his place.)

Draco was facing the cupboard, taking up less than half the bed. Harry slid in behind him and circled an arm around his waist. He heard a sleepy murmur and then Draco snuggled backwards just a little and sighed.

I wouldn't have picked Draco Malfoy for a cuddler. But then, he would never have picked himself as one either. He curled in on that welcome warmth, slid his face as close as possible to the nape of Draco's neck, and settled in to sleep himself, obscurely comforted by the scent of herbs and soap and warm male skin.

Part Eight: Misunderstandings

The Appropriate Courting gifts described in Section IIId(1) such as a Family Charm, an Invisibility Cloak, perfume potions, or fine Fabric or Jewels, are appropriate between Same Sex courting partners as well. However, added to these may be Sexual Charms and Devices, which are never appropriate between Opposite Sex courting partners. Black-Smith and Weasley, 3rd edition, 2000. Used by permission.

When Harry woke, he squirmed with embarrassment. Storming into Holding was, he thought, completely reasonable given his protectiveness and the nature of the place. Apparating out without discussing it with Draco was… just who Harry Potter was.

But stripping him and throwing him into a bath while he was shock was… well, kinky. Even though it had seemed necessary at the time, and it was not about sex in the least.

However, in retrospect, he couldn't help remembering details: that Malfoy's body was less hairless than he'd imagined, but the hair was such a pale blond it almost looked like he'd shaved it; that his body was a trifle thin, but tough as dragonhide. There were tactile memories as well, and Harry's hands twitched to repeat them. He moved his head a little closer to Draco's nape, and rested his slightly scratchy cheek on Draco's right shoulder.

Unexpectedly, his pillow moved.

"Potter?"

Harry hastily pulled back and sat up. "Good morning."

Draco rolled on his back to face him. "Better than yesterday, certainly. Potter, why are you here?"

Harry blushed. "You asked me to stay."

It was Draco's turn to blush, it seemed. "No, not here – I mean here. In my house. With me. I thought you'd given up on me."

Harry felt his face pale. He put a hand on Draco's shoulder without even noticing. "Draco, I will never give up on you. That's a promise."

"That's not what you said when you stormed out."

Harry looked at him with as much dignity as being dressed only in a pair of boxers could supply. “I was angry. I get angry. Then I say things I mean at the time, but…”

“But don’t mean in the longer term?” Draco’s face was unreadable.

“Yeah. And shouldn’t say, period. I was mad because you weren’t listening to me, and I wanted you to feel as bad as I did.”

“You need practice, Potter,” Draco said, lazily stretching, arms high above his head. “All pure-bloods know where at least some buttons can be pushed.”

Harry blushed, looked away, and wished he’d put Draco’s pyjama tops on him.

He was startled to feel a warm hand on his bare leg.

“Harry,” Draco said, and his voice was not as snotty as usual, “Why did you come for me?”

“I came as soon as Kingsley told me,” Harry said, avoiding the answer. He wasn’t quite sure himself, and his automatic “Because you’re mine” didn’t seem an answer Draco was likely to accept. “It wasn’t fair to put you in gaol because of me.”

He continued to look down, until he felt the hand on his leg move to his jaw and cup around it.

Draco pulled his head up, and looked him in the eye. “So you came… out of fairness.”

He couldn’t outright lie. “What better reason, Malfoy?”

The hand on his jaw grew firmer. “Scared, Potter? Don’t want to tell the truth?”

He stared into grey eyes and thought of the grey of Hogwarts’ lake, the grey of oblivion after a Quidditch fall. All that was familiar and home, terrifying and enthralling. “You couldn’t handle the truth, Malfoy.” He felt reasonably sure Draco wouldn’t recognize the reference.

Malfoy suddenly pulled him flat.

“Truth factors tend to be irrelevant to Malfoys, Potter.”

Harry blinked up at Draco, who seemed to be half above him, and realized that Draco, for the first time since the train to Hogwarts in sixth year, had the drop on him. That would simply not do. He reversed their positions. For good measure, he put one leg over both of Draco’s to keep him down.

“Listen, Malfoy, I was pissed off because you were making assumptions about me, okay? You called me a pricktease. Why is it that all the gay pure-bloods seem to assume that anyone inexperienced is straight? You didn’t even ask.”

For some reason, Malfoy began grinning like a crazy person. “And you’re not?”

“Not,” Harry replied firmly, “as far as you’re concerned.” And then, because he was half on top of a delicious, annoying pure-blood who might not be quite getting it, he bent closer and licked along Malfoy’s underlip.

Harry could never remember much of what happened afterward. It was warm, and wet, and after awhile, quite slippery. There were hands rough on his back, and his own hands stroked everywhere. He found that the pleasures of fondling someone’s cock through flannel were amazing; he could trace the outlines, see the dampening fabric, and still not quite see exactly what was happening. When he got tired of that, he could pull the fabric down and use his hand to slick, to keep rubbing, to pet every bit of the soft fur, to dig between someone else’s balls when he had only touched his own before, and to unexpectedly release the other’s semen all over his own face.

He could remember Draco's face squinching up when he came, and Draco's fingers, digging into Harry's back hard enough to leave the record of four bruises on each side; and Draco's snickering, a few moments later, when he saw Harry braced over him with semen over his eyes, blinking hard because his hands were still occupied. Draco moved his face to meet Harry's – Harry thought it was for another kiss – and his tongue licked the mess of Harry's eyes so he could see again. Then he Draco did kiss him again, and shoved a hand between them, and shortly after, lights flashed somewhere in his brain.

There were different kinds of orgasms, too. Harry wanted to experiment with all of them. Besides the hand-made sort, one could come till one was limp, two furry bellies rubbing together, two cocks contributing to the friction, until finally he flung his head back and roared from the sheer ecstasy of relief. Or by choice one might come from a hungry mouth circling shaft, balls, anus, then committing to long sucking and licking. Malfoy seemed to find all these things as pleasurable as Harry did. That was good, because Harry couldn't seem to stop.

Later, there was the rather terrifying experience of entering someone else for the first time. He was so afraid he would hurt Draco that the wizard beneath him finally said impatiently, "Move it, Potter!" and he did, trying to figure out, now that he was at last making love to someone but at the moment unable to see what he was doing, what the best thrusts were and what to do when Draco's entrance started spasming. He almost pulled out then, but Draco's legs, locked behind his head, pulled him back even before Draco's hands took a rather painful grip on his arse and also pulled. There was no choice then but to simply react, and Harry did, thrusting till he saw stars. Then the stars were falling, and Draco had gone nearly passive in his arms, and Harry thought he might actually faint from overloaded pleasure.

