Title: Perfect Day

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Team: Canon

Prompt: Wheel of Fortune

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Warnings: None

Summary: One day can change everything.

Author's Note Fortune, like a coy mistress, loves to yield her favors, though she makes us wrest them from her.—Christian Nestell Bovee

Thank you to my betas.

BORGIN AND BURKES, 9:13 am

It was Borgin, not Burke, standing at the counter, and Draco cursed his luck.

"Young Master Malfoy. What brings you here today?" Borgin's smile held no respect and more than a hint of malice.

Draco straightened his back and fixed Borgin with the sort of look his father had worn back when Lucius Malfoy cowered for no one and this greasy, pathetic shopkeeper had fawned and groveled anytime a Malfoy entered the shop.

"I require your assistance with a necklace...a cursed necklace."

Borgin sneered. Actually sneered. "You bought the last one. I'm sorry, but I'm afraid we're clean out."

"No, not...not that one." Draco's eyes darted to the case that had once held the opal necklace and the small card advertising the fates of its nineteen Muggle owners. It now held a skull and a wineglass that appeared to be bloodstained. "My mother's. Someone's cursed it, perhaps cursed some more of her things as well."

"How unfortunate," said Borgin, looking as if he found it anything but.

"I don't know how to lift the curse on the necklace. And I need to identify anything else around the manor that might also be cursed."

Draco waited impatiently, but Borgin seemed to have no intention of responding. "I was hoping you could help me," Draco continued in irritation.

"Were you? Hoping a stupid little man like me could help you with a problem like that?" Borgin's eyes were wide and mocking. "I'm sorry, Mr. Malfoy. I certainly would if I could, but that sounds beyond my capabilities."

Draco stared at him.

"If cursed jewelry is your problem, you could always try Gringotts. They retain a curse-breaker on staff who specializes in cursed treasure. He's a Weasley, mind you, and not much to look at these days." Borgin fixed him with a knowing gaze. "But he's good at what he does."

"I'm not interested in going to Gringotts," said Draco, wrenching his gaze from the cabinet in the corner.

"No? Well perhaps someone else could help you out. A family friend? Who was it you mentioned last time you were here?"

Rage, frustration, and a sick, infuriating fear roiled in Draco's gut. "I can't recall," he said tightly.

"I'm sure you'll remember soon enough. You can hardly go anywhere in Diagon or Knockturn Alley these days without seeing his face on a wanted poster." Borgin paused, musing. "Still, you might be right. Family friends might not be very helpful. Considering it must have been one of your father's...associates who placed these curses in the first place?"

"Don't talk about my father," Draco snapped, moving quickly toward the door. "I'm going to tell him what you've said. He won't want to set foot in this dirty little shop again."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Malfoy. I'll be sure to apologize to him in person. Just as soon as he gets out of Azkaban."

The bell jingled loudly as Draco wrenched the door open and slammed it behind him. His robes flapped at his ankles as he strode past old, familiar shops, past the shrunken heads and giant spiders that had fascinated him as a child and the Apothecary father had always curled his lip at and advised Draco to avoid.

The Apothecary father had patronized was now boarded up, and pasted across the grimy windows were wanted posters. Flinching away from Fenrir Greyback's leering mouth and dirty yellow teeth, Draco quickened his pace.

OLLIVANDER'S, 9:27 am

When he reached the small shop, he paused at the door, hesitating for a long moment before jerking it open. He felt only a slight relief at the absence of other customers as he and Ollivander stared at each other. The last time they'd been in a room together had been five months ago in the cellar of Malfoy Manor.

Ollivander looked less emaciated, and his voice sounded less feeble when he finally spoke. "Hawthorn and unicorn hair. Ten inches. Reasonably springy."

"That's right," said Draco slowly, withdrawing his wand from his pocket. "I have a new one, now. Owl order, from Girard's. Same specifications. It doesn't work well."

Ollivander stared at him for a moment before resuming his interrupted task of restocking wands. "You are fortunate Harry Potter spoke up for you and your mother."

Draco sneered. "Yes, I can hardly sleep at night for thinking of him. It. My gratitude."

Ollivander raised a bushy eyebrow. "I'll be sure to tell him that the next time he calls in."

Draco glared back even as he felt his cheeks flushing. Infuriating old man. He and Borgin were a pair. He'd teach them both a lesson once he had his feet back under him.

Ollivander glanced at the wand in Draco's hand. "An owl-order wand never works well. It's the wand that chooses the wizard; delivery by owl is an insult.

"That's why I need a new wand. My mother too."

"Your family hasn't had the best luck with wands, has it? Harry Potter took yours. Your father's was broken in the Dark Lord's hand. What happened to your mother's?"

"It burnt up," Draco said tightly.

"Why isn't she here with you?"

"She said it would be pointless to come here."

"She was right. But as long as you're here. Tell me, Mr. Malfoy. How does it feel to be the former master of the Elder Wand but to never have even touched it?"

Draco jerked, badly startled, as the bell on the door jingled and a wide-eyed first year entered the shop. The child's parents, obviously Muggle, looked at him nervously. Sneering at them all, Draco stalked from the shop.

And collided solidly with someone just a few feet out from the door.

He had the absolutely worst bloody luck in the world.

"Sorry," said Potter, before realizing just who had barreled into him, his conscientious expression melting away into a puzzled frown. Ginevra Weasley stood beside him.

He and Potter stared at each other for a moment, and Draco stood tall, reminding himself that he had a solid inch on Potter. An inch and a half, more likely.

"Potter."

"Malfoy."

Potter still wore that puzzled frown, and this was far more socialization than was called for. Draco turned sharply and, without another word, walked away, past the second-hand robes shop, and Gamble and Japes, and many other shops that Harry Potter was not loitering in front of.

He didn't even know where he was walking to. He'd have Apparated home, but with his luck, he'd probably have Splinched himself. Right under Potter's nose.

He'd be happy to never see that scarred, smug, superior git again as long as he lived. Too much to ask for, of course, but one would think that one day, just one day...

Draco stopped, stunned by the beauty and perfection of the idea that had just taken root in his mind.

He had one more stop to make.

APOTHECARY, 9:49 am

Father had always said this Apothecary was to be avoided at all costs, with a degree of disgust and finality that had not invited questioning.

Now, standing outside the door, Draco wondered what exactly his father had objected to. Perhaps the Apothecary's political leanings were objectionable. Perhaps Father had been treated rudely here once. Or perhaps the quality of the potions sold here was indeed as poor as Father had always implied. He hoped it wasn't that last, because the other Apothecary, the one on Diagon Alley, was not an option. Aside from being across the way from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes...Draco grimaced...everyone knew the Diagon Alley Apothecary was good for little but Hogwarts supplies.

No, this was his only option.

He opened the door slowly and stepped inside. Neither the Apothecary nor the customer with whom he was speaking noticed Draco's entrance.

"I know what I said before," said the Apothecary, "but circumstances have changed. I can't help you."

The customer looked truly desperate, even more so than one would expect for a wizard wearing robes that ought to have been replaced at least three years previously. "You know I can't go anywhere else. I'm not registered."

The Apothecary hesitated, obviously torn. Pushover.

"Please," said the customer. "There's less than a week left now."

The Apothecary nodded grudgingly. "All right. All right, I'll see what I can do. No promises. Come back in..." At that moment, the Apothecary glanced over, saw Draco, and jerked in surprise. The customer swiveled around to stare at Draco as well. "Just don't come back today," said the Apothecary tightly. The customer nodded and left the shop, casting a final, suspicious glance at Draco.

Draco stepped up to the counter. The Apothecary looked alarmed, defensive, and, in short, as if he'd happily sell Draco just about any substance in just about any amount if it would only get him out of the shop. Perfect.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, you can," said Draco. "You can sell me a potion."

MALFOY MANOR, 10:08 am

He held the small bottle in his hands, inspecting the contents, trying to compare it with memories from his sixth year. It was golden, but paler than he'd remembered it. The Apothecary might have diluted it. He wouldn't put it past him. Draco grimaced. Perhaps he should have tried the Diagon Alley Apothecary after all...

It would be all right, though. He'd purchased far more than one tablespoon. If he needed to take a bit more, then he would. There would still be more than enough to save for another day, to share with Mother, if the need arose.

"Draco, where were you?"

He hid the bottle in the folds of his robes as he faced his mother. Her skin was still mottled and blotchy, but she looked much better, aside from the frown lines marring her expression.

"Diagon Alley. I had some shopping to do."

Her frown deepened. "I thought we agreed you would wait until I was well enough to accompany you."

"I'm not a child, mother." His voice was tight, but he strove to keep his expression pleasant. She still wasn't well. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm much improved. If you had waited another day or two..."

"Mother, I'm fine. It was fine. In fact, I'm going back today. I was just calling in to check up on you." He stared at her, silently daring her to object.

She stared back, assessing him, then sighed. "Are you meeting your friends? You haven't seen Gregory or Miss Parkinson since the funeral."

Greg had stood near him through the whole service but hadn't said one word to him. He'd looked lost.

Pansy had clutched at his arm so tightly her fingernails had dug into his skin.

"No."

"It's more important than ever that we socialize right now, Draco. You can't keep isolating yourself like this. It's counterproductive." Her expression softened. "Besides. It's not good for you. Have you even answered their owls?"

No, he hadn't. "You've been writing to Father every day. The owl hasn't been free."

"Your father would like to hear from you as well."

"I'll buy a new owl today. One of my own."

She was silent for a moment before neatly changing the subject. "You should spend some time with the Greengrass girl today."

Draco blinked at her in confusion. "Daphne?" He barely knew her.

"No, of course not. She's engaged. Her younger sister. I heard from her mother this morning. Astoria will be shopping for Hogwarts supplies."

Astoria. He knew her even less, but he remembered her. She was a pretty girl, two years below him at school. A bit boring, but she'd always laughed at his jokes. He could use someone to laugh at his jokes.

"Their family has done very well in the aftermath of the war. They've secured invitations to the celebration at Hogwarts this evening."

Draco knew that Mother had been attempting to do the same for herself and Draco before the accident

last week. Mother was looking at him expectantly.

"I'll keep an eye out for her."

Once in his room, he withdrew the small bottle from his robes, tilted it, watched the golden potion slosh against the side. He wondered what it would taste like. Potter would know. Draco grimaced, still remembering so clearly the fury, confusion, and disappointment when Slughorn had handed Potter that small bottle, so similar to this one. What had Potter got on his perfect day? The Snitch? The front page of the Prophet? The entirety of the wizarding world falling down at his feet in worship? But then that was an average day for Potter, wasn't it?

But who cared about Potter anyway? Today was going to be Draco's day. Potter had no place in it.

He held the bottle to his lips.

One tablespoon. One perfect day. He was ready.

He paused after swallowing, fascinated at the sensation of warmth sweeping through his body. With the warmth came relaxation—muscles he hadn't known he had tensed felt comfortably loose, and the painful pressure in his temple eased and disappeared along with his worries.

He smiled. Everything was going to be fine.

He'd intended to leave immediately, get his own back with Borgin and Ollivander—after they took care of his cursed objects and provided him with a new wand, of course—and then perhaps find that Greengrass girl and see how far his luck would get him there.

But it seemed obvious now that what he really needed was a bottomless bag. He'd seen a spell for it in one of his books and deemed it too difficult to be worth the trouble. But now a bottomless bag seemed just the thing and the spell to produce one laughably simple. Glancing over the books on his

desk—Mastery of the Elements, Curses Moste Foule, Powerful Protections and Other Spells for Safety—his eye was quickly drawn to just the one he wanted: Ridiculously Difficult Spells For Ridiculously Clever Witches And Wizards.

A moment later, he'd performed the spell successfully. With his substandard wand. Nonverbally, even. His Nimbus fitted in the bag with no difficulty.

Caught on the side of the bag was an old badge from his school trunk. It had been weakly flickering for months now, but a tap from his wand, and it once again read "Potter Stinks." Draco laughed.

Now that he had his bag, he realized there was another spell he ought to cast: a modification of the four-point spell which would point his wand towards nearby cursed objects rather than north. His failed attempts to cast it had prompted his trip to Diagon Alley today.

As the wand swiveled in his palm, pointing towards his mother's bedroom, his jubilance at the spell's success faded quickly. Even the potion couldn't prevent him from remembering his mother's agonized screams, the bloody rash that had covered her body when he'd found her, the way her eyes had rolled back into her head. But those memories couldn't dampen his spirits too much—his mother's room was going to be safe for her again. Immediately. She could sleep in there tonight, if she wanted to.

Levitation spells had never come easily for him, but they gave him no trouble today. The necklace went into the bag first—it had been a gift from Father, very expensive, and Mother had only worn it when she was truly dressing to impress. She hadn't worn it anytime in the last year, and he wondered which of the Death Eaters flooding and polluting his home had cursed the necklace and when they had done it.

Draco had suspected other items in the manor were cursed, and now he was sure of it. Three other pieces of jewelry, all extremely valuable, all worn frequently in better days when attracting attention had been desirable and not dangerous, went into the bag as well. The same with a music box from her bureau, two of Father's books and one of his peacock feather quills from the study, a large, framed family tree, and, disturbingly, also a portrait of Draco at age seven.

He made his oddest discovery when the wand pointed him towards a peacock on the grounds of the manor. It walked stiffly, and all the other peacocks appeared to be avoiding it. Draco watched it for a

moment, unwilling to put it in his bag, equally unwilling to leave it on the grounds on the off-chance that his mother should ever take it into her head to touch the thing, but nevertheless not wanting to kill it... Upon further reflection, however, it became clear to him that it was the tail feathers on the bird that provided the real threat. He Summoned them all and laughed at the bird's bald arse as the feathers sailed into his bag.

Bag held tightly in one triumphant fist, he Apparated to Diagon Alley.

MADAM MALKIN'S, 11:04 am

Draco stood comfortably for a moment at the junction of Diagon and Knockturn Alleys, enjoying the sense of ease he was now able to feel. He glanced down Knockturn Alley towards Borgin and Burkes and across the street at Gringotts. Either would suffice, but now that he had the cursed items stowed safely in his bag, he found he was in no rush to deal with them. They could wait. No, what Draco really needed, he decided, was a new set of dress robes.

The shop was crowded, and as at the Apothecary earlier, no one noticed when he entered.

At one end, a harried-looking assistant was taking orders for robes from three Hogwarts students at once. At the other, Madam Malkin was finalizing fittings for two different wizards. One of them was Zacharias Smith. The other was Harry Potter.

It should have upset him to see Potter standing there, in the middle of Draco's day where he surely didn't belong. But for some reason it didn't.

Potter wasn't a threat, couldn't ruin anything today, and this was the right place for Draco to be, he felt certain.

Besides, Draco realized with amusement, this promised to be entertaining. Ginevra Weasley was here too, supervising the fitting of her heroic boyfriend, and apparently not all was well in the land of freckles and moral superiority.

"Really, Harry, if you'd just come with me two weeks ago as I asked, we wouldn't be having to buy these at the last minute."