He lay there sprawled across his partner's heavily breathing chest, getting his own breath back. When Harry was back to himself enough, he rolled off, then rather gingerly embraced Draco and pulled him close, encouraging him to rest his head on Harry's shoulder. This seemed something Draco was willing to do, and they lay like that for a long time.

"You," Harry said when the silence finally got overwhelming, "are mine, Draco. That's it. I went and got you because you belong to me. Every single bruise on your body will be one more year added to those prison guards' time. If, of course, I can ever force myself to leave this bed and go after them."

Draco seemed to get sleepy and compliant after sex. That would come in handy. Harry planned to exploit that knowledge for awhile. A year or so, at least. The measures needed to bring Draco to that state

would be fun by itself.

“Whatever you say, Potter,” he said drowsily. “You’d be disgraced if you hexed any of them, so committing to legal trouble is much healthier, anyway. Could you possibly do that thing with your lips on my neck again?”

Harry complied, with tongue thrown in, to which Draco did not object. In fact, he snuggled even closer and wrapped his arms around Harry’s chest.

“So I did okay?” Harry asked, fairly sure he had, despite his inexperience. Draco seemed pleased, at any rate.

Draco opened his eyes and gave him a small smirk. “Yes, I suppose. Of course, you do need training. But I’m willing to take that on, Potter, if you put yourself in my hands.”

“I think I’ve already shown willingness for that,” Harry replied. “But here’s the thing – you can give all the cues about proper behaviour in public you want, and I’ll try to do what you say. I’ve already promised Kingsley I won’t get mad. But in private, we’re equals, and in bed… in bed we’re this. Deal?”

“Deal,” Draco said, and it seemed he was trying not to laugh. “You are so predictable, Harry Potter.”

But Harry had just decided to test Draco’s stated willingness to let them be “this” in bed. Somehow, coherent conversation got lost.

Part Nine: More Misunderstandings

The pursuit of One by Another is always a Challenge for Both. When each is Male, the complexity increases Geometrically. -- Alohomora Society: A Young Wizard’s Guide to Etiquette. Black-Smith and Weasley, 3rd edition, 2000. Used by permission.

The first three weeks went smoothly until the end. Draco continued to jibe at Harry's taste, bearing, conversation, and just about everything. Since Harry now found Malfoy funny, that was no problem – except for the required compliance.

There was, for example, the Inappropriate Touching Incident at an indoor garden party, and a similar one at a Roman Masqued Ball (which also had another dramatically inappropriate touching incident, but that one involved a Witch. Nor did Harry collaborate in the event. He later vowed never, never, ever again to wear a Centurion's uniform in the Formal style).

In both cases, the inappropriate touching Malfoy railed at Harry about were awkward attempts at affection on Harry's part. Which, unfortunately, violated the Rules against same sex Public Displays of Affection. Harry could not keep from using capitals in his own thoughts these days, thanks to a rigorous set of quizzes Malfoy administered at the end of every day. Since his iron rule was No Sex Till You Pass the Quiz, Harry was fully motivated to study. The combination of Malfoy's rule and his own determination to prove success to Kingsley spurred him on.

After the first incident, Malfoy was almost nice to Harry. When the evening quizzes and snarking were done, he changed his tone. "It's not your fault, Potter," he said indulgently, coming close. "You're socially inept because you were brought up by stupid Muggles and your best friend is uncouth."

"Ron is not – "

"Hey, Potter, Weasley agrees with me." One small shock was that Draco and Ron owled each other these days, mostly to discuss which events would be most appropriate to take Harry to. Draco had seemed to acquire great respect for how Ron had behaved himself at that first restaurant party, despite the horrible table manners. "He wrote the other day that you can learn, but it will take years. I see no reason to argue with that – so you just have to get used to remembering the important things."

"But I like touching you," Harry said grumpily. "And I have to do, because you don't initiate our touching."

"In public," Draco said, his voice a little impatient, but his hands sliding under Harry's shirt (he'd changed to Muggle clothing the instant they got home). Harry closed his eyes and let Draco stroke the parts of him that needed soothing. He'd never seemed the kind to know what would make one feel better, but he

was remarkably good at it, and knew every trigger spot. Harry, who'd been standing a bit stiffly, allowed himself to melt, his head against Draco's shoulder because of the difference in heights.

Draco nuzzled the nape of Harry's neck and nibbled where it joined with the shoulder. "You can touch me any time you like in private, I swear. I like you touching me. I even like you protecting me, when you don't go overboard. I didn't expect that I would have a shining knight slaying dragons for me – no name jokes, Potter – but it's rather nice to know you have my back. Nonetheless, you really would cause a scandal if you, say, cupped your hand behind my neck and pulled me to you for a deep kiss." He proceeded to demonstrate what would be shocking.

Harry sighed when Draco came up for air. "Okay, I really am trying. Don't pure-bloods ever break the rules and get away with it?"

Draco knelt and began undoing Harry's trouser buttons. "Obviously. But pure-bloods know which rules to break, when. And public touching between two men who might be partners simply isn't done. It isn't. Ever. And yes, I know you are trying. I've known that since first year."

Harry was not in a mood he could be teased out of. "There used to be rules like that in Muggle society."

"And I'm sure well-brought up young Muggles honoured them."

"Yeah, I'm sure," Harry said, trying to focus on the conversation as Draco found a way to distract him more foolproof than teasing. Accessing sexual bits through a layer of fabric had turned out to be rather a – couldn't call it kink, precisely, maybe quirk – of his, and what Draco could do with a well-manicured thumbnail on silk was probably illegal in Taiwan. "G-g-god, Draco, I'm going to come in my pants."

"Good," the other said smugly, and escalated with mouth as well. Harry began to whine.

"Well… any..way… it was the men and women who did kiss their partners in the streets who made it possible to… to…. Oh fuck, how can I talk when you're doing that?"

Draco stopped briefly. “Don’t talk, then. But let me point out to you, Potter, that I am a Malfoy, and the heir of at least 15 generations, though I can’t be arsed to do the math when you’re spreading your legs for me like this. Surely you do not take me for a radical who would go against his own people? That’s for middle class idealists such as yourself.”

Any more conversation was derailed as Draco impatiently pulled down Harry’s pants to give himself a broader choice of distractions.

It was the second incident which wrecked everything. This involved a moment, when Harry, feeling quite fond of Draco for joking him through an embarrassing incident, put his arm around his shoulders and gave him the sort of hug he’d given Ron once or twice. They were both masked, which was probably the reason Malfoy decided to tick him off right then, though at least he did it quietly.