Draco watched gleefully as Potter attempted to suppress, with poor success, his obvious irritation.

"I told you I was busy. And besides, it worked out, didn't it?"

Of course. Leave it to Potter to rely on his celebrity to provide him with last-minute dress robes.

"You can't always count on things to just work out. Besides, I don't think they worked out that well at all. These are Slytherin colors. And they're going to clash terribly with my robes."

Malkin looked up briefly from the hem of Smith's dress robes. "The green will go perfectly with your eyes, dear."

Potter ignored the bit about the matching robes as well as the bit about his eyes. "I wish people would stop acting like the entire house of Slytherin is evil. It's not."

What?

"Excuse me, dear," said Malkin to Weasley. "If I could just squeeze in here? It's a bit crowded."

Weasley took a couple steps back, glanced towards the door, and saw Draco. Her eyes narrowed.

She closed the distance between them quickly. "What are you doing here?"

"I want to buy robes. Obviously."

"They're only doing robes for the Hogwarts celebration today." She sounded positively indignant.

"Perhaps they'll make an exception," Draco said.

"Listen to me," said Weasley, her eyes flashing. "You leave Harry alone."

Potter didn't even seem to have noticed that his girlfriend was now across the room, mere feet away from his childhood nemesis...or one of them, anyway...and clearly so angry that she was on the verge of some violent and unladylike act.

In fact, Potter seemed preoccupied with hostilities of his own. He was glowering in the direction of Zacharias Smith. Smith looked uncomfortable but otherwise appeared to be doing quite a decent job of pretending Potter didn't exist. Those two never had got along.

Then again, perhaps Potter was just resentful that Smith's robes were nicer than his. Even the Boy Who Lived couldn't expect miracles all the time, and his robes were about as plain as one would expect for a last-minute order. Went all right with his eyes and accentuated the breadth of his shoulders, certainly, but otherwise singularly unimpressive. Smith, on the other hand, obviously possessed better taste, as well as the intelligence to place his order further ahead of time, and his robes were very nice. Draco approved.

As...actually, apparently did Potter. His glower became less pronounced as his gaze drifted lower, over Smith's shoulders and down to his... Draco paused, as a thought struck him, and he scrutinized Potter's face.

Oh, god, this was just too good.

Perfect Potter, staring at another bloke's arse, in front of his girlfriend, and he didn't even realize he was

doing it. Beautiful.

Really, it was mind-boggling that anyone, even Potter, could have so little self-awareness, such an absence of propriety, that he'd advertise inclinations like that. How long had he been staring at Smith now? Pathetic.

"What are you staring at, Malfoy?"

Draco turned back to Weasley.

"What's Potter staring at. That's the real question, isn't it?"

She flushed, and it was obvious she'd seen exactly what he'd seen, even if she didn't want to admit it. He smirked at the thought that the Potter-Weasley relationship might be numbered in hours rather than days or months.

"You're delusional, Malfoy."

"Am I?"

"You've always been obsessed with him, haven't you?" said Weasley. "It wouldn't surprise me if you did think about him all night long."

His smile faded. "What?"

"Ollivander told us what you said. About losing sleep over Harry. We all had a good laugh over it."

Draco felt anger and embarrassment warring with the loose, easy sense of confidence brought by the potion. The potion won out.

"Oh, no, Ollivander was mistaken. It's you I think of, all night long. The lovely Ginevra Weasley and her Bat Bogey Hex. There's nothing more attractive in a girl than the ability to summon snot, in winged rodent form, from the nostrils of everyone in her general vicinity."

Her lip curled. "You can say what you like about us. No one cares what you say. Especially Harry. He doesn't spare a thought for you."

"No, of course not," said Draco lightly. "He thinks about you, doesn't he? All the time."

She now had bright red, unpleasant blotches on both her cheeks.

"Like now for instance," continued Draco. "Obviously. Thinking about you." He gestured at Potter who had at least given up staring at Smith's arse and was now brooding in the direction of the wall.

Weasley appeared even angrier. Draco didn't know why. Brooding was obviously what Potter was best at. He did it all the time when she was pining for him at Hogwarts, so why should she should have a problem with it now?

"Harry," she said. "I'm going to visit George."

Potter, hilariously, didn't hear her, and the blotches on Weasley's cheeks darkened further. "Harry!"

"What?" said Potter, still pathetically ignorant of the shambles his love life was in. "Sorry, did you say something?"

"I said I'm going to visit George. Unless you'd rather I wait?"

"No, go ahead. I'll meet you later."

Her lips were tight. "Fine."

She slammed the door on her way out, but Potter didn't seem to notice that either, as he'd finally registered Draco's presence and was staring at him with an odd expression on his face.

The slammed door got Malkin's attention, though, and she finally noticed Draco as well.

"Mr. Malfoy," she said, glancing nervously between him and Potter. "I'm surprised to see you here. Wouldn't you rather be at Twilfitt and Tattings?"

"Never," said Draco solemnly.

"Well, I'm sorry," she said, as she adjusted the sleeve of Smith's robe, "but I can't possibly fit anyone else in. It's as much as I can do to complete fittings for this evening."

"Ouch," shouted Smith, whom she'd stuck with a pin in her distracted attempts to keep tabs on both Potter and Draco as she worked.

"You're such a pansy, Zacharias," said Potter in disgust.

"You know what?" said Smith. "I don't need to put up with this. I've got better robes at home." He pulled the robes over his head, threw them at Potter's feet, and stomped from the shop.

"Fantastic," said Draco. "I'll take those."

It was a bit strange, standing next to Potter again. It had been seven years, almost exactly, and, now that he thought about it, it had been about seven years since he'd had any decent luck. He wondered if he might possibly have broken a mirror that day and forgotten all about it.

Potter kept staring at him. Draco didn't know if the odd looks had been prompted by Ollivander's spiteful, misleading remark, or if Potter's attention was just unnaturally drawn to silver embroidery on blue robes. It would have been downright disconcerting, on a different day. Not today, though. Draco laughed, and Potter furrowed his brow at him. Draco raised an eyebrow back.

"Fitting, you getting his robes," Potter finally said.

"I agree, they look brilliant on me."

Potter shook his head in irritation. "I meant he was the one DA member who didn't stay and fight. He ran out before the first years."

"I didn't run out at all, actually," Draco pointed out. "I stayed. Remember?"

Potter gave a small huff of disbelieving laughter and rolled his eyes. "Yes, you were an enormous help."

"Well, you were heroic enough for the both of us, so it all worked out, didn't it?" said Draco easily.

Potter blinked.

"So," said Draco. "Why so angry at him and not me?"

Potter frowned. "As I said, he was a member of the DA. He let us down. I didn't expect anything better from you."

That hurt a bit, even through the potion. Which it bloody well shouldn't have. Draco wondered if the Apothecary had watered it down. If he ought to take a bit more.

"You're not seriously going to try and attend tonight, are you?" asked Potter.

"I don't have any plans of that sort, no."

Potter stared at the wall a bit more, in an obvious attempt to ignore him, before Potter's curiosity finally got the better of him.

"Then what do you need the robes for?"

"Well," said Malkin to Draco, before he could answer. "There's your robes done." She obviously couldn't see the back of him soon enough.

Potter was still staring after him as he left the shop.

QUALITY QUIDDITCH SUPPLIES, 11:48 am

Gringotts and Borgin and Burkes were both to his right, but Draco had a very strong inclination to turn left instead. To his left was Flourish and Blotts, a large herd of what appeared to be third years, and...the Greengrass girl. She didn't see him. She was speaking animatedly with another girl Draco recognized as a Slytherin from her year. They entered Flourish and Blotts, a package-laden house-elf trailing behind them.

He could follow her inside. He could feign surprise at encountering her as she purchased her textbooks, say something incredibly witty that would make both her and her friend giggle, and then treat them both to ice cream at the newly reopened parlor across the street. He could bring up Quidditch, ask her if she liked flying, casually mention that he had his broom with him and ask her if she'd ever flown tandem.

He could do that. But he wasn't going to—not right now.

As he walked past Flourish and Blotts and the stationery store beside it, he realized this was the very same path he'd taken when he'd left Malkin's seven years ago. Potter had gone off with that overgrown oaf of a groundskeeper, and he and Father had gone to...Quality Quidditch.

He reached the door but stopped. Now that he was here, he felt no inclination to actually go inside. He stood to the side, observing, as several customers entered and left the shop.

The window display had attracted an admiring crowd of young boys, as it always did when Diagon Alley was overrun with Hogwarts students, and the broom of the season appeared to be the new Nimbus. That broom had been anticipated for years, and the series number had been the subject of much debate in the Slytherin common room since second year. He wondered numbly what Crabbe would have thought to learn he had been right after all. It was indeed the Nimbus 3000 that had been released next, not the 2500 that Draco had predicted or the 2002 that had been stubbornly favored by Goyle.

He felt a twinge of unhappiness, stronger than before, and was filled with renewed suspicion about the quality of his potion. This still felt like the right place to be, but he failed to see how standing around and dredging up pointless, unpleasant memories fit anywhere in a perfect day. He'd reached into his pocket, had grasped the small bottle, when another person walked past him, into the shop. He immediately felt a strong urge to enter the shop as well.

The wizard he'd followed stepped up to the counter, and Draco stood behind him as he purchased a Quaffle and a broom polishing kit.

"How may I help you?" the shopkeeper asked Draco once the other customer had left with his purchase.

He looked hopeful, and Draco wondered if he possibly remembered Father's purchase of seven Nimbus 2001s in Draco's second year.

"I'd like to purchase...a Snitch," Draco decided.

The shopkeeper's shoulders sagged slightly, but he gave no other indication of disappointment. "Any particular type? We have a new one in charmed to detect cheating of any sort. It glows when..."

"No," Draco interrupted. "That won't be necessary. Just a regular one."

As soon as Draco had paid for his Snitch, it began to shine with a bright, golden light. He frowned at it. He still felt certain it was the right purchase to have made, but...

"I thought I said I didn't want this one."

The shopkeeper's eyes widened with surprise.

"Oh! My goodness! No, that Snitch would have glowed red, and besides, you're hardly cheating, are you?" At that, he glanced down at the money still held in his hand, before shaking his head and smiling back up at Draco. "No, this is a different spell entirely." He then cleared his throat before speaking again in a much louder voice. "Congratulations to the customer who has just purchased the 3,000th item sold in our store since the end of the war! I'm happy to announce," he said, looking back at Draco, "that you've just won a new Nimbus 3000!"

The boys outside the window began to shout in excitement as the shopkeeper withdrew the broom from the display and offered it to Draco. Draco looked at the broom but felt no inclination to take it. The shopkeeper frowned in puzzlement, and the small crowd that had gathered around Draco looked on curiously.

"Thank you," said Draco, "but I think I'd much rather have that one." He pointed to a different broom,

hanging on the wall near the corner.

"Oh!" said the shopkeeper, clearly flabbergasted. "Well." He paused. "Well, that would be just fine," he finally said, warming to the idea, perhaps at the thought of the Galleons he would be saving. "That is a very fine broom also. Cleansweep, newest model. Official broom of the Holyhead Harpies."

Someone behind him sniggered, but Draco didn't care. It was exactly the right broom.

Draco placed both Snitch and broom in his bag, causing even more surprise and interest among the onlookers. As he turned to leave the shop, he saw Potter standing in the doorway, blinking in confusion at the crowd gathered around Draco.

"Excuse me, Potter," said Draco as he stepped neatly around him and through the door.

OWL EMPORIUM, 12:22 pm

Across the street was Eeylops Owl Emporium. He'd told Mother he would buy a new owl, and something told him now was the perfect time to do it.

It had been seven years since he'd been in this shop last. Draco glanced at the many caged owls before turning to the balding wizard at the counter.

"How may I help you?" the man asked.

"I need an owl. One with a large wingspan, so it can travel long distances and carry heavier parcels when necessary."

Father had always said that an owl was worthless otherwise.

"We have several that would fit that description. Would you like to take a look, choose your favorite?"

Draco frowned. "It's an owl, not a pet."

"All right, then," said the shopkeeper, raising an eyebrow but not commenting further. "Just one moment."

He returned a moment later with a large, white owl. "How's this one?"

"A snowy owl?"

"Is that a problem? You could take a tawny or a barn owl, but the wingspan would be at least a third smaller."

Draco looked at the owl.

He remembered coming here, aged eleven, to purchase his first owl. He'd liked the look of the snowy owls, pointed to one and told Father he wanted it. Father had insisted on purchasing the eagle owl he'd already arranged for. Once Draco had got to Hogwarts and seen Potter's owl, he'd been glad, and he'd scoffed at every white owl he'd seen since.

But there was no question in his mind that this was the right owl to purchase.

"No," said Draco. "No problem. I'll buy this one."

The owl hooted in an almost friendly manner, and Draco blinked in surprise. His eagle owl had always

been rather solemn and taciturn.

"Hello, can I help you?" said the shopkeeper, looking over Draco's shoulder.

Draco turned to see Potter, lurking in the doorway. He looked extremely displeased to be there.

"Malfoy, I need to talk to you."

Potter's presence was odd, his request was odd, and yet somehow neither felt at all surprising. "In a minute, Potter. I'm buying an owl."

Potter glanced uneasily in the direction of the cages, then turned away. "I'll be waiting outside."

He didn't even want to come into the shop. That was interesting.

"What do you want, Potter?" asked Draco when he emerged from the shop a few moments later.

"I...er..." said Potter, in a fit of eloquence, before trailing off and staring at the cage in Draco's hand. A look of indignation, almost outrage, crossed his face. "What is this, some kind of joke?"

Draco had half expected Potter to mock him in some way over his choice of owl. But to react like this, as if Draco had no right to purchase even the same breed of owl as Potter's? Even through the soothing confidence brought by the potion, Draco felt himself bristling.

"I'm sorry, am I not heroic enough for this owl? Is this the official owl of the side of light? How embarrassing. Here I was picking one for its wingspan, when I should have been asking for an evil owl. Do you think they carry those here, or would I have to order one specially?"

Potter flushed.

"Don't be stupid, Malfoy. That's not what I meant. But if you need an owl that's so bloody big, why aren't you buying another eagle owl anyway?"

Again, Draco felt anger rippling underneath the cloak of his unnatural confidence, but it was muted and settled quickly. As it did, he noticed another, stranger feeling—somewhere inside he felt a bit gratified that Potter remembered his owl. Ignoring both feelings, he raised an eyebrow at Potter. "Eagle owls you do have to order specially."

"What happened to the one you've already got?"

He could hardly understand why he would be willing to discuss this with Potter, and yet the compulsion to stay, to participate in this ridiculous conversation until its purpose was revealed, was strong. "I don't know. I haven't seen him—it—since the battle of Hogwarts."

Potter looked surprised and then sorry. It was an odd look on him.

"We found a lot of dead owls after the battle. The Death Eaters were shooting them down."

Draco sneered. "Yes, thank you, Potter, I'm aware of that."

"Maybe yours got away."

"Yes, maybe my owl escaped Hogwarts, flew to France and is living a life of luxury at Beauxbatons. Or maybe it's dead." Potter's flinch was small but noticeable. "Did you have something you actually wanted to discuss? I have better things to do than stand here chatting with you." Draco was lying, of course. The pull of the potion made it clear that standing here talking to Potter was exactly what he needed to be

doing.

"What made you decide to buy a new one now?"

"You came across the street to find out why I'm buying an owl?"

"No, I just...never mind." But Potter's gaze drifted downwards and he stared at Draco's owl again, as if he didn't want to but couldn't help himself.

And suddenly it made sense, why Potter hadn't wanted to come in, why he'd offered his ridiculous reassurances about the fate of Draco's eagle owl, why he kept staring at Draco's snowy owl now. Potter's owl had died during the war, and he hadn't replaced it. He'd been mourning it all this time. As if an owl was worth mourning. As if mourning served a purpose. And how was the git even answering his fan mail?

"Well, it would be rather stupid of me, wouldn't it?" said Draco. "To cloister myself in mourning for my owl, never buy another? I might want to send someone a letter."

Potter's expression darkened. "I said never mind."

"Right then," said Draco. "Talk to you later. Or better yet, not." Draco turned and took a couple of steps away from Potter.

"Wait! Malfoy, I need your broom!"

Draco turned back, aware that amusement was written all over his face.

Potter flushed.

"For my girlfriend. I need your broom for my girlfriend."

"Yours not doing it for her?"

Potter flushed further. "You are such a git. She wants a Cleansweep and you got the last one. I need it for her birthday."

"When's her birthday?"

"Last week."

Oh, that relationship was even more hopeless than Draco had realized. Potter really ought to save himself the Galleons. Although...

"All right, I'll give you the broom."

Potter looked flabbergasted. "You will? Give it to me?"

"Absolutely. If you give me back my wand."

"Oh." Potter had obviously forgotten about Draco's wand entirely. What an enormous prat. "Right, you were at Ollivander's today." Potter paused, not looking at Draco, then cleared his throat. "Well, all right. I don't have it with me, though." Potter glanced around. "Where's the Cleansweep?"

Draco patted his bag. "Right here."

Potter looked momentarily impressed before his eye caught the "Potter Stinks" badge, and then he looked torn between irritation and amusement. "You have got to be joking. Grow up, Malfoy."

Draco smiled. "Some fashions never go out of style."

"Right," said Potter. "Look, I'll go and get it now. Meet you at Flourish and Blotts in a few minutes."

Then he Disapparated, without even bothering to wait for Draco's response. Git.

FLOURISH AND BLOTTS, 12:49

As he approached Flourish and Blotts, he saw Astoria Greengrass and her friend both leaving, the house-elf behind them even more weighted down with packages than before. They headed across the street to the ice cream parlor. For some reason, Draco felt no inclination to join them. That was all right, though. He could catch them a bit later.

In the window next to the door was another wanted poster for Fenrir Greyback. He found he was now more than up to the task of meeting the malignant gaze of the werewolf in the photograph, but he still shivered slightly at the sight of Greyback's teeth.

Potter didn't appear to be in the shop yet, so Draco thought he might browse around. More particularly, he felt inclined to browse in the relationship section—one part of the shop he'd never before visited in his life. It was empty aside from the Weasley girl and Granger, who was selecting a book from the shelves and adding it to the stack of textbooks held in Weasley's arms.

"Thanks, Hermione, really," said Weasley. "But you know, I don't think I..." She paused, handed the book back to Granger, then stared at the bookshelves, frowning in what was apparently a painful attempt at thought. Being a Gryffindor, she likely didn't engage in it any more often than her soon-to-be-ex-boyfriend. "Do you know, he doesn't really know anything about me? Aside from the fact that I have red hair and like Quidditch? It's like he wants to be in a relationship without actually being in a relationship. I don't think I'd admitted it to myself until today, but...sometimes I think he forgets I exist. I thought he just needed more time, but..." and then she looked up at Granger, an almost defiant

expression on her face. "I've given him a lot of time. And honestly, I'm getting tired of waiting. I'm starting to think... I just don't think any of these books would help."

"Well, a book on what to do when your boyfriend turns out to be a flaming poofter might not go amiss," said Draco.

Both of the girls spun around, matching looks of outrage on their faces.

"What are you doing here, Malfoy?" asked Granger. "Looking for a book on how to overcome a childhood of indoctrination in racism and bigotry? How to interact normally with other human beings? How to grow a backbone?"

She then trailed off as her eyes lit on the owl in the cage he was holding. Her gaze became as indignant as Potter's had been.

Draco rolled his eyes. "It's not actually Potter's owl. You do realize that, don't you?"

"Come on, Hermione," said Weasley. "I need to pay for my books."

They both stalked from the aisle. He followed them. But he didn't make a crack about Weasley's ability to afford her books—for some reason, it didn't seem necessary.

As they approached the counter, Potter walked into the shop. He was carrying a cage, and inside it was a tawny owl. Weasley stared at him, then turned furiously back to Draco. "What, did you two go...shopping for owls together?"

Draco laughed.

Hermione shook her head. "Why would you think that, Ginny? Harry needed a new owl; it's just a

coincidence that Malfoy has one too. Why would Harry want to do anything with Malfoy?"

Potter approached them, flicked a self-conscious, defensive sort of gaze at Draco, as if he were daring him to say one word about the owl, then turned to Granger and Weasley. "I need to talk to Malfoy."

Granger's mouth fell open, and Weasley's pinched in on itself. "I'm going to buy my books," Weasley said, voice tight.

"Do you want me to pay for them?" asked Potter.

"No. I can take care of myself, thanks." She walked to the till. Granger, after casting Potter a complicated look that seemed an odd blend of concern, confusion, and reproach, followed her.

Potter turned back to Draco, shoulders hunched slightly, as if he were about to engage in something sordid and didn't want anyone else to see him doing it. What a prat.

"Your owl's wingspan is a third smaller than my owl's," Draco told him.

Potter blinked.

Draco held out his hand. "Do you have the wand?"

"Er. Right." Potter fished it out from the pocket of his robes and handed it to him.

Draco held the wand, ran his fingers over the smooth surface of the wood. Somehow this wand felt completely different, familiar in some way that his replacement wand wasn't, despite the fact that they were nearly identical...

An idea occurred to him, and he laughed. Potter frowned at him. Potter was always frowning, of course. Draco just needed to get him to frown in another direction for a moment.

"Harry Potter!" cried a female voice that was positively dripping with malicious delight.

Potter turned, and right on cue, frowned—glowered, really—at Rita Skeeter.

Draco slipped the wand into his pocket, withdrew the substandard Girard wand in its stead, and then turned his full attention to the conflict brewing between Potter and Skeeter.

"What a delightful surprise! I was just here purchasing some new quills," she said, displaying a handful of them, "with the full intention of writing you a letter immediately after. And here you are! Did you receive the others I sent? You never replied."

"He couldn't reply," said Draco, smirking. "He hasn't had an owl."

Skeeter glanced at him briefly before returning her attention to Potter. "Well, I see you have one now." Her smile was as wide as it was insincere.

"I'm not interested in an interview," growled Potter. "Ever."

"But my dear," said Skeeter, "the world has a right to know what happened on that fateful night at Hogwarts. And I'll be publishing my book regardless. Surely you would rather your side of the story be included?"

"No thanks," Potter said tightly. "Why don't you interview Malfoy here instead? You remember him, don't you? He was at the battle too." Potter, who held grudges for far too long if he was still this worked up about a few articles back in their fourth year, obviously thought Draco wouldn't want to discuss the

painful, humiliating events of that night. And perhaps on a normal day he wouldn't. Today, however...

Draco smiled winningly at Skeeter.

"That's right. I was right there in the middle of the action. Potter here saved my life. Pulled me onto his broom at the last possible moment, rescued me from a fiery death. It was all very exciting. I'd love to tell you about it."

Potter stared at him as if he'd grown another head. Skeeter stared at him as if he was the answer to her prayers. Then she pulled out her notepad.

"He pulled you onto his broom, did he? You flew together? What was he rescuing you from?"

Another ripple under the cloak of confidence, a whisper of horror this time, as he remembered the flame and the smoke, then he pushed it back, down, away.

"Fire," said Draco.

"Tell me," said Skeeter, "which of you was in front? Who held on from behind? And although I'm sure circumstances were quite terrifying, would you say that Harry here seemed to enjoy the experience at all?"

In light of the exposé she'd written about Dumbledore last year, it seemed obvious what angle Skeeter was choosing to take on her Potter biography. Not that she was entirely off-base about him, given what Draco had observed, but the idea that anyone could have enjoyed that broom ride was ludicrous. Draco glanced at Potter, who now looked nearly apoplectic, his eyes promising death to Draco if he gave the wrong answer to that question.

"Let me tell you what," said Draco. "I've an errand I need to run." And he was suddenly aware that this

was true. "Meet me across the street, at the ice cream parlor, at, say, 2:07?"

"2:07," Skeeter repeated, looking a bit puzzled. "Wouldn't you rather make it 2:00?"

"No," said Draco, feeling quite certain on this point. "2:07 would be better."

"All right, then," said Skeeter, closing her notebook. "2:07 it is. And you're more than welcome to come too, Harry."

Harry crossed his arms and glared at her as if he could melt the glasses off her face if he focused hard enough. Knowing Potter, perhaps he could.

She turned to go, but Draco realized he needed one more thing. "Rita, could you spare some parchment and a quill? I need to write a quick note."

"Certainly," said Skeeter. She tore several pages from her notebook and offered him one of her new quills.

"Oh, I couldn't possibly take your new quill. An old one will be fine."

She frowned. "Are you sure? Once they get older, they tend to..."

"The old one would be perfect," said Draco firmly.

"Well, in that case, you can keep it," she said with a smile. She handed him the quill and parchment, turned, and, flinching at the look Potter was still giving her, walked briskly away.

Potter immediately turned his furious glare back on Draco.

"What the hell was that about, Malfoy?"

"Quiet, Potter, I need to write a note. I've always wanted to try one of these." Setting the Quick-Quotes Quill to the parchment, Draco folded his hands behind his back and began dictating: "Dear Mother, I've bought an owl. Please make sure it is looked after until I get home."

The owl gave what sounded like an appreciative hoot from the cage. Draco glanced at it briefly before continuing:

"I have plans to meet someone at the ice cream parlor in Diagon Alley at 2:07, so I will not be home before then. I hope you are feeling well. Your loving son—"

At that point, Potter snorted. Draco gave him a warning look before continuing: "Your loving son, Draco Malfoy."

The owl accepted the note and flew out the door as Granger and Weasley left the shop.

Potter was still glaring at him.

"How could you talk about it like that, like it's all a big joke?" Potter finally asked. "You don't even care, do you? About your owl. About your friend who died."

Draco felt anger flare up at that, but it died again quickly, like a fire that couldn't get enough air.

"You don't know anything about me, Potter."

Potter crossed his arms in front of his chest. "I know that you're perfectly happy to make mockery of all of it. Anything for publicity, for attention."

It really was ludicrous that Potter of all people was criticizing him on those grounds.

"You think what you want," Draco said, as he shoved the empty owl cage into his bag. "I have an errand I need to run."

"Right, and what's this errand? I know you're up to—"

"Excuse me, Mr. Potter?" asked a girl, standing timidly at Potter's elbow. She looked to be about ten years old, and she was gazing at him with adoring eyes. It was sickening, really.

Potter looked down, his anger melting quickly into extreme and visible discomfort. "Er...yes?"

"My friends and I were wondering..." Five other girls stood off to the side, giggling and watching avidly for the results of their friend's undertaking. "Could we have your autograph?"

"Er," Potter said again. Draco rolled his eyes. Potter glanced about, then seemed to realize something. "Hey, where did Ginny go?"

"Please?" asked the girl.

"I don't have a quill...or any parchment..." said Potter.

"Here you go, Potter," said Malfoy, slapping the quill and extra pages into Potter's hands. "Oh, and you

can have this back too," he added, handing Potter the Girard wand. "I've changed my mind."

"You...what? My god, Malfoy, you are such a—"

The girl in front of them let out a shocked little gasp, and Potter glanced down, clenching his jaw tightly.

"You can let me know at the interview. I've got to get going."

He glanced back once, on his way out of the shop. Potter was surrounded by the girls and looked as if he was contemplating making a break for it rather than signing the autographs.

Across the street, the Weasley girl and Granger were seated at a table. Weasley looked as if she'd been crying.

Seated one table across was Astoria Greengrass, her friend and the house-elf nowhere to be seen. She was sharing an ice cream with Zacharias Smith.

Draco found he didn't much care.

Turning right, he headed towards Knockturn Alley.

APOTHECARY, 1:32 pm

It was odd, as he walked down the alley—the sensation of knowing what direction he should head without knowing his ultimate destination.

It became clear when he reached the Apothecary where he'd bought his potion. He didn't know why, but

he knew he needed to be here right now. Without hesitating, he opened the door and stepped into the darkened shop.

Inside the shop was a single customer, his face partially obscured by a hooded cloak, his hands on the counter as he leaned forward menacingly into the Apothecary's space. The Apothecary was flinching backwards, wide-eyed, and his hands were trembling. They both turned to stare at Draco.

"I thought you locked that," snarled the hooded man.

"I did! I thought I did!" said the Apothecary, his voice quavering.

The cloaked man stepped forward, appeared to stare at Draco from under his hood, then turned threateningly back toward the Apothecary. "Lock it now."

The Apothecary cast Draco an agonized look, then spelled the door locked.

The man snatched the Apothecary's wand from his hand before turning back to Draco. Stepping closer, he pushed back his hood. It was Fenrir Greyback. His eyes promised violence, and the leer on his face promised that whatever form that violence took, Greyback would enjoy it.

Draco should have been terrified.

It was strange. He'd rarely felt calm during an emergency before, but when he had, he'd felt calm at his center, while the rest of him had been filled with energy, trembling, his skin almost buzzing, his rapid pulse propelling everything, even his mind, faster.

Now he felt panic at his core, but it was contained, suppressed by the calm exterior and by the certainty that somehow everything was going to be just fine.

Slowly, Draco drew his wand, though he had no intention of using it, no spells in mind to cast.

Greyback laughed. "What are you going to do with that wand? We both know you're hopeless with them. Expelliarmus!"

His wand flew into Greyback's grasp; Greyback's dirty fingers with their yellowed nails were now clenched tightly around it. And somehow that was exactly right, exactly what needed to happen.

Greyback's mouth widened in an obscene parody of a smile. Even now, at near noon, his teeth were pointed. They weren't the teeth of a wolf, but Draco knew what they could do. He remembered seeing those teeth, flinching away from them, in the Astronomy tower, in the drawing room, in his nightmares.

"Your Mummy's not here to protect you this time," said Greyback.

"I protect her now. Who cursed her necklace?"

Greyback laughed again. "More than her necklace was cursed, from what I heard." He walked closer, slowly, like a predator. Draco stood where he was and watched him approach.

There was a small sound at the counter where the Apothecary stood.