“Thanks for rescuing me from that old horror,” Harry had whispered.

Draco pulled his shoulders in and adroitly moved away from Harry. “Do not do that again in public,” he said. “I mean it.”

Harry stopped. Draco was supposed to have said something like “Anytime, Potter. You are my Potter, and the world should keep its hands to itself.” Since Harry was feeling a little rumpled and humiliated, Draco snapping at him was definitely not the right way to soothe.

“I can’t believe you said that.”

Draco, who had been moving forward, scowled. “I can’t believe you did that. Now come on, there’s the reception. You have to make your bow to the Emperor of Rome.”

“No, I do not.” Harry, rather than joining Draco, moved to the side to let others go by. Draco did not look pleased to be refused.

“Potter, you promised me that you would do whatever I said in public.”

“Yeah, I did,” Harry said, more and more conscious of his ridiculous costume and the embarrassment he’d suffer a few minutes ago. “As I recall, more than half the time since, you’ve taken over.”

This was not, of course, completely fair. They’d had an understanding – Draco could initiate anything remotely resembling “bed,” though sometimes it could be more precisely called “wall” or “countertop” or, one rather disconcerting day, “broomstick” --but Harry got veto over what they would do. Specifically, Harry definitely preferred topping to bottoming. Draco was compliant with this – largely, Harry expected, because he preferred to bottom, himself. If Harry had wanted it the other way around, there would have probably been far more of an argument. As it was, Harry hadn’t cast a veto yet, and initiated anything he cared to. Handcuffs and the Levicorpus charm had both played roles in what he cared to do recently. What Draco liked best was for Harry to shove him against the wall, give the Patented Powerful Harry Potter glare, and order him around. That game played an ongoing role in their activities.

“Potter,” Malfoy said, reverting to Frustrated Malfoy face, which Harry had always enjoyed producing, but never particularly liked. “Be reasonable.”

Harry closed his eyes, controlling his temper. A fountain near them burst into flame.

“Potter, don’t do this. You’re making yourself conspicuous.”

“Oh, and standing watching the dancing while a drunken harridan comes up and fondles my private bits isn’t conspicuous.”

Malfoy grinned a little, ready to end the conversation. “Well, you certainly weren’t arranging the event, and it did give me a great idea for later.”

“No later tonight, Malfoy,” Harry said. “If you’re ashamed of me, and it’s just about the sex, no later ever.

It’s about time I checked my own home, anyway.”

He turned and walked around the flaming fountain, in order to Apparate in front of as few people as possible. He felt rather marked for life concerning public exposure.

“Merlin’s balls, Potter, that’s not what I meant. Potter, the Emperor! It’s traditional!” Then, after a very brief pause, “Come on, Harry...” There might have been more, but Harry didn’t hear it. He was picking himself off his entryway floor and wondering why it was dusty.

He found that out quickly. He’d forgotten that he’d sent Kreacher to Hogwarts to help with the Triwizard championship Yule Ball, and he should have remembered that because he’d been to the first event as one of the judges, and would eventually attend all three. When Kreacher came at his call, he apologized and sent him back, and told him not to worry about the dust.

And here he was. He hadn’t seen the place since he went off to rescue Draco. It looked smaller than he remembered, though it really had about the same square footage. It didn’t have the aristocratic lines, or generous sunlight, or the view of the garden, or…

Or Draco. That was the worst, Harry admitted to himself. He took a shower, and told himself that it was fortunate Draco wasn’t around, because he was feeling anything but sexual – in fact, showering, soaping and cleaning seemed simply a task to take the feeling of that witch’s hand away, and not a temptation to wank. He scoured himself as thoroughly as he could, feeling a hard lump in his throat. Draco had been angrier about Harry’s touching him in public than he’d been about the sexual assault.

Harry refused to acknowledge to himself that he might have contributed to the second part, at least, by making a series of jokes about the event which deflected any sympathy. It was stupid, after all, not to mention unmanly, to feel assaulted. Draco loved his power. What would he think if Harry told him that every little loss reminded him of all his dead, that every unwanted touch reminded him of the Dursleys, and ever since Hermione had gotten so buried in her new Ministry job, the only one he saw regularly who had seemed to care about him as a person was Malfoy?

Harry threw his wards up and then threw himself on his living room couch. He had always longed to be able to watch the telly, and now he had his own. He had longed for permission to sit on the couch, and

ditto. He didn't live with the Dursleys any more. He had his own place, his own job, his own friends…

But that was a lie, and he knew it. His friends had lives which didn't include him. Of course they still occasionally got together – especially he and his two best friends. But the only other person he knew who didn't go out and hang out with other people was Malfoy. Even that was because he wasn't allowed to, unless Harry was with him. He'd seen how Malfoy enjoyed himself, laughing and gossiping and showing off a little, but also listening to others in a way which helped them show themselves off.

And now he'd left Draco alone, which wasn't supposed to happen, so Draco would have had to Apparate immediately or risk arrest. And Draco couldn't leave his house again, because Harry wasn't with him. And maybe Kingsley would decide Harry hadn't kept his promise, and Draco would have to go back to…

Harry sighed, took down his wards, and Apparated.

Part Ten: Understandings

In the End, all our discussions and strictures and advice can be summarized in one Extended Metaphor. Life is like a book. There are expectations in the course of the story; we do not write an Epilogue before we have written the entire body of the story, for example.— Alohomora Society: A Young Wizard's Guide to Etiquette , Afterword. Black-Smith and Weasley, 3rd edition, 2000. Used by permission.

He found Draco morosely playing with a tarot deck, teaching himself wandless cheating, in the dining room. Apparently the house-elf had been there recently, because there was a plate of several kinds of cheese with a glass lid and another one of crackers. Draco, however, was apparently sticking to burgundy.

He looked up when Harry arrived. There was a flash of what appeared to be simple relief on his face; then it was gone with all other emotion. He returned to playing with the cards.

Harry stood there. The silence was definitely not going away.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have left you alone to Apparate home. I didn't think. I came here as soon

as I remembered you can't go out without me."

He waited for Malfoy to say, "That's the problem, Potter. You never think." When Malfoy said nothing, he looked up to see the pure-blood watching him with concern. Maybe Draco was concerned about Harry's bad memory.

"Harry—" Draco said, and held out his hand. Harry stared at it, and after a moment Draco stuck it in his pocket. "Harry, let's go to bed."

Harry felt that lump in his throat again. He shook his head, and didn't try to speak. "Not tonight, Draco. I—I just can't. I had a lousy evening, and all I want to do is sleep. Can I stay in the guest room?"