"You'll stay where you are, Gifford," said Greyback, his eyes still on Draco. "You take another step and you'll regret it soon after. I'll snap your wand and then your neck."

The werewolf stopped, finally, directly in front of Draco, so close that Draco could smell Greyback's filthy robes—they smelled of sweat, maybe blood, and some fouler smell, like the matted fur of a sick animal. Leaning in, he sniffed Draco's neck. Draco was surprised Greyback could smell anything beyond his own stench.

The terror within him pulsed more sharply but was still contained. He was standing in the right place. Nothing bad was going to happen.

"I like to bite, you know," rasped Greyback. "If it weren't for your parents, I'd have bitten you long ago. They spoiled you; you never grew up. Never learned to take care of yourself. You're still...just...a boy." Greyback leaned in further, opened his mouth, but then pulled back sharply as the door rattled.

Potter was staring through the window, eyes wide.

"What the fuck is he doing here?" muttered Greyback.

"He's here for me," Draco said. "I have something he wants." Draco allowed his gaze to flick down to his bag, still hanging from his shoulder, then back up to Greyback's suspicious face.

"Give that to me," Greyback snarled, wrenching it from Draco's shoulder. As he did so, Draco reached neatly down, seized the wand held in Greyback's other fist, and pulled hard. It fitted in his hand perfectly, felt even more like his wand now than it had when he'd received it from Potter. As soon as it was within his grasp, he Apparated. Not too far—just far enough.

Greyback stared at him, features pinched in fury, before plunging his hand into the bag he'd just taken from Draco. And then he screamed.

He dropped the bag and collapsed to the floor, still screaming, a peacock feather clenched in his fist. Sores began to open on his face, his hands; patches of blood bloomed on his robes.

"Incarcerous!" said Draco, and Greyback was bound in thick ropes that soon became stained in blood as well.

The door burst open, and Potter, wild-eyed, rushed into the room, only to stop in confusion at the sight

of Greyback already incapacitated on the floor.

"It hurts! It hurts, make it stop!" cried Greyback, the pain driving sharp notes into his deep, rasping voice, and then he abandoned words entirely and began howling in anguish.

His screams blended in Draco's mind with his mother's screams when he'd found her on her bedroom floor, Rowle's screams when Voldemort had forced Draco to torture him. For the first time, the tightly bound horror inside of him threatened to unravel.

"You!" shouted Draco at the Apothecary.

"I'm sorry, he had my wand. There was nothing I could do—I'm sorry!"

"Who cares if you're sorry?" snarled Draco. "Get me a pain potion. And some Veritaserum."

The Apothecary scurried to the shelves, and Draco turned back just in time to see Potter stupidly reaching for the peacock feather. "Don't touch that," Draco shouted. "You idiot!"

Potter jerked his hand back and stared at Draco.

Turning to Greyback, Draco levitated the feather out of his hand and towards the bag on the floor beside him. When it was safely stowed, the Apothecary arrived with a single bottle. A quick glance at the label showed it to be the pain potion. Draco tipped it into Greyback's mouth, not really caring if he gave him too much, as long as it stopped his horrible screaming.

Greyback lapsed into silence, his pain obviously eased, but he was still conscious. The panic that had been threatening to spill outwards, flood Draco's mind and body, began to dissipate.

"Where's the Veritaserum?" Draco asked the Apothecary.

"As...as I'm sure you know..." said the Apothecary, in a voice that trembled slightly, "Veritaserum is a tightly restricted..."

Draco stood up, ignoring the man. He was useless. Stepping behind the counter, Draco was unsurprised to find a row of small bottles on a shelf underneath. One caught his eye, and he picked it up.

"Hmm...what do you know?" he said, raising an eyebrow. "Veritaserum."

The Apothecary stared at him. Potter was squatting by Greyback, staring at the werewolf as if it was his vigilance alone that was keeping Greyback bound and defenseless.

"Why are you doing this?" Potter asked, as Draco poured three drops into Greyback's bloodied mouth.

"I need to find out who tried to kill my mother," said Draco, not bothering to look at Potter as he answered.

"Who cursed my mother's necklace and the other items at the manor?"

"Yaxley..." groaned Greyback. "Yaxley did it. He always hated your father. He said those peacocks—"

"Did anyone help him?"

"I don't know," said Greyback. "I don't think so. No one said they did. He didn't like—"

"What were you doing here?" interjected Potter. "Have you been in contact with Draco Malfoy? Did you

have arrangements to meet?"

Draco glared at him.

Greyback groaned, perhaps at the discomfort of being compelled to answer three questions at once, perhaps because the potion wasn't entirely alleviating the pain of the curse that was still ravaging his body.

"I was here because there were rumors that Gifford has been double-crossing me, selling Wolfsbane to the werewolves who aren't cooperating with my plans. I was in contact with Draco Malfoy five minutes ago when I smelled his pretty throat. We didn't have arrangements to meet. The last time I saw him was in May, the night you killed—"

"Is my mother in danger from anyone else?" asked Draco.

"I'd kill her if I got half the chance," said Greyback, "right after I—"

Draco kicked him, hard, and Greyback groaned and choked for breath, still struggling to answer the question.

"Is my mother in danger from anyone other than you and Yaxley?"

"I don't..." sputtered Greyback. "I don't know. Lots of people don't like her, she treats them like shit. Thinks she's better than everyone else. She—"

"Silencio!"

Greyback's lips were still moving, but no sound issued from them. Draco held his wand tightly.

"Yaxley's in Azkaban already," Potter finally said.

"I know that," said Draco. Potter's eyes still looked a bit wild, and he was breathing fast. A drop of sweat slid down his forehead. Draco looked away.

"A bit late, weren't you, Potter?" he said, as he levitated Greyback. "Some hero you are."

Potter flushed.

"Come on," said Draco. "We're going to be late for our interview. Besides, he can only go another hour, at most, without getting this curse treated. Bringing him in dead would look much less impressive." He looked back at the Apothecary. "You might want this." Draco plucked the Apothecary's wand from Greyback's robes and lobbed it at him. "If it doesn't work as well for you after this, you entirely deserve it. My father was right. This is an awful shop."

ICE CREAM PARLOR, 2:07 pm

He grasped Greyback's arm where it looked least filthy and Apparated to the ice cream parlour. The Weasley girl and Granger were still there, as were Astoria and Smith, Rita Skeeter, and a photographer.

They all stared at him.

A moment later, Potter Apparated beside him. A moment after that, the Minister for Magic and a dozen Aurors Disillusioned themselves. Then all hell broke loose.

While the Aurors took Greyback into custody, Draco sorted out with the Minister for Magic why his owl had delivered a letter that was largely incomprehensible but had seemed to threaten terrorist action of some sort at the ice cream parlor at 2:07.

"Malfoy Manor, Ministry of Magic. These kinds of slip-ups happen when working with old Quick-Quotes Quills and new owls," Draco told Shacklebolt.

Shacklebolt frowned at him as if Draco were the strangest thing he'd ever seen in his life, looked over at the bloodied Greyback as if he were the second strangest, and finally asked Draco if he'd considered applying for Auror training. Draco promised to take it under consideration.

Meanwhile, Skeeter's newer and hopefully more reliable Quick-Quotes Quill was scribbling busily in her notebook, and the photographer was snapping pictures of the whole thing.

Also, Weasley slapped Potter full in the face. The photographer got a picture of that too.

"My apologies," said Draco to Skeeter, as she approached him, right after he'd accepted the Minister's invitation to attend the Hogwarts celebration. "I'm feeling a bit exhausted. I think we'll need to reschedule that interview. It looks as if you've got enough for an article, though. Quite the story, isn't it?"

Then he saw Bill Weasley, standing next to Potter, watching.

He'd seen Bill Weasley a couple of times since that night at Hogwarts, but he'd never been able to bring himself to look closely at the scars on his face. They were bad. Worse than the ones on Draco's chest, worse than the one on his neck that he felt so self-conscious about on most days.

He felt compelled to do the strangest thing he'd done all day. Perhaps the strangest thing he'd done ever. He walked over to Weasley and Potter, saw both of their eyes widen in surprise. He turned to Weasley.

"I'm sorry," Draco told him.

Even stranger was when he realized that he meant it.

LEAKY CAULDRON, 3:30 pm

Of all the things Draco had expected to do on his perfect day, having a late lunch at the Leaky Cauldron with Bill Weasley and Harry Potter had not been one of them. In fact, he reflected, as he looked at Bill's curious and Potter's sullen expressions, this was stranger than the werewolf attack itself. But once again, he was confident that this was the right place to be.

"You defeated Fenrir Greyback with a peacock feather?" asked Weasley.

"Stranger things have happened," said Malfoy. This lunch, for instance.

"You were just lucky, Malfoy," said Potter resentfully.

"So what if I was? I know success through blind luck is your thing, but I hadn't realized you had a copyright on it. Is luck off limits too? Like snowy owls?"

Weasley ignored them. "Why did you have a cursed feather in the first place?"

"I've got over twenty cursed feathers, and quite a few other cursed objects besides. Yaxley cursed them. I don't particularly care about the feathers, but I really need to find a way to lift the curses on the others. Some of them are special to my mother."

Bill looked interested. "I could have a look at them for you."

"I'd appreciate that," said Draco.

Potter huffed in irritation, then looked down at the table, his expression becoming more somber. His

shoulders sagged, and he sucked his lower lip into his mouth for a moment, biting it. He had the look of someone who had been blindsided by life. Today, Draco reflected, was not Potter's day.

The crease in Potter's forehead deepened, a response to some unpleasant thought, and it occurred to Draco that that crease was always there on Potter's forehead, right next to the scar. Or at least it was whenever Potter was around Draco. He supposed he'd seen Potter smile a time or two from across the Great Hall, but he wondered what Potter's forehead would look like now if it were smoothed out, free of worry lines; what his mouth would look like if that lip Potter was biting were turned up in a smile.

"You two are a bit distracted, aren't you?" asked Weasley, and Draco blinked. How was it possibly lucky to think about Potter smiling? He'd known there was something off about that potion.

"Well, then, I suppose I'll be heading back to Gringotts," Weasley finally said. "Shall I take those cursed items off your hands?"

Draco opened his bag, pulled out both brooms and the Snitch, and then handed the bag to Weasley. "There's an owl cage in there," Draco informed him. "It's not cursed. But the rest of it is."

"All right then," said Weasley. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you," said Draco.

Potter looked up then, to stare at Draco, his expression not unlike the one Kingsley had worn while speaking to Draco earlier. Then he looked at the brooms leaning against the table, the line on his forehead becoming more pronounced than ever.

"That broom is mine," Potter said, gesturing at the Cleansweep. "We had a deal."

Draco rolled his eyes.

"You're not going to win her back with a broom, Potter."

Potter glared at him. "I—I know that, so just shut up about it."

"I was meaning to ask you, Harry," said Weasley. "What happened with Ginny?"

Potter hesitated. "She was angry because I sent her an owl and didn't tell her what I was doing, that I was doing something dangerous," he finally said. "That I didn't tell her where I was, or give her a chance to help."

"Wait just one moment," Draco said. "You saw Fenrir Greyback slobbering on my throat, and you took the time to write your girlfriend a letter before you bothered to help?"

"What did the letter say?" asked Bill.

"It said 'stay there,'" Potter said grumpily.

"Did you think you had her trained, Potter? Like a dog?"

Bill raised an eyebrow at Draco before turning back to Potter. Potter, predictably, was glaring at Draco, but a moment later he lowered his gaze again to the table.

"I didn't want her to get hurt. I didn't...I didn't want the owl to get hurt either," he added more quietly.

Bill sighed and clapped Potter on the back. "She's got a temper on her," he said. "Maybe you can try talking to her about it. In a week or two." He picked up the bag and stood up from the table. "Well, I'm

off."

Draco and Potter sat at the table in silence. Draco ought to be leaving too, but for some reason he just didn't feel inclined to get up.

Noticing a spot of blood on the sleeve of his robes, he took out his wand and cast a cleaning charm.

Potter glanced at the wand, and his eyes narrowed. Pulling the Girard wand from the folds of his robes, he stared at it in furious suspicion.

"You lying bastard," shouted Potter.

"So they're similar. That doesn't prove I switched them. It doesn't prove anything. And so what if I did? It's not as if you could even tell the difference."

"I carried that wand" Potter said, nodding pointedly at the wand in Draco's hand, "for months, relied on it for survival on more than one occasion, and you think I can't tell the difference? You're deluded."

"You started the day with a spare hawthorn wand. You're finishing the day with a spare hawthorn wand. I haven't cheated you out of anything."

"You've cheated me out of that broom," Potter said stubbornly. "It's mine."

"It is not," Draco said. "But..." he continued, as an idea occurred to him, "I'll play you for it."

"What?" asked Potter, flabbergasted.

"I'll play you for it," Draco said, nodding at the two brooms and the Snitch lying on the table. "Seeker's match. Winner takes the broom. And both wands."

Potter stared at the Snitch for a moment, the line on his forehead slowly smoothing out. He smiled.

"All right, Malfoy," he said. "You're on."

"Where would you like to play?" Draco asked, standing up. "Loser's choice."

Potter raised an eyebrow. "Then what are you asking me for?"

Draco pocketed the Snitch, picked up both brooms, and waited.

"Somewhere where people won't stare at us," Potter finally said. "Or take pictures."

"We have a Quidditch pitch at the Manor."

Potter looked at him as if he'd always suspected Draco was insane and this proved it.

"Scared, Potter?"

Potter rolled his eyes.

"If I'd wanted to do you in, I could have just let you grab that peacock feather, you know."

"Fine," Potter finally said. "Let's get going."

"We'll have to Side-Along. Here." Draco held out his hand. It was only then that he realized he'd just done what he'd promised himself he'd never do again. Ever.

"I've been to Malfoy Manor before," Potter said, frowning. But he took Draco's hand.

Potter's reference to that night brought up unpleasant memories, and Draco found himself tensing, his hand tightening on Potter's.

"Yes, well, I somehow doubt Greyback took you on a tour of the grounds before he brought you to the drawing room. Or that you'd have been able to see well enough to tell the Quidditch pitch from the gardens if he had. I couldn't see your eyes at all."

He could see Potter's eyes now, though.

"But you knew it was me," said Potter.

"Of course I knew it was you."

Draco felt strange, almost nervous, and a game of Quidditch he was sure to win should not be enough to unsettle him. Perhaps the potion was wearing off. He didn't feel prompted to take more, but then he wouldn't, would he, if it had worked its way out of his system. He'd take more at the earliest opportunity. There was no way on earth he was going to take the chance of losing this game.

Potter glanced down at their joined hands, and then back up, an odd expression on his face.

"Right, then," said Draco and, keeping a firm grip on Potter's hand, Disapparated.

MALFOY MANOR, 4:07 pm

They arrived by the Quidditch pitch, both of them blinking in the afternoon sunlight. Draco let go of Potter's hand and took a step back.

Potter looked around. "No peacocks?"

"They're over that way," Draco said, pointing toward the gardens. "Can't you see them?"