Draco looked very worried now. Harry supposed he might be afraid that he'd be left to his fate again. He'd learned by now that Draco did not trust promises much, and with Harry acting the way he had, who could blame him?

"I'm not going to abandon you," Harry said. "I promise."

He turned and walked up the stairs to the guest room.

The next week was awkward between them. Harry stayed every night. The first night, he tried to sleep in the bed but it felt large, empty, and exposed. After that, he tried a bedding transfiguration in the guest room cupboard, which worked very well.

On the third morning, he woke to find his door open and Draco sitting on the floor, watching him sleep. There was something in his eyes which Harry couldn't name. He'd never had anyone look at him that way.

"Harry, why here? And why not our bed?"

Harry shook his head. “It’s not our bed, really. It’s your bed. I was allowed to visit.”

“That’s not true.”

“Draco, don’t lie to me. If it were “our” bed, or “our life”, you’d be proud to be seen with me in public. You wouldn’t think of it as betraying your values, because “our” values would include your… caring about me. And letting everyone know that.”

“If you’re asking if I love you –“

“No, Draco, I’m not asking. I don’t want you to say what you don’t mean. You’re ashamed to be seen with me. That’s not love.”

Draco sighed, climbed to his feet, held his hand out for Harry, and pulled him up. “The final test is in four days.”

“Do you think I’m ready?”

“Yes, I do. Your manners are a bit eccentric from a pure-blood point of view, but then, lots of pure-bloods are eccentric. And you’re the great Harry Potter. You’ve got powerful magic, aside from defeating the dark lord. I think you’ll be fine.”

“Good. Because if I’m fine, you’ll be free. And then you can start your climb to Minister.”

“Wizengamot member, first,” Draco said absently. “Let’s eat something.”

Harry stopped, and shook his head. “I’m not hungry.”

“Oh come on, Potter. You need fuel.”

“Maybe, but I’m not hungry,” Harry repeated. “I haven’t seen Ron and Hermione for a long time. Perhaps I’ll drop by.”

“That’s a good idea,” Draco said neutrally. “I’ll… see you later.”

Harry Apparated.

Draco was already in his room when Harry went upstairs. The house echoed as it had when the Dursleys were all asleep and Harry sneaked down to go for a walk. He pulled off his robe and trousers and went to sleep in the rest of his clothes.

He was in the graveyard again. He hadn’t been there for years. But here he was, staring at Cedric open-eyed and blank on the ground. Then he looked again. This time it wasn’t Cedric; it was someone blond-haired and less well-muscled, someone with a scar on his forehead that was a human skull. As Harry watched, frozen in horror, a snake poked out through one of its eye sockets, and it was the precise colour of Draco’s eyes.

This time, Harry had to change events. He screamed, clutching his wand, and the world flew up around him, making him a human time turner, pulling him back into the better past. Shards of earth and gravel, and then a tombstone flying at him…

The gravel smashing his face ceased. The tombstone shattered as Harry opened his eyes. It turned out to be a large slate from the roof. Shards of several others lay around him. His cheek hurt. He put his hand to it, and it came away bloody.

“Harry.”

He blinked. Draco was standing over him, wand in hand.

“What in the name of Gaia were you dreaming of? It can’t have been anything good. If I hadn’t heard you yelling, you would have had about a ton of slate landing on you.”

Harry flushed. “It’s just a usual dream, Draco. I get them sometimes. I’m sorry I woke you.”

“I’m not.” Draco looked at him consideringly. “I think you should sleep in our bed.”

“No, thanks. I’m not moving.”

Draco’s lips firmed. He cast a quick Reparo, and the roof returned to its normal state, except for a few small pieces of slate which apparently had shattered beyond repair.

“Okay, then, I’m going to stay here,” he said.

“Don’t --”

“Don’t argue with me, Harry. You cast Reducto on the roof. In your sleep. With your wand apparently still under your pillow.”

Before Harry could get himself together enough to articulate his thought that, if he were doing that in his sleep, it wasn’t safe, Draco had slipped off his bedroom slippers and fallen to the bed.

The room darkened then, and Harry sighed. It was comforting to have Draco close to him, his body

stretched out along Harry's, his arms sliding around him, his cheek flat against Harry's impossible hair. It was even more comforting when Draco began to kiss him – nape and belly, nipples and hip. Harry tried to say, "Stop," but no words would come out, with Draco lightly skimming his lips across his abdomen and then straight down.

He waited for Draco to say something about going to bed with his clothes on, but the other matter-of-factly just Vanished his pants and, after a moment, his shirt. Then it was skin to skin. Draco's full attention seemed to be on making Harry feel good. Better than that was that someone was with him in the dark, in the cupboard.

When he was done – which took quite a while, since he seemed to want to kiss every square inch of Harry as he stimulated him – Draco lay back and sighed. Harry, working completely by touch, found his body in the dark and tried variations of Draco's example on his cock, until Draco, helpless, moaned and came.

Then he was around Harry again, clinging as if he would fall a long distance if he let go. Harry sighed, and moved his lips to Draco's neck, and fell asleep in the middle of another kiss.

When he woke, Draco was already awake, but not gone. He was sitting up in bed and trying to look neutral, but his eyes still had the worried expression he'd been wearing all week.

"How do you feel, Potter?"

Harry stretched and tested, and concluded Draco had probably healed his cuts and bruises while he was sleeping. "Pretty damn good, actually. I guess abstinence is bad for me."

Draco cupped his cheek. "It's not the abstinence, Potter, it's the depression. Do you ever go to a friend for comfort?"

"I went to you. I went to Hermione and Ron. I guess there just isn't any comfort available. But I can handle it, you know, Draco."

As Draco left the bed, a candle melted. Draco was too angry to notice, although Harry was quite sure this wild magic was, for once, not his.

“Potter, you are sometimes the most unaware person on the planet – and those are when you’re being observant. Can you get out of your own head long enough to notice that we all care about you, and you’re not letting us care?”

“Shit, Malfoy, I know you care. I mean… last night…” Harry faltered. Something wonderful and precious had happened a few hours earlier, and he had no words for it and didn’t quite understand it. It hadn’t felt like Malfoy wanting sex, or anything else, from him. If he didn’t know better, he would have said Malfoy was loving him – loving every inch of him, and trying to comfort with no Slytherin expectations of being rewarded for it.

His eyes teared up at that thought, and he gritted his teeth, furious at himself. He hadn’t cried since the year Sirius died. He didn’t need to do it again, and in front of someone, no less.

Malfoy sighed, letting a tinge of exasperation slip into his voice. “You are… such a Potter. Come here.”

And Harry stood up and put his arms around Malfoy, and for a few minutes, everything felt exactly right and as they ought to be.

Finally, Malfoy spoke in his Coach Malfoy voice. “All right, tonight’s a big night. Time to get ready for it.”

The rest of the day passed in a bossed-around haze. Harry didn’t mind – his closest women friends were all bossy, with the exception of Luna, and no matter what sex he’d ended up being attracted to, he’d probably have ended up bossed, not boss, in most matters. And although he still had a sneaky feeling somewhere deep that he wanted a public declaration, last night – hell, the last week – had definitely reassured him on Draco’s feelings concerning him.

Draco surprised him by handing him the blue and gold robe he’d bought despite his unattached status at

Master Humble's. Harry, glowing from his bath and a variety of unfamiliar cleaning spells from Draco which seemed to have cleaned him completely, inside and out, stared at it.

"Come on, Potter, it's getting late."

"But you said –"

"I said that it was only appropriate for someone with a regular companion. I was under the impression you had one."

The voice was Malfoy's at his airiest, but his face retained a certain amount of anxiety. Harry shrugged the robe on, not even noticing the soft fabric. He was enjoying a certain ridiculous happiness.

"I was too. Though you're getting the worse half of the deal."

Draco smiled, a small, vulnerable smile Harry had never seen on his face; a mixture of embarrassment, shyness, smugness, and pleasure. "I don't think so. But don't tell anyone."

Harry laughed then, and allowed Draco to weight him down with a remarkably thick gold chain, the size of a Burgher master's but pure gold.

"Usually, these are handed down through a family line," Draco explained. "But obviously, you haven't one."

"Obviously, you don't know much about me yet," Harry responded. "I'm willing to bet if these are traditional, there's one like it in the Potter vaults. They're full of all sorts of gold things. I've just been too lazy to ask the goblins to give me a catalogue. The only thing I've ever taken out of there are Galleons."

Draco's eyes lit with the fervour of a sportsman. "We'll need to go and look soon," he said. "There may

be lots of things we… you can show off with."

"My vault is your vault," Harry said obligingly. Perhaps he could be absent the day Draco wanted to explore it. He suspected it would be a lot like their shopping trip in Diagon Alley, only with more things to carry home.

"It'll be fun, Potter," Malfoy said, accurately reading his mind. Maybe he better take up Occlumency again. "We'll go through the vault with the catalogue, sort things into more logical piles, count the Galleons to be sure they're all there…"

Harry had a brilliant idea. "Talk to Hermione," he said quickly. "I'm sure she'll want to get to know you better, and both of you would think that was fun."

Malfoy looked vaguely confused. "Don't you?"

"Think of me as Goyle," Harry advised him, pulling on the round velvet hat that looked like a beret which had eaten too much. In his opinion, it highlighted how flawed his hair was. When Draco tucked away most of his fringe, it also emphasized his scar.

When Harry tried to pull out enough to hide his scar, he got his hands slapped.

"Don't touch it," Malfoy warned. "I did that on purpose. You want to win, don't you?"

"It's not a beauty contest."

"Which is fortunate, since you're not one of the 10 most attractive wizards in the British Isles. However, your scar is a reminder to everyone that you defeated Voldemort."

“And that will make me popular with all pure-bloods everywhere, I suppose.”

“It’s not a popularity contest either, Potter.”

It was Not Done to Apparate, Harry discovered. When he asked if they could go by broomstick then, Malfoy didn’t even deign to answer. Nor were there Floos in medieval times, and this one was so entrenched in unknown magical wards there was no way of modernizing it sufficiently to do so.

Malfoy held a large brown piece of parchment, which invited them to Celebrate the Solstice Season with the rest of the “world.” “This, Potter, is a Portkey. We will go the traditional way, of course.”

As they arrived at the main gate, he realized that this mansion was just over the hill from the Burrow. Ginny and he had chased runaway snitches this far. That led to another thought. Much as he loved them, the introduction of Draco as his partner was going to cause stress among the Weasleys. He’d prefer to put it off… if possible, forever, but he knew that wasn’t going to happen. Still, better he sent them owls first, right? Or Hermione or Ron could tell them…. Harry glumly reflected that the Hat which decided he was a Gryffindor had obviously not included relationships while Sorting him.

He cast an Impervius Charm to keep them from getting wet as they walked. Draco still insisted on spelling away the few drops of water which had managed to get onto him, and spelling his cap – as Draco called it – more firmly onto his head.

“Remember, Potter, dignity,” he cautioned. “Courtesy, dignity, discretion. That’s what makes a pure-blood respected.”

“Not a good heart and a reliable conscience? Not bravery?”

Draco snorted. “My father and Fudge were both chosen 10 years in a row. If the Evil Lord hadn’t resurfaced, they’d probably be on the list this year. What does that tell you?”

“So the majority tends to be from Slytherin?”

“I suppose. Unless the pure-bloods are in the mood for academic or rhetorical brilliance that year. You should know from the Prophet that the wizarding community is really only united by its moodswings.”

Harry laughed, but didn’t have time to ask Malfoy where he’d heard that word. They had reached the gate of the Oldest Home.

The Oldest Home was where Anybody who was Anybody, Malfoy said (and Harry flinched at the Omnipresent Capitals) would come for the winter solstice. It was a symbol of hope, having been magically constructed in the early Dark ages, which were of course the golden age of wizardry. It was the official residence of whomever was Minister, so Harry was welcome to think he was hosted by Kingsley again. He riffled through his other friends and acquaintances. Luna was in France – her father might be there, but that simply would make everything more awkward, not less. Neville was studying desert botany in a place called… Los Alamos? Something like that, but it wasn’t in Texas, so obviously there were multiple Alamos around. Ron said his family didn’t come here for the solstice – winter hols, they spent with their extended family. He had hinted that Hermione and he would be making an announcement there.

So, the only personal friend there might be Kingsley. And he didn’t live there, so he was merely official host. Malfoy had patiently explained. Well, patiently for him, anyway. “Use the brains you occasionally display, Potter,” he’d said. “This is a great house for extraordinarily official functions, but it’s not all that wonderful a home. If your only choices of transportation are Apparating or walking, there will be times you’re feeling stuck. Side-Along Apparition or nothing? Hah. It’s like Hogwarts without the comfort. Anybody with sense would prefer to be close in. And Kingsley’s got a family.”

“Don’t Malfoys have sense?”

“Stop needling, Potter. Malfoys… are different. We are County. We only need to go to London occasionally to pay off our ministerial minions or shop. And as you’ve seen, even now we have a house in town, though it’s not one of our nicer – read socially impressive – ones.”