Potter turned, squinting as he looked, and Draco slipped the bottle of Felix Felicis out of his pocket. One tablespoon had lasted him through the morning and early afternoon. Another one ought to be just about right.

Warmth flooded his body, as it had when he'd taken the potion this morning, but this time, it felt different. He'd felt calm, confident, and, yes, happy. But now, rather than relaxed, he felt exhilarated, his body almost vibrating with the urge to do something. Something amazing, something impossible. Because nothing was impossible for him today. And he wasn't just happy—he felt elated, jubilant, almost giddy.

He slipped the bottle back into his pocket and turned to look at Potter.

Potter was still staring in the direction of the garden, his robes and hair moving softly in the breeze.

"Oh, right," said Potter. "I think I can see them. Hey, where did those cursed feathers come from?"

Draco remembered the peacock with the bald arse, laughed, then couldn't stop laughing and laughed about that. Potter looked a bit confused, but the corner of his lip quirked up nevertheless.

Draco tossed him the Cleansweep, and Potter caught it easily. "Come on, Potter. Follow me. I'll show you my evil peacock."

Mounting his broom, Draco kicked off, flying fast, delighting at the rush of wind on his face and in his hair. He did a complicated little loop, then paused and looked back for Potter. Draco had got a head start, but it didn't take Potter long to catch up.

"That sounded like a bad pickup line, I hope you know," said Potter, then laughed, a little uncomfortably. "So what does an evil peacock look like?"

"You'll know it when you see it," said Draco, and he shot towards the gardens, Potter following closely behind. Draco didn't take a direct path to the gardens, though—that seemed boring—instead he took a more circuitous path, but fast enough that it didn't matter. He flew by trees, darting under them, between their branches, so close the leaves lashed at his face.

"You're insane!" shouted Potter, but he was laughing.

Draco spotted a large group of peacocks near the fountain and, on impulse, flew high above them and then dove down, laughing as the startled birds scattered. He had to bite his lip in an effort to stop when Potter pulled up next to him.

"Is that one...it's missing all its tail feathers, isn't it?" Potter asked, pointing in the direction of the manor. There it was, along with a couple other peacocks, under a tree. It likely wanted shade.

"Why, yes, it is," said Draco, sniggering.

"So that peacock's evil?" Potter furrowed his brow, though whether in confusion at Draco's giddiness or out of concern at the possible threat posed by the peacock, Draco didn't know.

"Well, it was evil. It's been reformed." And despite his best effort to pull a serious face, Draco sniggered again.

"It doesn't look very happy about it."

"Yes, it's difficult to give up one's evil ways. Or feathers, either one."

"How did you know the feathers were cursed?" asked Potter curiously.

This was treading on dangerous ground. "Who wants to talk about that, Potter? Aren't we here to play Quidditch?"

"What, right here?"

"Why not?" Draco pulled the Snitch from his pocket and tapped it with his wand to activate it. The golden wings sprang to life. "It's been a long time since I played with a new Snitch," said Draco. "This should be fun." He opened his fist, and the Snitch immediately darted out of sight.

They looked at each other for just a moment, hovering, then Potter flew off, high above the manor grounds, and began searching for the Snitch. Draco felt no need to look for it just yet, though. He practiced dives and turns, chased another peacock or two, flew by the fountain, so close that he caught the edges of its spray, then darted off again, robes flapping, delighting in the feel of the mist cooling on his hands and face.

And then he realized that Potter had followed him through the fountain when he suddenly appeared beside Draco, water dripping down his face.

"Is this what you call looking for the Snitch? No wonder you never catch it." Potter smiled as he said it,

and Draco didn't take offense. He didn't think he could take offense at anything at the moment.

"Don't worry about me, Potter, just keep your own eyes open. It'll be embarrassing for you if you haven't even seen it before I catch it."

He flew high, and Potter followed him. He didn't think he'd ever had so much fun.

They flew together for a few moments, and then an idea occurred to Draco. There was something he'd always wanted to try.

He flew even higher, pushing the limits of how high a broom could go, feeling the air cool and thin, and then looked down at the manor grounds. There was the manor itself, looking so small, and the trees and the Quidditch pitch, and the fountain, and the peacocks, tiny white dots. And there was Potter, twenty feet below him, frowning up in puzzlement.

Draco waved at him, then took his broom into a dive. The alarm on Potter's face was comical.

It was amazing, the force of the wind in his face, the rapidity with which those tiny objects below him grew larger. He'd never had the guts to try this before, and it now seemed ridiculous that he hadn't long ago. He reached the point when he would before have tried to slow his descent, passed it, laughed as the ground rushed up at him and he heard Potter's sharp cry of warning, and then finally, at the last possible moment, pulled up, hard. But he'd never tried to halt a dive at speeds like this before, and the broom was slow to respond. He had one moment to feel confused—nothing was impossible today, nothing—and then the shock of impact.

He lay there for a moment, gasping for breath, feeling sharp pricks of pain in many places on his body, then looked up, dazed, realizing a large rosebush had broken his fall. And there, fluttering in front of his face, was the Snitch. He opened his hand, made motion to grab it, and it met him halfway, smacking snugly against his palm. He heard a thump behind him, and then Potter was there, eyes wide, crouching beside him.

"God, Malfoy, are you all right? You're bleeding." He sounded nearly as out of breath as Draco.

"I'm fine," said Draco dismissively, as Potter pulled him to a stand, and he was, for the most part, aside from the scratches on his body and a pain in his left knee.

"I can't believe you did that! What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that you ought to be feeling awfully embarrassed right about now," said Draco, laughing as he displayed the Snitch still clutched in his other hand.

Potter laughed too, sounding a little giddy himself, and it occurred to Draco how odd it was that Potter was relieved now, that he'd been worried on Draco's behalf. "Snitches have flesh memories," said Potter, as he took the Snitch from Draco's hand. "It'll always remember that you caught it right there," and his finger brushed Draco's palm.

Draco jerked his hand back, palm tingling.

Potter looked up, caught Draco's gaze, and whatever he saw in Draco's expression appeared to startle him.

They stared at each other for a moment, both still breathing heavily. Potter's hair, Draco noticed, was still damp from the fountain.

"It's not true, you know," Potter finally said, looking strangely intent.

"What's not true?"

"Riding the broom with you, in the Room of Requirement. I didn't enjoy it."

"I know that," said Draco. "And just for the record," he said pointedly, "I don't lose sleep thinking about you at night either."

Potter blinked. "How did you know Ollivander said that?"

"Your girlfriend may have mentioned something."

"She's not my girlfriend," Potter muttered. "Not anymore." He shifted, looked around as if he didn't know where he ought to rest his eyes, finally focusing on the broom he still clutched in one fist. He offered it to Draco, then fished the Girard wand out of his pocket and handed him that also.

"It's a nice broom," Potter said. "Maybe I'll buy myself one when they get some more in stock."

"Tired of your Firebolt?"

"I lost it," said Potter. "The night...the night my owl died."

"I'm sorry." Draco wasn't sure if he was offering condolences for the broom, or the owl, or both. Though he still thought it stupid to get so worked up about an owl. "You didn't replace it either?"

"No, I've been busy. I should have today, but then I got distracted, didn't I?" He looked down again at the Snitch in his hand, its wings still beating against his fist. "I haven't been flying in weeks. Ginny was always asking me to, but..." He cut himself off with a frown. "Anyway, I don't suppose I'll be going flying with her any time soon. But I should make more time for it. This was...fun, actually." He offered Draco a small smile. Draco found himself smiling back.

Potter cleared his throat. "I should go. Get ready for the Hogwarts celebration."

"I should too," said Draco, and Potter blinked. "Oh, didn't I tell you? Kingsley invited me. Lucky I've got new dress robes, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Lucky," Potter said, frowning for a moment. "Right. Well, I expect I'll see you there."

"Wait." Draco stepped close, and Potter's eyes widened. Draco took the Snitch from Potter's hand, replacing it with the Cleansweep. "Go on, take it. It's a girl's broom anyway."

"Thanks," Potter said quietly, and Disapparated.

A moment later, Draco Apparated into the sitting room.

When Mother saw him, she was horrified.

"Draco, what happened to you? Sit down this instant."

Draco glanced at the scratches on his hands, touched the ones on his face. He'd forgotten about them. "Really, Mother, I just took a tumble into one of the rose bushes while I was flying." And he couldn't help it; he laughed. But he sat down, as she'd asked.

She began murmuring an incantation as she touched her wand to the wounds, healing them. It had a lilting, almost sing-song quality; he realized it sounded familiar, and not just because he recognized it from his youth.

"I've never thought to ask you, but where did you learn that?"

"From Severus Snape. It's a better spell than a simple Episkey. It might not be necessary for scratches like

these, but there's no point in using a substandard spell. There's nothing more important than your health." It was then that he realized her hands were trembling, and he placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

He remembered Snape's careful hands and crooning voice as he'd healed Draco's wounds, his approving face in lessons in the years before. He also remembered Snape's face when Draco had accused him of wanting to steal Draco's glory, and the cold distance he'd kept between them in the year before he'd died.

He didn't know what to think about Snape. He didn't want to think about Snape.

"I was...surprised when you wouldn't go to his funeral," said Mother.

He wouldn't have gone to Crabbe's either if he'd thought he could have got away with it. And he didn't particularly want to talk about it.

"Did my dress robes arrive?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "They're in your room. Should I take their arrival to mean that you were successful in your endeavors with Miss Greengrass?"

For some reason that struck him as hilariously funny, and he began giggling in a way that would have been truly embarrassing had it happened in front of Potter.

She looked up, brow furrowing, when his laughter continued. She inspected his eyes, smelled his breath. "Draco, have you been drinking?"

That struck him as hilarious too, but he bit his lip, hard, and got the laughter under control. "Don't worry, mother, I'm fine. I'm just happy. I've had a good day."

She wanted to believe him, he could tell, but she was still worried. He knew just what would distract her, though. "Yes, I'll be going to the Hogwarts celebration tonight. And you might also be pleased to hear that I bumped into the Minister for Magic today. We had a pleasant chat, and he even suggested I join the Auror training program."

Her eyes widened. "Are you serious, Draco? How on earth did you manage that?" She had been attempting to meet with the Minister of Magic for weeks now, in hopes of speaking with him on Father's behalf.

"I'll tell you about it all tomorrow," he said, standing up. "I really need to get ready." If he let on that he'd nearly been eaten by a werewolf mere hours ago, she would forbid him to leave the manor. He'd deal with the fallout tomorrow. Most likely when the Daily Prophet arrived. With any luck, they would print the picture of Weasley slapping Potter. That would be one front-page photograph of Potter he wouldn't mind seeing.

"Are there any more scratches that need healing?" she asked, eyeing his robes.

"None worth speaking of," said Draco. "I'm fine, Mother, really."

"Give my regards to Miss Greengrass," she finally said.

"I will," Draco promised as he turned to leave the room.

"And Draco?"

"Yes?"

"I'm glad you're happy."

He took a shower—a long one. The scratches that had been hidden by his robes stung when the water hit them. Cleaning them adequately was the most obvious cause of delay, but he found it took quite a while before he felt he'd sufficiently washed the stink of Greyback from his skin.

When he entered his room, he saw the new dress robes laid neatly on his bed. That wasn't surprising. He'd known Mother would want to inspect them. What was surprising was the snowy owl there in his room as well. Sitting on his desk. On a book, actually: Mastery of the Elements.

"What are you doing in here? Owls belong in the owlery. There's plenty of room in there these days. We only have one other than you at the moment."

The owl hooted.

"I don't even have a cage for you in here," Draco continued. "You'd better not shit on my desk."

The owl looked almost offended.

"And another thing. I can't believe you went by the address written on the note rather than the one you heard me say. What were you thinking? It all worked out all right, but under normal circumstances, that would have been completely unacceptable."

The owl blinked, and hooted, but didn't seem particularly apologetic.

He didn't know what he was doing talking to the owl anyway.

Picking up his robes, Draco found that he really did like them, both for the style, and for the way the silky material felt against his skin. As he looked at the silver accents, he remembered how Potter had stared at him at Malkin's, like he hadn't even known he was doing it. Which brought up the more recent memory

of how Potter had stared at him just an hour ago, like he had known he was doing it and for a moment had been considering doing other things besides. Which would have been horrifying. But equally horrifying was the way his body responded to the memory, his breath speeding up, his pulse racing, his—Draco jerked the robes over his head and smoothed them down, appalled.

Had he liked it, Potter staring at him like that?

So maybe it was nice, in some ways, not to have Potter glaring at him in loathing constantly. Maybe it was nice to have Potter finally starting to appreciate some of his finer qualities. That didn't mean he wanted Potter appreciating his finer qualities. Potter could look, Draco supposed, if he couldn't help himself. But he'd better not touch, or someone would be in for a rude awakening. Malfoys didn't do things like that.

He glanced over at the owl, ludicrously concerned that there had been a witness to his brief moment of insanity. But the owl was looking in the other direction. Minding its own business. As it should be.

He realized his left knee was still bothering him and paused, frowning. That fall hadn't been too bad, but it could have been. He shouldn't have fallen at all. Aside from the intermittent cheerfulness, and that bit of good luck with the Snitch, he really hadn't noticed much in the way of effects from his second dose of the potion. Perhaps he'd misjudged, not taken enough. It wasn't as if he'd been able to measure it. And he couldn't afford bad luck at the celebration tonight. This was too important.

The bottle of potion was half empty now. He lifted it to his lips, and the owl hooted in warning.

"You shut up," Draco said. "I'm ignoring you."

He felt that giddiness again, the one he was beginning to associate with this potion, even more strongly this time, and for a moment he was worried he might have made a mistake. But then, he quickly realized, that was silly. He couldn't possibly make a mistake tonight.

HOGWARTS, 7:00 pm

The giddiness was less of a worry when he arrived at the edges of the Hogwarts grounds and saw the Thestrals waiting to pull carriages up to the castle. He didn't feel threatened by them, and he didn't feel unhappy, exactly, at the sight of them, but the warmth brought by the potion seemed to disappear. On the whole, he thought, he'd much rather walk.

The cooling evening air was refreshing. As he got some distance between himself and the Thestrals, he began to enjoy himself again, picking up on the mood of the evening, which was festive, for the most part. He spotted a few others who seemed to want to keep their distance from the Thestrals as well, but many were talking, laughing delightedly. If he laughed once or twice to himself on the walk to the castle, it went unnoticed by the few gaily dressed couples and groups of chatting friends who had chosen to walk as well.

The Great Hall was already crowded. He stood in the doorway, staring at the house tables and the High Table at the end. The atmosphere reminded him of his school days, particularly the start of term feasts; the room was buzzing with excitement and anticipation, and many of the faces were the same, too, though older.

But it was different, too, very different.

McGonagall now sat in the gold chair at the center of the High Table where Dumbledore and, more recently, Snape had previously sat. Beside her sat Kingsley Shacklebolt on one side, Harry Potter on the other. Granger and the Weasel were up there as well. The High Table was positively packed with Gryffindors.