“I like the house.”

“I do too. I was speaking as a Slytherin. But Shacklebolt works for a living. He needs to be where the action is. And that, of course, is London. Or a suburb, but Merlin help us if any of us lived there.”

“I grew up in a suburb, Malfoy.”

“Well, there you have it.”

The gates reminded Harry of Grimmauld Place. They had the same air of too much magic and not enough happiness. They were heavy oak, barred with metal, possibly a foot thick or more. There was a whisper of a notice me not spell, probably put there relatively recently – 300 years ago or less – but many more, old, almost certainly Dark spells, guarded it. If Hogwarts represented the future, this unquestionably stood for the shadowed past. No frivolous charms, like moving stairs or come-and-go rooms. If there were hidden rooms here, they hid secrets Harry didn’t want to know.

The fairy lights in the garden simply highlighted the iron and oak which were the visual defenders of the perimeter. Harry had listened to Hermione talk about magical history, in rather a more interesting fashion than he was supposed to learn it. Iron, Oak, Rowan, Holly – all defences against magical beings. He wondered if the beings they’d guarded still lay in the darkness outside, waiting to get in.

His train of thought was derailed by Draco, who nudged him in the shoulder. “Put on your smile, Harry, it’s time to cement any good impressions you’ve already made.”

“According to you, I couldn’t have made any,” Harry said, more cheerful than he might have been. “I’ve committed every faux pas in the book, and a few they haven’t invented yet.”

“Quite probably so,” Draco replied imperturbably. “So let’s hope your faux pas didn’t outweigh your impressive attributes.”

“What are those?”

Draco glanced quickly over, presumably to find out if Harry were a) flirting; b) fishing for compliments; or c) being oblivious. He concluded (c), which was statistically the best bet, and in this case, also correct.

“Harry,” he said, and his tone of voice almost made up for the fact that he was four inches away at least, “pure-bloods love magical power. You’ve got that in spades. You’re young, and everyone loves a young hero. And you have refused to take crap from anyone at any event this fall. They haven’t seen you explode, panic, faint, or apologize, but you stand up for your friends. Why do you think you’ve been invited to so many houses recently? Because people like you. I find that astonishing, but I’m willing to use it.”

“Gee, thanks, Draco.” Harry reached over to tug his hair, but remembered in time and pulled his hand back. “But liking isn’t the same as respect. Isn’t this event supposed to highlight the 10 most respected wizards in the UK?”

“The what?”

“Britain. Great Britain, I suppose I should call it. I thought you took Muggle Studies.”

“You took History of Magic. How much of that do you remember?”

“Ah, it’s in Hermione’s head. I can download it when I need it.”

As Draco sputtered, trying to choose between an insult concerning Harry’s intellect and a request for definition, Harry made a note to himself that, really, he needed to visit Muggle libraries and watch Muggle news more often. Even, maybe, conquer the internet. He loved being a step ahead of Coach Malfoy.

Draco, however, stopped sputtering as they came closer to the magnificent door. It was 20 feet above

their heads. There were no steps. The door, which looked like solid gold but was probably gold leaf over iron, seemed to sneer at them from its height advantage.

“Shit,” Harry began, and felt the dreaded Booted Foot on Instep.

“Shut it, Potter. Get your wand out.”

They stood there, side by side, wands raised toward the door. Harry felt powerful magic, less dark than the wards, surround them. He glanced down and noticed he was several feet off the ground. He kept his eyes up as they rose, after that.

“We need to make one of these for the house,” he whispered.

“If you can find how they did it the first time, we’ll do it again.”

“I’ll just ask Hermione,” Harry said, primarily to annoy his companion.

“You do that, Potter. Let’s find out if a Muggle-born will be struck dead by the tomes which have this sort of spell in it. Some say Merlin himself created the magic for this place.”

Harry followed Draco off the invisible platform, through an invisible barrier which kept the heat in, and into the most lavish room he’d ever seen. It looked rather like a room designed by a children’s designer who’d drunk too many potions and just decided that tacky was to be Trend of the Year.

Almost everything in the room was either gold or silver. Harry wished he’d worn sunglasses. The windows appeared to open on summer – roses blooming in arbours, wisteria trailing over thatched huts (which Harry thought made it pretty certain this was not an enchantment original to the mansion). Rainbows and butterflies and fairies all danced over the landscape, which consisted of occasional patches of deep green grass surrounded by flower beds, with a background of ancient oak trees lit by the sun. A brook meandered through the garden in three separate places. For some reason, the only thing

Harry could think of was Little Whinging's suburban lawns.

"Yes, Potter, I know," he heard Draco murmur. "The primary reason I want to be Minister is to change that scenery. It's marked every pure-blood who ever visited. I would win on that promise alone."

Harry snickered, then turned to assess the room.

Kingsley Shacklebolt came out of nowhere in particular and put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "I stand by my expectations," he said. "It's too late to argue now, Harry. Evening, Draco."

Draco actually looked amused. "I don't think he was going to argue this time, Minister," was all he said. "You might want to record this historical occasion."

"I shall do so." Shacklebolt took Harry aside. "You behave," he said firmly.

"Don't worry, Kingsley, Draco's here to keep me in line," Harry grinned.

"You must be getting along better?"

"What makes you think that?" He turned and accepted one of two gold goblets Draco apparently had just Summoned. "And what the fuck is this stuff?"

"Don't worry about the constant bubbling – it's quite cold, just a charm. Don't worry about the fog above it, either. It's called a Cauldron Cup. Since it's winter Solstice, the drink is—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, traditional. Okay, now you've told me what not to worry about, what is it really?"

“Whatever you want it to be.” Draco took a sip and smiled. “Mine’s an excellent Merlot.”

Harry didn’t mind red wine, so he took a sip. Then he glared reproachfully at Draco. His was pumpkin juice.

“Have to be at your best tonight, Potter,” his coach said smugly. “People who put poison into their bodies will have unpleasant consequences.”

“You’re drinking wine.”

“Yes, well, wine is good for me. It would be good for you, too, if you had any concept of how to drink it.”

“I can see that you two are getting along just fine,” Kingsley commented. “I’ll be off to do my presentation now.”

Harry discovered he was still fiddling with his wand. With his eyelids nearly closed, he checked for Draco under his lashes. Draco had found a couple of friends – Nemo and an elderly witch whose name Harry couldn’t quite remember, perhaps Hazel? – and wasn’t looking at him. He slid his wine into the goblet and muttered to it, “I prefer um… gin and tonic. Cold.” He replaced his wand and tested his drink. Lovely. And there was actually ice in it. He took a deep drink and felt much better about his chances.

“Ladies and gentlemen, wizards and witches, may I have your attention, please?” Kingsley’s mellifluous voice only sounded better yet when he cast Sonorus.

“Every year, we gather here at this time to commemorate the old year and welcome the new. Let us sing.”

Harry flinched. Draco hadn’t told him about the singing.

He turned and glared at Draco, who was happily singing counterpoint with the other wizards while witches sang the melody. Or possibly the other way around.

Draco edged closer and said, “I didn’t tell you about it because there was no point. You should keep silent. Training your voice to adequacy will take some time.”

Harry fumed, and took another gulp of his supposed pumpkin juice. Malfoy had never warned him that he’d have to learn to sing adequately. Harry knew what that meant. Lalalas and bumbumbums the rest of his life, no doubt.

The song was about holly and ivy and sounded vaguely familiar. The next was in a strange language – sort of English, kind of not – and did not sound in the least familiar.

“Is it about holly and ivy too?”

“No, Potter, it’s the story of the Fisher King and how he shed his blood for new life in the land. It’s a sacred song. Kind of the wrong time of year for it, but it’s traditional here.”

Harry held still and tried not to shuffle.

Possibly 20 minutes later, the song ended. Kingsley stood on the raised platform – which then, apparently with the same magic as outside, raised him another 10 feet – and intoned something in Latin. Harry, who knew spells in Latin and nothing else except the Hogwarts motto, braced himself for new magic doing… something to him.

But nothing happened, unless everyone in the room chanting back the same words counted as happening.

That seemed to be the end of the musical ceremonial section. Kingsley was lowered magically to the platform again. Everyone bowed to each other. Harry did as good a bow as Draco had managed to teach

him.

“We gather here to affirm each other in our magic. Wizarding blood, and wizarding power, are required to keep our islands safe from Darkness. Those who have great power must be respected for more than power. As we are reminded every year, fear is not a creative force.”

“Merlin’s pants, Kingsley,” Draco commented, mostly to himself, “You are really, really bringing new politics into the conversation.” He seemed impressed.

Draco’s earlier comments about his father and Fudge came back to him. Yes, Kingsley’s speech did seem to deviate from previous expectations. Good luck to him.

And they were finally approaching the reason Harry had come. “One last tradition before the dancing. Because even wizards require leaders we can trust, we call on the power of the House to identify the five most respected magical practitioners in our community.”

Kingsley had explained the method briefly, and Draco in more detail. Selection worked on principles similar to those for the Sorting Hat, but far more powerful. Magic went out to every single person in the British wizarding world, determining who each considered most worthy of respect. Since almost every wizard and witch was listening to the events, if they weren’t actually here, the question was at the top of their minds and fairly easy to gather. Then it sorted through the degrees of respect each person was held in, weighted that, and produced the 10 names everyone was waiting for.

“What if it’s someone in prison?”

“That could conceivably happen, Potter. Sometimes they even pick someone dead. If their major commitment is to someone no longer living, that will come through. If the Dark Lord had killed you as you fought him, you’d probably have made the list easily. Problem is, he didn’t – and dead heroes are much easier to respect than live annoyances.”

Remembering that, Harry reached for Draco’s hand, his own shaking a little. Draco eased further away. Harry sighed and shoved his hands in his robe sleeves. He’d seen that in a Muggle movie recently, and it

seemed a good way to keep them out of some tiresome pure-blood's hair, robes, or… places lower down.

The magic was building to a physical crescendo. It was clearly more showy than the Sorting Hat – but then, the Sorting Hat was mostly for children. Ribbons of dark green fire plaited themselves with dark red and yellow ones, and slowly began to turn, in an ever-expanding circle which finally pressed to the darkest corners of the room, on every side.

Then they broke off into smaller rings.

The first fell around Kingsley's neck, and turned into a garland of hellebore. 7

The room burst into applause which sounded spontaneous. Kingsley actually blushed. Harry thought that was a memory he'd put into his Pensieve and bring out every year on Kingsley's birthday.

The respect didn't always include the Minister, Draco had told him. The last two years before he was thrown out, Fudge didn't get the garland. That was a scandal in the community, all by itself.

The second circled Headmistress McGonagall. Harry hadn't even seen her there. He glanced at Draco, who grinned.

"If you're not here when you're chosen, the magic will bring you," he said. "Most people dress carefully, just in case. But usually the ones everyone knows are here. After all, opinions in the community usually come from people with prestige and power. You wouldn't have a chance if the People Who Matter, as they say, hadn't met you and approved of you. If they have."

Harry winced. If they have. Why would they?

His palms were sweating. He surreptitiously wiped them on the insides of his sleeves, so that Coach

Malfoy wouldn't catch him.

Malfoy had seen him do that anyway. He raised an eyebrow, and pursed his lips threateningly. Harry almost threw all caution to the winds in order to grab Draco and kiss him thoroughly. He resisted mostly because he knew what the consequences would be – not with pure-blood society, but with Draco. He turned his attention back to the remaining three rings.

The third had settled over a witch he'd met at the second ball he'd attended. She was a Smith, but not a close relative of Zachariah. A Hufflepuff, undoubtedly. Draco had identified her as the most successful hostess in the pure-blood world. It was odd what created respect among witches and wizards.

Draco had his "no comment" face on, and that told Harry he was nervous. Somehow, that made it easier to just stand and wait. After all, if he weren't selected, he'd just grab Draco and Apparate to another country. They could take a freighter from there to Morocco or something – somewhere without a wizarding extradition agreement. Kingsley would not be pleased, but –

The fourth circle landed on Augusta Longbottom. She was dressed in what looked rather like a dressing robe – bright purple, and possibly made of cotton flannel. She had kitty slippers on her feet, which started meowing. Neville's grandmother looked astonished and bewildered – as if something had just snatched her out of a quiet evening at home.

Draco snickered. "Hence, the value of making sure you're dressed well."

McGonagall's robes looked the same, day or night, Harry remembered. After all, there had been more than one time when he himself had been the cause of waking her in the night.

He'd had no idea Augusta Longbottom had that much respect in the Wizarding community. Perhaps her age and her legendary battles with the Death Eaters counted for something. He was glad.

He told himself that firmly, twice, looking around for the last fire garland.

He couldn't find it anywhere. Then, to his surprise, Draco snorted with laughter next to him. "Harry, it's over you."

He had expected the magical fires to be hot, and stared at them circling above him for an instant. Then Harry realized that everyone in the room had turned toward him and was applauding and cheering. He felt the hellebore garland fall into place around his neck, unexpectedly soft.