One would think that the Gryffindor table might be emptier as a result, but no, it was nearly filled to bursting as well. He spotted Potter's girlfriend—ex-girlfriend, he reminded himself—seated snugly between Longbottom and some other Gryffindor male. The table was nearly overflowing with Weasleys, actually—the parents were there, and the one with no ear, and the one with his head stuck up his arse, and...there was Bill Weasley, looking back at him. Bill nodded, in an almost friendly way, and Draco grinned at him. Bill blinked and then smiled back briefly as well.

The Slytherin table, on the other hand, was in no danger of overcrowding. It held a scattering of Slytherins—younger ones at one end, older at the other. If Draco felt a pang at the thought of the faces

missing from the table, it was gone quickly at the sight of the few Gryffindors who seemed unable to have found seats at the other tables and had been forced to sit there instead. He laughed, long and hard, at the sight of their discomfited, resentful faces.

He saw Daphne, seated with what must have been her fiance and her parents at one end of the table. Astoria and Smith were seated at the other. Suddenly done with standing about and looking, Draco walked to the Slytherin table and plopped himself down beside Smith, grinning at him.

"Astoria," he said, leaning forward and slightly around Smith in order to see her better, "my mother sends her regards."

She looked surprised but pleased and smiled prettily. "Thank you, Draco. I didn't know you knew my name."

"Of course I knew your name," said Draco, then turned to look at Smith, who appeared equally surprised, but quite a bit less pleased. "Smith, if you're so loyal, why aren't you sitting at the Hufflepuff table?"

Astoria laughed, like he had said something really funny. Which he had, of course.

"I'm loyal to my companion for the evening," Smith said pointedly.

Astoria finally stopped her giggling to smile besottedly at Smith. Smith didn't notice, however. He was too busy staring at the silver accents on Draco's robes.

"Are those my robes?"

"Correction," said Draco. "They were your robes, before Potter told you you were a pansy and you pitched a fit and stomped out of the shop."

Smith's cheeks flushed bright red, and his lips drew together tightly. Draco patted him on the back. "Don't worry, you didn't want them. Potter would have been staring at your arse all evening if you'd worn them."

Smith's eyes widened comically. "Potter stares at my arse?"

Draco laughed. "He did while you were wearing these robes, anyway."

"Wait, so..." and Smith paused, looking more gleeful by the second. "What are you wearing them for? Does that mean you do want him to stare at your arse?"

Draco glanced at Astoria, who was staring at him, and felt momentarily flustered. "That's not what I..."

"Excuse me," said McGonagall from the High Table. She'd stood up and was apparently prepared to make a speech of some sort.

"Oh, Professor Gryffindor is going to say something profound," said Draco. "I can't wait to hear what it is."

Astoria giggled.

McGonagall glanced around the room, eyes lingering on the Slytherin table. Perhaps she was going to announce that there had been a mistake, that after a thousand years it had been revealed that Slytherin really was the Evil House, and that after the feast but before the dancing, anyone seated at the Evil Table would be fed to the Acromantulas in the Forbidden Forest. This struck him as bloody hilarious, and soon he was giggling too. Smith raised an eyebrow at him.

"Started celebrating a little early this evening, have we Malfoy?"

"Oh, trust me, Smith, I've been celebrating all day." Draco glanced up at the High Table, at Potter, and saw he was looking straight back at him. Or possibly at Smith. It must be hard for him to decide which morally inferior non-Gryffindor blond male to stare at, with the two of them sitting right next to each other. Draco snorted in amusement, prompting someone from the Ravenclaw table to shush him.

He realized McGonagall had already begun speaking, and he listened for a moment, thinking he really ought to keep an ear out in case the topic of Acromantulas came up. Forewarned was forearmed.

She really wasn't much of a public speaker. Dumbledore had been a barmy old coot and had committed swift and terrible acts of house-specific injustice from time to time, but at least he'd known how to make a speech interesting.

And suddenly, with no more warning than that, he was assaulted by a memory—Dumbledore, in the tower, praising Draco's cleverness, offering him mercy; Dumbledore, falling from the tower, dead.

"And now," he heard McGonagall say, "let us take a moment to remember the dead."

No, thought Draco, amusement lost somewhere in the chill that had invaded his body, no, let's not.

He looked around the room, saw others who didn't seem thrilled at the idea of remembering the dead either. At least two of the Weasleys were particularly pale, and one of them had his head buried in his hands. How many here, it suddenly occurred to Draco to wonder, were now without a parent, sibling, or child who had been with them this time last year? How many of them had seen the loss coming?

He remembered sitting in this room, at this table, together with his parents on the night of the battle. It was the one time in his life he could remember being held by both his parents at the same time. Hours later, they had taken Father back to Azkaban.

He wondered what Father was thinking, what Father was doing at this exact moment, unshaven in his cell, and tried to push the thought back, to where he'd kept it locked away perfectly well for weeks and

months.

He wondered what the Weasley with his head buried in his hands would write to his brother if his brother were rotting in Azkaban rather than mouldering in the ground, now that the Dementors were gone and owls were allowed.

And he didn't think that was funny, he didn't, but he found himself choking as he struggled not to laugh and covered his face with his hands as well so that no one would see the horrifically inappropriate expression on his face.

Zacharias shifted beside him and then leaned over to whisper in Draco's ear: "Get a hold of yourself, Malfoy, you look ridiculous. Even Potter's staring at you."

Draco looked up, startled, and Potter was staring at him, was standing up from the High Table, even as McGonagall began speaking again, naming teachers who had been lost—Snape, Dumbledore, Burbage—and was Draco the only person in this room who had seen two of those people die? And what was Potter thinking, stalking away from the High Table in the middle of McGonagall's touching memorial, didn't he know that wasn't done? McGonagall faltered for a moment as Potter strode down the aisle and walked...right out the door, Weasley and Granger slipping away from the table to scurry after him.

Draco covered his face again, shoulders shaking in silent peals of near-hysterical laughter. "You're pathetic, Malfoy," muttered Smith.

Draco knew he wasn't pathetic; he was brilliant. But he was also confused. What blinding good fortune could this new tendency to suffer flashbacks, mood swings, and mild hysteria possibly bring him? After a brief struggle, he gained control of himself again, and looked up. Astoria was staring at him, wide-eyed and sympathetic. Smith looked every bit as disgusted as his voice had indicated he would.

"But I have a bit of news that might bring comfort to those of us who have lost family or friends in the last year," said McGonagall. "Just today, mere hours ago, countless lives were saved, when Fenrir Greyback was captured by Harry Potter."

Draco's head snapped to the High Table, where he could see Kingsley Shacklebolt now standing and whispering in McGonagall's ear.

"With the assistance of Mr. Draco Malfoy," McGonagall added, not even bothering to glance in Draco's direction.

"What the fuck!" said Draco, startling Astoria and offending quite a few nearby Ravenclaws and a couple of stranded Gryffindors.

He stood from the table and marched out the door. Heroic Gryffindor Potter had some explaining to do.

He didn't have to look far. There, standing by the oak front doors, were Potter, Granger, and the Weasel, deep in discussion. Though by the looks of it, Granger was doing most of the discussing for them.

"You don't want to use it, do you?" asked Granger.

"No, of course I don't," said Potter indignantly. "I just. I got to thinking it might not have been a very good idea. To just leave it there in the forest like that."

"Are you sure you're not just looking for an excuse to leave early? Is this about Ginny, Harry?"

"No!"

Granger was shocked into silence, and Weasley shifted uncomfortably.

Potter was apologetic, but firm. "I'm sorry, but. No. I don't know why, but things just haven't been the same between us since the war. I tried—I mean, I know I made mistakes, but I tried. And I don't think things were going to work out. Especially after today. Some things happened today that made me think

that..."

Draco felt a momentary excitement, an entirely inappropriate fluttering in his chest, that was squelched almost immediately after by the memory of McGonagall's announcement.

"Well, never mind," Potter continued. "It doesn't matter. I'm sorry, Ron." The prat was obviously more concerned about the impact the breakup might have on his friendship with the most annoying Weasley on the planet than he was over the breakup itself.

"That's all right, mate," began Weasley, an awkward note to his voice, before glancing in the direction of the hall and catching sight of Draco. "What the fuck is he doing there?"

Potter's eyes widened as he saw Draco, and he whispered something to Granger and the Weasel. The two of them filed back into the Great Hall, both casting Draco unpleasant looks as they passed him, Granger's suspicious, the Weasel's threatening.

Potter and Draco stared at each other. Potter cleared his throat. "Malfoy. Are you...er...are you all right?" The prat managed to even look concerned.

Draco didn't know if he was all right, actually. Of course he was, he knew whatever he did would turn out well, that nothing was beyond his grasp, but the problem was that he felt drawn to do more than one thing, say more than one thing, at the same time. Part of him wanted to hit Potter right now. Part of him...didn't. It was confusing. He obviously hadn't taken enough of the potion.

He realized he'd just been standing there, staring at Potter for who knew how long, when Potter took a step towards him, half-raising one hand. That settled it. Draco closed the distance between them quickly, and Potter's hand fell back to his side. Draco stepped close, very close, and Potter let him, finally raising the hand again and resting it tentatively on Draco's shoulder.

"I'd be all right," Draco said tightly, "if you hadn't gone and taken all the credit for catching Greyback. What did you need to do that for, Potter? Wasn't credit for saving the world enough for you?"

"What?" That line was back in the middle of Potter's forehead again, and Potter's fingers loosened on Draco's shoulder. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about McGonagall, in there, announcing that once again thousands of lives have been saved by Harry Bloody Potter!"

"I don't know anything about that!" Potter shouted. Then his hand on Draco's shoulder tightened painfully. "But is that the only reason you did it? For the credit you'd get?"

Draco felt too many conflicting impulses to know which one to take, but it didn't matter, all of them were right, and he picked one at random. "So what if it was?" he sneered.

Potter looked almost like Draco had slapped him, then furious. "Well, what about Ron? What about Katie Bell? I don't see you taking credit for what you did to them!"

"Katie who?"

Draco hadn't known he could slip any further in Potter's estimation, but apparently he could. "The girl you gave a cursed necklace, you complete bastard."

Oh. Of course. The Gryffindor he'd almost killed. It wasn't funny, but he couldn't stop himself from laughing. This time his hands weren't in front of his face, and the look of disgust on Potter's face pierced something in Draco that shouldn't have been there to be wounded.

Potter removed his hand from Draco's shoulder as if his robes were as filthy as Greyback's had been. "She could have died," Potter said. "People did die. And you don't even care."

"There's no point in getting sentimental over deaths," Draco said, his voice going shrill. "It won't bring

them back."

"I can't believe you," Potter said. "I can't believe I wanted to—"

Wanted to what, Draco wanted to scream at him, but he knew what, of course he did, and when Potter tried to walk past him, back to the Hall, Draco grabbed Potter's robes and shoved him against the oak doors. "But you still want to, don't you, Potter?"

Potter's eyes were wide, horrified, but when Draco kissed him, he groaned, leaning into it and opening his mouth.

Draco groaned too, at the sensation of Potter's wet mouth against his. He reached down, grabbed Potter, felt him hard under his robes, and Potter froze before shoving him away, violently.

"What's wrong with you?" Potter shouted.

Again, there were too many conflicting impulses, and Draco turned and walked away, without responding. He needed more potion. It obviously wasn't working, or he would have got lucky with Potter, wouldn't he? But, wait, he didn't want that, so it was lucky Potter had shoved him away. He laughed, couldn't stop laughing, even as he pulled the bottle from the pocket of his robes.

Potter grabbed his hand, shoving him against the wall. "What is this? Give it to me!" And he pried the bottle from Draco's fist.

Draco watched as Potter inspected the bottle, the remaining third of the golden potion sloshing against the bottle's sides. "My god," Potter said bitterly, "suddenly today makes so much more sense." And then he looked up at Draco with furious, resentful eyes. "So where is she?" Potter asked. "Do you have Rita Skeeter hidden over in the antechamber there? Is she going to take pictures of this too?"

"What?" Draco asked, confused. "No, of course not. Give that to me!" He grabbed for the bottle. Potter

shoved him back, hard.

"I don't think so." He looked at Malfoy, his gaze cold and appraising. "How much of this have you had?"

"Not enough, obviously," said Draco, glaring back at Potter.

"Didn't you listen to anything Slughorn said?" Potter shouted. "Overdose of Felix Felicis causes recklessness, giddiness, dangerous overconfidence, and is highly toxic. You're going to kill yourself!"

"What do you care?" Draco shouted, shoving Potter, and—there—a moment of residual luck, as the bottle slipped from Potter's hand and fell neatly into Draco's waiting palm. "Ha!"

Potter glared at Draco, frustrated and furious. "Fine, Malfoy. It's your funeral." He stalked back into the Great Hall, leaving Draco by the oak doors, bottle of potion clutched in his fist.

FORBIDDEN FOREST, 8 pm

Draco stood in the empty entrance hall, breathing heavily. He'd kissed Potter. Why the fuck had he kissed Potter? He'd obviously got too used to following random impulses today, and when the potion wore off—which it obviously had!—he found himself committing insane acts, mistaking random, meaningless impulses for the direction of Felix Felicis. He was supposed to have an entire day of good luck. Potter getting credit for Draco's heroic deeds was not good luck. Potter getting kissed by Draco was not good luck.

He looked at the bottle of potion, held in trembling fingers.

Potter was an idiot. It was only regular Felix Felicis that was toxic in large quantities, not this diluted crap that Apothecary sold. He'd probably have to drink a gallon of it to overdose on this stuff.

He was tempted to swallow the rest of it at once, just to prove Potter wrong, but surely half of the remaining potion would suffice.

It felt hot, burning hot, going down, and for just a moment he worried he'd made a mistake after all, when he felt a sharp stab of pain in his gut. But the pain disappeared soon thereafter, and he felt fine. More than fine.

He opened the doors and looked out at the grounds. It was dark now, but the road leading away from the castle was lined with floating candles, just like the ones above the tables in the Great Hall, and he could see the waiting Thestrals and carriages clearly. The Whomping Willow was also lit brightly, illuminating the grounds beside the castle and the edges of the Forbidden Forest, its softly moving branches causing shadows to shift and chase each other across the lawn.

Draco walked down the steps, keeping his distance from the Thestrals, and found himself turning towards the lake. He'd never set foot near the lake during all of his seventh year, but he felt drawn there now.

He saw it as he approached: white marble by flickering water. The horror within him was muted by anticipation, a sense of impending triumph, and his heart beat faster.

He approached the tomb, still not knowing what he was doing here, when suddenly he did know.

He was robbing a grave. He was robbing Dumbledore's grave. He remembered his Hand of Glory, and his shrill, almost hysterical laughter sounded across the waters of the lake.

Best Friend of Thieves and Plunderers! Your son has fine taste, sir! Borgin had said.

Father had not been pleased.

But Father was in Azkaban now.

He spelled the tomb open. Even under the influence of the potion, he couldn't bear to look inside it and stood at a distance. "Accio wand."

The wand flew to his hand, and his fingers closed around it, thrilling at the feel of it, even as part of him was silently horrified that the hands of a corpse had been closed around it mere seconds ago.

He knew this wand. He had seen it sailing over the ramparts of the Astronomy Tower.

How does it feel, to have been the master of the Elder Wand and never even touched it? Ollivander had asked.

Well, he was holding it now.

And he wasn't stealing it. He'd won this wand from Dumbledore. Even Potter had said so.

But he wouldn't leave Dumbledore with nothing. Using his hawthorn wand, he levitated the Girard wand inside the tomb and put the Elder Wand in his pocket.

Once the tomb was resealed, he turned away quickly. He was going to find out what Potter was so worried about having left in the forest.

He didn't laugh any more as he walked towards the trees. Something about the feel of that wand in his hand, the slight weight of it now in his pocket, killed any laughter before it could form in his throat. His throat and chest both felt tight, his body almost vibrating with the near painful energy that now seemed to have no escape from his body. He walked faster in an effort to ease the discomfort. Whatever he needed to do in the forest, it was obviously important.

The light from the Whomping Willow lit his path to the forest's edge. He felt dizzy as he walked, but the cause seemed obvious: the agitated movement of the tree's branches as he passed, which caused the lights to spin and dart, a few of them guttering out.

Before entering the forest, he cast Lumos, and something on the ground caught his eye—two halves of a Snitch, nearly buried in the dirt, but the light from his wand glinting off them nevertheless. He felt another sharp stab of pain in his gut as he bent over to pick them up, but the pain eased again as he brushed the dirt from the Snitch with trembling hands and fitted the two halves back together. He placed it in his pocket alongside the wand.

The pain and the dizziness both returned intermittently as he walked, but he couldn't focus on them. He couldn't focus on the sounds of the forest either, didn't care if the rustling in the bushes or the cracking of twigs was caused by Acromantulas or centaurs or any of the other forest creatures he'd always been so terrified of. He couldn't focus on anything but whatever it was he was walking towards.

Eventually, he tripped on something and fell, hard. He barely registered the pain in his knee as he realized that whatever he was looking for, it was right here. His fingers traced the ground in front of him, brushing leaves away, burrowing lightly into the earth, finally uncovering a small stone. The light from his wand revealed a design of some sort on it. He turned the stone over in his fingers once, twice, three times.

Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape, Charity Burbage, and Vincent Crabbe were standing in front of him.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" shouted Draco, stumbling back. They weren't ghosts, he could see immediately, they were more substantial than that, and so what if they weren't entirely solid, they shouldn't have been there at all.

"We're here to watch you die, apparently," said Snape, disgust evident in his voice.

"I'm not dying," asserted Draco, eyes darting from one impossible face to another, then found himself doubling over at the renewed pain in his stomach.

"You're cleverer than this, Draco," said Snape, in a marginally more gentle voice. "Of course you're dying. You've taken more Felix Felicis in one day than would be advisable to take in a lifetime. A lethal dose."

"I couldn't have taken that much," said Draco, eyes wide. "My luck kept getting worse. The potion wasn't working. It was diluted."

Though Snape's face was not entirely solid, the irritation on it was plain to see. "The more you flooded your system with Felix Felicis, the less able you were to control your emotions or distinguish between your own misguided impulses and the promptings of the potion. Your poor luck was the direct result of your own poor judgment. Your poorest decision of the day, of course, was the one to poison yourself."

"You're one to talk! You got yourself killed. Because you were in love with Potter's mother. Potter told the Dark Lord and everyone else there that night about your doe Patronus. Pathetic."

"She did have lovely eyes," said Dumbledore, and Draco's rage enabled him to finally look the man—ghost—whatever he was, full in the face.

"You shut up!"

Dumbledore looked back at him, his gaze understanding. Draco flinched away. His eyes touched briefly on Crabbe but immediately darted away and settled on Burbage. She was wearing the same clothes she'd been wearing when he'd seen her last, suspended over the table, moments before her death.

"What are you doing here?" Draco shouted. "I don't even know you!"

"I imagine that my death was very traumatic for you," Burbage said. What a stupid woman. He was glad he'd never taken her classes.

"I wasn't traumatized by your death. I haven't thought about you once!"

"The Muggles believe that the first stage of grief is denial," she said, as if she were back at Hogwarts, delivering a lecture, rather than standing here in front of him, dead.

"I'm not grieving for you, you Muggle-loving bitch!"

"But I'd say that you're in stage two: anger," she concluded, obviously unruffled.

A wave of dizziness and nausea hit him, and he slumped down, groaning.

"I suspect you won't need to tell him about stage three," said Snape.

"Severus," said Dumbledore, "you always did get like this when you were worried about someone."

Draco looked up to see Snape glaring at Dumbledore, but he realized there was concern in Snape's eyes when he turned back to Draco, and for the first time it hit him that he was very likely going to die.

"If I'm dying, you can't save me. None of you can. You couldn't even save yourselves!"

"And yet..." said Dumbledore quietly, "you are worth saving."

"I'm worth saving?" Draco cried, almost hysterically. "You wouldn't say that if you knew—" And then, at the look on Dumbledore's face, he realized it was very possible Dumbledore did know. Unable to cope with that thought, he turned to Crabbe instead. Crabbe gazed back at him calmly.

"Don't you have anything to say? Or do you just stand around like a great lump in the afterlife, like you did at Hogwarts. When you weren't setting things on fire and getting yourself killed?"

"That wasn't a very bright thing for me to do," said Crabbe. "But if you picked friends for being bright, you would have been friends with that Granger girl, wouldn't you?"

And he couldn't deal with it. With Crabbe, here, asking what if Draco had been friends with Granger.

"The Granger girl? You mean the Mudblood you tried to Cruciate? The one you tried to set on fire? That one?" Draco screamed.

"I wish I hadn't done that," said Crabbe.

And something in Draco tore open.

"Well, that's too bad! Because you're fucking dead! Because you fucking killed yourself and it's too late to do anything about it!"

Another wave of dizziness hit Draco, and he realized that his cheeks were wet at about the same time that he realized Potter was standing between Burbage and Crabbe, staring at him. He had just enough time to think to himself that Potter probably wasn't going to slice him open this time when another stab of pain hit him that was so severe, it felt like he was being cut up anyway, from the inside out.

The stone slipped from between his fingers, and then everyone was gone. Except Potter. Because Potter was grabbing him by the back of the head, forcing his mouth open, and shoving some small rock or a dried bean in his mouth, and Draco tried to spit it out.

"Malfoy, you stupid bastard," said Potter, holding Draco's mouth shut, and Draco realized it was a bezoar and swallowed it.

He collapsed, panting, head on Potter's shoulder. Potter's arm went around him, tight.

"Where did you get the bezoar?" Draco finally asked, his voice rough.

"From Slughorn."

"How did you find me?"

"I have a map." That made no sense, unless Potter had a map that showed where Draco was, but Draco wasn't up to discussing it further.

Another long moment passed, and as Draco's head cleared, he began to realize that he was in fact sitting in the middle of the Forbidden Forest snuggled up with the Boy Who Lived. He shifted away, uncomfortable. Potter took the hint and withdrew his arm.

"You saved me again," Draco finally said. "This is getting to be really embarrassing."

Potter cleared his throat. "Well, you're worth saving, aren't you? That's what Dumbledore said."

"You heard all that?"

"Well, I heard your end of it. I couldn't see who you were talking to. But I worked it out."

Draco finally forced himself to look at Potter's face, just so he could properly communicate how very unimpressed he was with Potter's reasoning skills. "And you're still basing all your decisions on what that old bastard says?"

"No," said Potter. "No, I'm not."

Draco tried to stand up, but a jolt of pain shot down his leg. He shifted into a more comfortable position, as if he'd intended to remain sitting all along. "Then what exactly are you basing your decisions on?"

Potter sighed. "All right, so I was angry. But once I realized you had overdosed, I started thinking about how you'd acted earlier in the day...the things you did. When I took Felix Felicis...I did things I never would have thought to do otherwise. But it didn't make me do anything I didn't actually want to do."

Draco crossed his arms over his chest. This was a line of thought he did not want to pursue. "And?"

"You did good things. For the most part. Even if you did some of them for self-serving reasons." Potter paused, frowning. "And some of them just to be annoying."

"I wouldn't say my actions were entirely self-serving. Greyback's capture served the interest of quite a few people."

"Well, that's my point," said Potter. "Look, what does that potion do? It makes you more confident. And it helps you know the right thing to do. If you'd known the right thing to do...and been more confident...you'd have done the right things in the war too."

Potter's logic was painful. "Just what 'right things' are you deluding yourself into thinking I would have done? You don't know me at all, Potter."

"I saw your face when you looked at Greyback. You hated him as much as I do. And you obviously care about the people who died—you were crying about them not ten minutes ago."

"I was not," Draco said furiously.

Potter just looked at him. Well, this conversation was over.

Draco stood up, wincing. Potter rose as well. As Draco brushed off his now-dilapidated dress robes, he saw the stone still lying on the ground.

"What do you want to do with that stone, anyway, Potter? You said you didn't want to leave it here? You shouldn't leave it here, by the way; the thing is evil."

Potter stared at it. "Did you ever read The Tale of the Three Brothers?"

"Of course I've read it. Has anyone not?" Then he paused. "Wait, are you saying this is the Resurrection Stone? From a Beedle the Bard story?"

Potter nodded. "The girl in the story—the one brought back from the dead—she really suffered. And the man who brought her back suffered too, until he went mad and killed himself. I don't think this stone is a good thing. I'd destroy it if I knew how."

"Fiendfyre would destroy it," Draco found himself suggesting. "We could go up to the Room of Requirement and destroy it now."

Potter shone the light from his wand in Draco's face and leaned forward, staring at him. "Are you sure that potion is out of your system? You're honestly proposing that we go into Hogwarts—while the castle is filled with people celebrating the fact that it's finally been repaired—and light a Fiendfyre storm right in the middle of it?"

"Of course the potion's out of my system—you gave me a bezoar, for Merlin's sake. As far as the room, it survived the first time, didn't it? And get that light out of my face."

"You were there, Malfoy. Crabbe killed himself. He nearly killed us."

"Crabbe didn't know what he was doing. Look." Draco paused. He hadn't told anyone what he was about to tell Potter now. "I've...I've done a lot of studying about Fiendfyre in the last couple of months. I wanted to know...what I could have done. What I would need to do if I ever encountered it in the future."

Potter was silent for a moment. "And what did you find out?"

"There are spells for targeting what the Fiendfyre burns...for the first minute or so..."

"Yes, that's very reassuring," Potter said, rolling his eyes.

"But also spells to protect the caster. And spells for ending the fire. Besides, there would be nothing preventing us from standing much nearer the door this time." Potter's expression was unreadable, and Draco huffed in irritation. He didn't know why he'd offered to help with this in the first place. "Look, Potter, it's up to you. You can leave this stone right here and hope no one ever stumbles across it. Or we can go to the Room of Requirement and destroy it tonight."

Potter thought for a moment, then picked up the stone and put it in his pocket. "All right. All right, we'll do it. But we need to go one other place before we go to the Room of Requirement."

"Look, how much walking are we talking about here? My knee's not doing well," Draco admitted. "I'm not up to trooping around the grounds of Hogwarts all evening."

"If I'd thought to bring my broom," said Potter, frowning, "we could have flown on that."

"No, thanks. That would be a little embarrassing, don't you think? Besides, you might enjoy it too much."

And then he remembered that he had kissed Potter, that he had groped Potter, and that Potter had shoved him away. Forget embarrassing, this was fucking humiliating.

He began walking towards the castle, or tried to, but nearly fell as his knee proved unable to support his weight. Potter grabbed Draco's arm and pulled it over his shoulder.

"Look," Potter said into his ear, and Draco shivered. "You're being stupid. I know that now that you're...yourself again, you don't want me to touch you, but you can hardly walk. I'll help you get up to the castle, and then Madam Pomfrey can see to your knee. We'll do the rest afterwards."

They walked together like that, silently, for a while. It wasn't too incredibly awkward once they worked out how to match their steps. Draco wondered how deep into the forest they were, and how near they might be to Acromantulas or centaurs, but it was hard to feel too frightened with Harry Potter snug against his side. And he was going to pretend he had never had that thought. Ever.

"What did you do, Potter? On your perfect day?" Draco eventually found himself asking.

Potter shifted against his side. "I got a memory about Voldemort from Slughorn. Then I gave the rest to my friends, so they could protect themselves—that night you let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts."

Draco didn't know what to say to that.

"I used to wish I had Felix Felicis that year," he finally said. "I thought it would help me repair the cabinet. Now I think...I don't think it would have." He felt awkward enough at the confession to continue, "Really, though, giving it all away? That's pathetic, Potter."

Potter's hair brushed against his face as Potter turned to look at him. "You think so?"

"Well. No, I don't suppose I do. Not completely pathetic, anyway. I can understand wanting to protect your friends."

"Is that why you were there?" Potter asked. "With Crabbe and Goyle in the Room of Requirement? Or had you really decided you wanted to take me to Voldemort?"

Draco felt a spike of resentment at Potter's apparent unwillingness to discuss anything other than Draco's Death Eater cock-ups. "I hadn't exactly...decided what I was going to do. I was going to ask you questions about that diadem. The fire sort of got in the way."

Potter stopped walking and turned to Draco. "What if I'd told you about it? About what the diadem was? And asked you to be on my side. To help me. Would you have done it?"

Draco stared at him. Then he imagined Harry Potter, sharing secrets, asking for his help. He was filled with warmth at the very idea. It was embarrassing. "You'd have had to make a very convincing argument," he finally said.

Potter looked quite gratified at the idea of Draco choosing his side. As they walked, Draco took sideways glances when he thought Potter wasn't looking. A pleased little smile kept lingering at the corners of Potter's mouth.

That mouth that Draco had kissed not even two hours ago, he remembered, and immediately tried to push the thought from his mind.

Draco had never been so glad to see the edge of the forest.

As the Hogwarts grounds became visible, Potter stopped, staring at the Quidditch pitch.

"You were using Felix Felicis when you beat me."

"Obviously," said Draco, rolling his eyes.

"That's illegal, you know."

"No, it's illegal to use it in professional matches."

"Well, it's cheating," Potter insisted. "It's against the rules."

"Right, Potter. Because the rules are always so important to you."

"I'll beat you next time," Potter said confidently.

Potter didn't even realize what he had just said.

"We'll see," Draco said, looking off to the side and trying to keep the smile from his voice. "I found a broken Snitch, you know, on the forest's edge, over there by the groundskeeper's hut." He plunged his hand into his pocket, and the smile died on his face as he felt, not the Snitch, but what was in his pocket alongside it: the Elder Wand. He'd forgotten it was there.

So Potter thought what people did under the influence of the potion showed what they were really capable of. Their true worth. He felt like he was going to be sick.

Potter had stopped and was staring at him as if he already knew. But apparently he didn't.