As he breathed deeply, trying to prepare for the next step, he looked at Draco and grinned, because the magical chains which had bound his companion were falling away. He could see them go, although other Aurors in the room would be able to see them too. He glanced over at Kingsley, who was smiling.

Then pure-bloods were coming up to him, and shaking his hand, and telling him they respected him more than anyone else in the world, and it had been such a pleasure to meet him and find him deserving of his fame. Harry thanked them all awkwardly, using the polite phrases Draco had painstakingly coached him with. Then he heard Kingsley's strong hand pounding on the podium.

"The dancing begins now," he said, "and, as is traditional, those honoured tonight are requested to begin it. Select a partner, and come forward."

Oh fuck. Yule ball all over again.

He thought sullenly that he wanted to dance with Draco. And Draco wasn't even dating someone else, the way Cho was. He also knew how to dance this time. But the one who made him like to dance wouldn't be there, reminding him of the steps, nagging him to look appropriate, snarking at his graceless, and acting as if he'd never been a nasty little boy who ran screaming through the forest after he'd seen someone drinking the blood of a dead unicorn.

He turned to Draco, feeling lost. He could probably have blown up this whole place, wards be damned, but he didn't want to dance with anyone else.

Something in his face caused Draco to move closer and nudge him toward the centre of the dance floor, where the others waited. “Ask McGonagall,” he whispered.

Harry brightened. That would be nearly as good. But even as he approached her, a rather dashing older wizard in dark purple robes with silver along the edge bowed, and she nodded graciously.

The music began. Harry stood alone among the dancers. They smiled at him as they circled around, a little puzzled – for the Chosen One could have asked anyone he wanted. Except the one he really did want.

He was beginning to slip to the side of the dance ring, hoping to sidle even farther away. Then, out of the blue, he felt a firm hand attach itself around his wrist.

“Merlin’s beard, Potter, I don’t know why I’m doing this. There goes all our respect, and I’ll certainly never become Minister this way, but… it’s your damn eyes. If puppies had big green eyes, you’d look just like one. And … well, you’re my puppy, and I’m responsible for that look. But you better not forget that I housebroke you.”

Harry allowed himself to be led by a babbling Malfoy to the center of the dance floor. He knew wizards did dance together sometimes, in circle dances and such. He waited for Coach Malfoy to tell him what steps to do.

But it seemed Coach Malfoy had retired for the evening. Draco remained in the middle, holding Harry’s wrist and staring into his face as if looking for something. They bowed to each other as the music began. Harry was going to lead for a change, he discovered.

But Draco didn’t follow his lead. After a few steps, he let go of Harry’s wrist and put his hand around Harry’s jaw.

He sighed elaborately. “I blame you, Potter,” he said grumpily. Then his other arm was around Harry’s back, and he was pulling Harry closer.

Harry didn't wait to see what his intentions were. He grabbed a handful of Draco's hair and pulled his face into kissing range. Neither could remember later if it was Draco or Harry who actually started the kissing, but it didn't much matter, since a moment later they were tangled together like the flower chains earlier. Harry's hellebore garland shifted a bit, and then it was wrapped around both of them.

Harry heard the crowd actually "oooh," at that, but he wasn't about to start kissing his dearly annoying git for silly things like finding out what that meant. Draco heard the sound, glanced down and saw how the garland had rearranged, gave a surprised smile, then returned his lips and tongue and hands to much better use.

"You are impossible, Potter," he muttered, when they came up for air. "What's more, you are improbable. I had best take you on just to make you less unlikely. We need to talk about spring robes…"

"Less babble, more kissing," Harry ordered. He was pleased to note that, as his new, privately published etiquette book would dictate, Draco obeyed.

THE END

1 Yes, I made a pun. Deliberately. Premeditatedly, in fact. [back]

2 Harry decided later that Ron was triggered by the forceful nature of Malfoy's reminders of basic pure-blood courtesy. He might not have yet internalized Hermione, but our mothers will always be with us -- usually nagging about table manners and cleaning charms. [back]

3 The Muggles among us may recognize much the same situation between Saturnalia, Christmas, and Hanukkah. First, the Christian hierarchy decided to make a holy day near Saturnalia to keep their flock from returning to their pagan traditions for fun; then many centuries later the Jewish rank and file started elevating a minor holiday of their own, to keep their children from converting to Christianity for the presents. Hence, lots of lights. Hence, Christmas trees. Hence, Hanukkah bushes. Hence, blue bulbs on the streetfront. [back]

4 In first year classes, of course they taught the children that they have to make the precise gestures and

the right words, carefully. Advanced magic included more theory. For the less powerful, gestures and words needed to be just right. For the more powerful wizards and witches, approximation should be enough, if said with passionate feeling – which is why unspoken spells are not taught until later at Hogwarts. Not everyone can actually do them. OTOH, had Draco yelled “Piss off” when he threw Harry out, instead of “Evictus,” he was so angry and aroused and therefore desperate to get the source of his feelings out of there that it probably would have worked the same. And been more fun to say. [back]

5The longterm holding rooms were the equivalent of Muggle gaols – a place to park prisoners while the formalities were completed and they could be sent to prison. Sometimes, that took months. Azkaban was not as bad since the Dementors left, but gaols still had the same things they had always been notable for – little oversight of prisoners in common areas, the contempt of the guards, who were not as trained in self discipline as Aurors are, and 24-hour random spells to check on any prisoner. The spells somehow always just managed to miss prisoners being beaten or harassed or raped. Still, occasionally such occurrences were leaked, if the damaged prisoner were able to get a message to friends or relatives who brought it to the attention of the Minister. He always made sure the perpetrators were caught, tried, and then spent weeks in the same prison as the ones they had persecuted. If they were lucky, they were then sent to Azkaban. [back]

6It may be worth mentioning here that Harry, years later when he could joke about the incident, noted that it had never occurred to him that prison garb was formal wear. At which point, his date usually put his hand over Harry’s mouth and whispered to him, “You’re drunk, Potter. Shut it.” [back]

7To see what helleborus niger (Christmas rose, so-called because it blooms in winter) looks like, try this site, or this, for a drawing. I envision the garlands being of the darker flowers, but there might be different flowers for each garland as well. Hellebore is, by the way, poisonous in every part, but only if one eats it. It’s more of a danger to livestock than humans, unless you have little children with a taste for poisonous flowers. [back]

General note: Anonymous’ delightful story Grand Prix inspired the conversation of one scene. Apologies that the inspiration for this story owes as much to Georgette Heyer and George Bernard Shaw as it does to JKR.