"You found a broken Snitch by Hagrid's cabin? That's..." and Potter gave a shaky laugh. "That's really strange." After a moment Potter prompted Draco to begin walking again, and with every step, Potter's shoulders, which had tensed under Draco's arm, relaxed further. Draco stayed tense, but Potter didn't seem to notice. "That's...the one from my first game," Potter finally said. "The one I caught with my mouth. Remember how you used to make fun of that?" Potter turned his head, smiled at Draco.

Whatever Potter's good opinion of him was, he'd already thrown it away. Potter just didn't realize it yet.

And what had he done it for? He'd taken the wand, but it wasn't really his. It wouldn't work any better for him than it had for the Dark Lord.

A chill went through his body when he realized: it wasn't his, but it could be. He wouldn't have to kill Potter. He wouldn't even have to hurt him. Just disarm him. Potter was going to hate him anyway.

"Dumbledore saved it..." Potter was saying, and Draco flinched at the name. "Held onto it all those years. After he died..."

Draco pulled the wand from his pocket, hand trembling. Jerking his arm from Potter's shoulders, he pulled back from the warmth of Potter's body, taking several painful, limping steps away. He pointed the wand at Potter but couldn't bring himself to say the words, or even think them.

Potter, bewildered, took a step towards Draco, saw the wand in Draco's hand, and froze. The swaying lights and shadows from the Whomping Willow played over Potter's face, making his expression difficult to read.

"Where did you get that?"

"You know where I got it, Potter."

"You're right, I do. I was going to get it myself, as soon as we got your leg fixed."

"What?"

"That's the other place we had to go. Before the Room of Requirement."

Draco kept the wand pointed at him, silently cursing his hand, which wouldn't stay steady.

"I thought..." said Potter, his expression far too calm, didn't he understand what Draco had done? "I thought they would be safe, in the forest, in the tomb. But today I realized how easy it would be for someone to, say, take a potion and stumble across them. Do you know what another person like Grindewald, like Voldemort, could..." Potter trailed off, finally looking disturbed by something. As if Draco plundering Dumbledore's tomb wasn't disturbing enough.

"A person like me, do you mean?" Draco shouted.

"Malfoy," said Potter, "this wand—is called the Deathstick. And you're not the master of it any more. Are you really going to fight me for it? Is that what you want? I don't think you do. In fact, I know you don't." Potter took a step closer, his gaze focused, intent. "I don't think you pulled it from the tomb out of some desire to become the next Dark Lord. Or even so you could run off with it and enjoy the glory of owning an all-powerful wand until someone killed you for it. I think you did it so you could help me destroy it."

Draco's arm fell to his side. "What?"

"You said if I'd asked you for help, you would have given it to me. I'm asking you for help now."

Potter stepped closer still, and Draco replayed the words in his head, tried to make sense of them.

"You want my help," he finally said.

"Yes."

"Well..." said Draco, his heart still beating very fast. "All right."

"Here, give me that wand," Potter said, hand outstretched. Draco handed it to him.

Draco didn't know what he expected Potter to do next—maybe put the wand away, maybe smack Draco over the head once he'd got the wand away from him. But instead, Potter kept the wand out and crouched at Draco's feet. "Potter?" Draco asked in mild alarm. "Potter, what are you...?"

"Just a second...there." Potter touched the wand to Draco's knee, and suddenly the pain was gone.

"Oh." Draco blinked. That wand was brilliant. And he was going to help destroy it. He was insane; his father would never forgive him.

"I knew you'd say yes," said Potter, looking up.

Draco glared at him.

"That was a compliment!" Potter rushed to add. "What I meant to say is, thank you. For saying yes."

"It was a convincing argument," Draco muttered.

They walked together up to the castle, not saying much, both of them lost in their own thoughts. Draco told himself that he did not miss walking with his arm slung around Potter's shoulder and thought instead about the stone, and the wand. Something occurred to him.

"That wand is from the story too, isn't it?"

Potter nodded.

"The wand, the stone, I suppose next you'll be telling me you have an invisi—" Then he stopped to stare

at Potter.

Potter shrugged. "Since our first year."

"You used Death's invisibility cloak to throw mud at me in our third year. No wonder I hated you."

"I used it to follow you around a lot during sixth year too."

Even yesterday, that thought would have provoked nothing but anger, but now Draco found himself flushing and wondering what private moments Potter might have been witness to that year. He pushed those thoughts away too.

When they reached the entrance hall, Draco stopped, turned to Potter. "Potter. I didn't. I didn't mean to laugh."

"I know," said Potter, glancing back at the door, his lips pinched tightly together. "I know you didn't mean it."

ROOM OF REQUIREMENT, 9:07 pm

Draco wasn't sure what he'd find when he opened the door to the Room of Requirement. He'd asked for a safe place to use Fiendfyre to destroy the wand and stone. What he found was a very large room, smaller than the Room of Hidden Things, but larger than the one Potter had used for his little club during fifth year. Despite the lack of any obvious sources of light, the room was well-lit. The walls, ceiling, and floor were made of gleaming black stone. In the center of the room was a deep stone bowl, made from the same material. At the far end of the room, opposite the door, were large piles of flammable material; some were obvious choices, like wood, or straw, but others were more surprising—pieces of furniture, large bolts of fabric.

Potter closed the door behind them. It immediately turned to stone as well, but the door handle was still

visible. Potter looked at Draco, waiting. It was unsettling.

"Go ahead and...put them in," Draco said, gesturing at the bowl, and as Potter did so, Draco reviewed the necessary spells in his mind. He knew them, he was sure of it. He could even picture the book on his desk—the book the owl had been sitting on—and the pages on which he would find the spells. He could do this.

But as Potter crossed the room again, he felt a moment of doubt. Potter was trusting him. What if he did make a hash of the spells somehow? What if Potter burnt up, just like Crabbe?

Then he remembered the bottle still in his pocket. He withdrew it, inspected it—there was still a small amount of potion remaining, at least a tablespoon. Looking up, he saw Potter staring at the bottle in Draco's hand, a dark expression on his face.

Draco offered the near-empty bottle to Potter. "Look, I obviously can't drink any more of this, but there's no reason why you can't. If you're worried about how it's going to go—"

"I'm not worried," said Potter firmly, as he took the bottle and slipped it into his pocket. "But that doesn't mean I'm going to leave that in your possession." The git actually looked irritated he hadn't thought to confiscate it earlier.

"You're welcome," said Draco dryly.

Then there was nothing left to do but get started. Draco positioned himself directly across from the stone bowl, and very near the door.

"You'll have to stand close," he said, not looking at Potter and making an effort to keep his voice even. "The protection spell doesn't extend far beyond the caster, so...the closer the better."

Potter swallowed, eyes flicking to Draco's, then slowly stepped behind Draco and put his arms around

Draco's waist. "That good?" he asked in a low voice.

"That's fine," Draco said shortly.

He turned his attention to the center of the room, ignoring the firm press of Potter's body behind him. This was important. He needed to focus.

He cast the protective spell in a barely audible whisper. Then he cast the next spell. The one that unleashed the Fiendfyre.

The fire exploded from his wand, already roaring and threatening to damage all in its path, but the vast majority of it went into the stone bowl, as he had directed it to. He and Potter both watched, silently, as the fire churned, an occasional flame leaping out, circling, and diving back in. The walls of the room gleamed with a muted red light.

After a moment, many flames leapt out, and Draco raised his wand. Potter grabbed his hand.

"The minute's up," said Draco. "I need to end it."

"You said we're protected by the spell," Potter said, his other arm tightening around Draco briefly. "Give it as much time as you can. We don't know how long it will take to destroy that stone."

They watched as more flames emerged, traveling to the back of the room where all the tinder was. The flames were beginning to take shapes—serpents, dragons, birds—and they began attacking the flammable objects. At first they ignored the wood and straw in favor of the more personalized, human objects—chairs and tapestries—but soon the entire back of the room was ablaze.

A dragon rose up from the inferno, appearing to roar at them, though it was impossible to hear above the roar of the blaze itself. Draco raised his wand again, and Potter didn't grab his hand this time, but

Potter's arms tightened around him further. "Not yet," Potter shouted.

The stone bowl was mostly empty now; the room itself had become an oven of sorts, Draco realized, though he couldn't feel the heat through the protection spell. The flammable objects at the back of the room were nearly consumed. The dragon dove for them, followed closely by two serpents and a chimaera.

He cast the spell to end the fire. All the flames that had not yet taken animal form winked out of existence immediately, but he had to cast the spell again, separately for each of the ones that had. He got the dragon, birds, and chimaera before they reached them, but it was a near thing. The protection spell ought to have held up, but he was glad not to have had to test it.

When the room was finally empty of fire, they both stood for a moment. Potter's arms were still wrapped firmly around Draco. Draco wasn't quite sure what to think about that. He cleared his throat.

"What was that last spell you used?" Potter finally asked, and Draco could feel the vibrations of Potter's chest against his back, the touch of Potter's breath on the back of his neck. "I couldn't hear it."

"It's really two spells, combined as one. Part of it is for putting out the fire, but it's part banishing spell, because the fire's demonic."

One of Potter's hands moved up, higher, over Draco's ribcage. The other stayed still, aside from one thumb, which began sliding gently, back and forth, over the muscles of Draco's stomach. Draco's hands, which had remained steady throughout the entire Fiendfyre experience, began to tremble.

"Potter..." Draco said.

"Yes?"

"I think we should check the wand and stone. Over there."

"Er...right," said Potter, unwinding his arms from Draco's torso and stepping back. Draco immediately strode to the center of the room. He didn't know what expression Potter was wearing, because he didn't look.

Coughing, he cast a spell to disperse the lingering smoke in the air. There was nothing remaining in the bowl but a dusting of ash and some blackened, crumbled bits of stone.

He felt Potter's presence at his side. "It worked," Draco told him. "The Fiendfyre destroyed them both. Nothing went wrong."

"I wasn't worried," said Potter.

"I thought I was going to die," said Draco and looked up to see a frown beginning on Potter's face. "I mean, not this time, of course. But last time."

"I didn't think I was going to die then. I didn't take the time to consider it. I thought I was going to die in the forest, though. When I walked out to meet Voldemort."

Draco shuddered at the thought. He still didn't understand how Potter could have done it. "What did you think of? When you thought you were going to die?"

"The last thing I thought of was Ginny. What it felt like to kiss her."

Something in Draco froze up at that, and his shoulders went tight. "Oh." He turned away, making to walk toward the door, but Potter grabbed his arm.

"It wasn't the same as I remembered it," Potter said quietly. "When I did get to kiss her again."

Nothing's been the same as I remembered it, Draco wanted to say, but he didn't want to think about all the things that were different, about his friends who were gone, and his home that was damaged, and his world that had changed, and his father who was in prison, and he definitely didn't want to think about what Father would have to say about what Draco was thinking about doing just now.

He looked up at Potter, who was staring at him. Who was staring at his mouth. "Draco. In the entrance hall. When you..."

"I wasn't in my right mind in the entrance hall, Harry." And this was true. The only problem was, he apparently still wasn't in his right mind. Or perhaps his right mind was just another one of those things he had lost somewhere in one of his near-death experiences, along with his ability to make rational decisions.

"So are you saying you didn't want to...?"

Draco compressed his lips. "Why, Potter? Are you saying you did?"

"Yeah," Potter said. "Yeah, that's what I'm saying."

Draco stared at him.

He ought to tell Potter tough luck, he was into girls. Girls like Astoria Greengrass, or Pansy. That the circumstances that had led up to that insane interaction in the entrance hall would not be repeated. Ever.

But the insanity was obviously spreading, because he couldn't stop thinking about what Potter's hands had felt like on his chest and stomach, what Potter's hair had felt like brushing against his cheek, what

Potter's fingertip had felt like on the palm of his hand...

And then he couldn't say anything anyway because Potter's hand was clenched in the back of his hair, and Potter's tongue was in his mouth, and god, he wanted this, so much.

Too much, it soon became clear, as Potter's fist relaxed its grip and his fingers began to stroke soft, gentle patterns against Draco's scalp. Beyond the smooth slide of Potter's mouth against his, and the pressure of Potter's hip against the erection Draco was now completely unable to ignore, there was the feel of Potter's arm around him, clutching him tightly, the solidity of Potter's chest pressed against Draco's, the smell of Potter that had somehow become familiar to Draco during the course of this day, and they were all doing strange things to Draco's insides, making his chest clench up, his throat feel tight, and this wasn't supposed to be about being close to Potter. When men did things like this it wasn't supposed to be about anything more than getting off.

He reached down, grabbed Potter like he had before, and Potter didn't shove him away this time. He dropped his forehead down onto Draco's shoulder and moaned low in Draco's ear. Draco felt chills all over his body. Wrapping his free arm more tightly around Potter, he pressed his face into Potter's hair. And this was still about being close to Potter, he realized, and he shoved Potter away, hard.

Potter stood there, panting, and blinking at Draco in confusion. "Draco, what...?"

"I'm not—I can't—" Draco said, lips still wet and tingling from Potter's kiss. He wasn't sure what he intended to say, or if it would even be true. Potter was still staring at him, cheeks flushed, pupils dilated, and Draco was not standing nearly far enough away from him. Draco took several steps back, turned to stare at one of the smooth, black walls, and stood breathing heavily, struggling to get his own arousal under control.

He didn't realize Potter had closed the distance between them until he felt Potter's hand on his arm.

Draco jerked away from Potter's grip. "Look, Potter, I hope you weren't intending on repeating that, because—" He stopped again, unable to complete the sentence.

Potter watched him silently for a moment. "Well, if we did, I'd like to find somewhere a little more comfortable next time. We're in the Room of Requirement," he added, glancing at the walls of the room almost reproachfully. "You'd think it would have given us a bed or something."

"I suppose we didn't require one," said Draco, and did not think about himself, and Potter, and a bed. He already felt too disgustingly warm and safe around Potter without throwing blankets into the mix. "I need to leave."

"Draco, wait."

"What?"

"You still owe me a Quidditch rematch."

Draco blinked. "Right," he finally said. "Right."

"How does tomorrow sound?"

Tomorrow sounded absolutely terrible. Doing anything with Potter any time this year would be a bloody awful idea.

"Tomorrow would probably be all right," Draco found himself saying. "But" he continued pointedly, at Potter's triumphant expression, "Don't get any ideas. You're not getting the Snitch, let alone..." and he flushed. "Anything else," he concluded lamely.

Potter's mouth quirked up a bit, as if he might possibly be amused, and Draco bristled. "There wouldn't be any point in it anyway. You'll...you'll be back together with that Weasley girl within the week."

"No, I don't think I will," Potter said, all trace of amusement gone, his gaze burning and intense. And

Draco wanted things, wanted Potter's arms around him again, Potter's lips on his neck, Potter's fingers in his hair.

He wanted to kiss Potter again. He nearly did.

"I need to go," Draco repeated. He needed time to think. He'd done enough impulsive things today.

"Draco," Potter said, and Draco met his gaze. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He couldn't control the fluttering sensation in his chest, but he could control his expression. He raised one eyebrow. "If you're lucky, Potter."

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