HAPPY H/D HOLIDAYS, MELUSINAHP!

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Recipient: melusinahp

Title: At Your Service

Pairing(s): Harry/Draco, Ron/Hermione and all those other characters one would expect to see at Hogwarts.

Summary: Hogwarts students are in danger; Harry is determined to save them all. There's only one thing he knows for certain: Draco Malfoy is somehow involved.

Rating: NC-17

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Warning(s): Word count? Also, lots of plot; romance will take awhile. It's there, though, never fear!

Epilogue compliant? No. This is an "eight-year" fic. Some interview canon included, though.

Word Count: ~96,000 (no, it's not a typo, sorry)

Author's Notes: melusinahp, I can't apologize enough. I didn't actually plan to write you a book, but this story insisted on being told slowly and carefully. This is a bit, er, happier than what you normally prefer, but I share your love of canon and Harry, and I'm hoping to distract you with numerous canon references. This fic was incredibly fun to write, so thank you for your wonderful prompt. It was a joy to write for you. ♥

Massive thanks to my betas for all their corrections, suggestions and incredibly helpful concrit. Making someone beta a 96K fic is more than a little cruel; I can't thank you enough for attacking this monster without a single word of complaint. You are absolute stars. ♥

(At Your Service)

Tags: [fic], [long/chaptered fic], rated: nc-17, round: winter 2011

At Your Service

Chapter One

Wright Query

Ron Weasley stabbed his sausage. He took a bite and chewed on it thoughtfully, glancing at the Great Hall ceiling and grimacing at the darkening clouds. They seemed to have gathered above Hogwarts castle to glare down at them.

"It's an omen," he declared. "Today, the sky will cry together with Gryffindors." Yesterday, the sky really had cried. The weather was so dreadful, the match had to be postponed. Another day's wait had only served to make everyone even more anxious.

"Omens are a bit unnecessary, don't you think?" Harry stabbed his own sausage, but decided he could not eat. His stomach was in knots, though that had little to do with the match. He stabbed the sausage again, just because he liked the way it burst beneath his fork. There, I killed it; I can't possibly eat it now. "Not with Pyke playing Seeker."

"Never mind Pyke." Ron took another bite. "Graham will bury us before Harper gets the Snitch."

"He's not that bad."

"He's worse than Pyke!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Hermione folded the Daily Prophet and set it aside with a huff. "You both think Gryffindor will lose just because you're not playing."

Ron goggled at her. "Did you know Graham is likely to dodge when the Quaffle flies at him? And he's the bloody Keeper!"

"Yes, well, nonetheless, I'm feeling rather optimistic. The Slytherin team suffered losses, too."

"Suffered isn't the word I'd use. Good riddance describes the situation better."

Harry nodded. "Their new Keeper isn't half-bad, their Beaters are even better and Harper is a good Seeker. Compared to Pyke, he's brilliant."

Hermione arched an eyebrow. "Compared to you, he's quite terrible, though."

Well, yes. Harry knew better than to say that aloud. "We'll lose, Hermione. And not just the match; we'll lose the Cup today."

Ron rounded on him. "Don't say that! There's always Hufflepuff. Surely we'll beat Hufflepuff."

"Jane Bradshaw," Harry reminded him. They had seen little Jane flying two weeks ago. The daughter of Tornados' star Seeker, Eleanor Bradshaw, had inherited her mother's talent. Born in August, the first-year Hufflepuff had snatched the title of the youngest Seeker of the century. Seeing her zoom around the Quidditch pitch, with a smile on her face and wind in her hair, had made Harry feel nostalgic. Don't swallow the Snitch, he thought at her, but then he remembered the last time his lips had touched the Snitch and he was glad he did not have to play Quidditch this year.

He had never shared that sentiment with Ron, though. Just like he hadn't told Hermione he didn't really want to go back to Hogwarts. It seemed wrong to worry about Quidditch and essays when there were Death Eaters still on the loose. I should be out there; it's not over.

"You deserve this," Hermione had said. "You deserve a break. Quidditch and lessons and Hogsmeade weekends. No Death Eaters, no Voldemort, no life-threatening situations."

Maybe I do, Harry thought. But do I want it?

But here he was and now it was too late. It is our choices that show what we truly are, Dumbledore had told him once. Hogwarts had been his choice in the end, and what did that show? That he was idle? Or could his unhappiness with his choice show what he truly was, too? Harry stabbed his sausage again; it sprayed oily liquid all over his plate.

"Bradshaw," Ron bemoaned. "Ah, well. At least Malfoy is miserable, too."

Harry turned to the Slytherin table instinctively. Draco Malfoy was sulking and staring into his porridge.

"Don't know why, though," Ron added. "His team will win."

But it's not his team, Harry thought. Just like the Gryffindor team was no longer Harry's. They wore scarlet robes with a golden G sown in, and faces Harry barely recognised.

Ginny was on the team, Harry told himself. But Ginny was not his anymore, either.

"To be fair, he always looks miserable," Hermione said.

Malfoy looked up, as though he had heard her, but his eyes focused on Harry.

"It would be nice if we could play," Harry said. "I would have liked beating Malfoy again." That at least was true, he decided. But Malfoy did not look defiant. There was no smirking, no challenge in his gaze; he stared for a bit and then averted his eyes. Harry felt oddly disappointed. Malfoy did that a lot lately. Staring at Harry then looking hastily away. It was beginning to make Harry feel uncomfortable.

"Give it a rest, you two." Hermione stood up. "You think I wouldn't have liked to be the Head Girl?" She tossed her bag over her shoulder. It looked heavy; she most likely planned to read during the match. "The Board of Governors made its decision and so did you; there's no point crying about it." She looked

much too cross for someone who claimed to be at peace with those decisions.

Hogwarts Board of Governors had found itself in a predicament this year. The wizarding world had been in chaos, and O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. examinations had not taken place; not to mention the students had been ill-prepared for them at any rate. Many parents had been displeased and had demanded a solution, one that did not include their children finishing their education a year later than planned. In response, the Board had established O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. preparation lessons for the fifth and seventh-year students, with O.W.L. preparation lessons scheduled from June to September, to allow the students to take their O.W.L.s before their sixth-year had begun, and N.E.W.T. lessons scheduled from September to January, since Hogwarts castle had not been equipped to admit more than a handful of students before extensive restoration. At least that had been the official explanation for pushing back N.E.W.T.s so late. The gossip mill had claimed that McGonagall had put her foot down, said that everyone had suffered losses and there was no need to punish Hogwarts teachers with a rigorous summer schedule. "The N.E.W.T.s can wait," McGonagall had been quoted saying, "Hogwarts teachers deserve a break."

Preparation lessons were not obligatory, but most students had decided to attend them. Hermione had insisted they should ignore them and simply sign up for the seventh-year, which the three of them had missed in its entirety, but Harry and Ron had point-blank refused. Not even the promise of keeping their Quidditch positions on the Gryffindor team, which, as seventh-years, they would be entitled to, could persuade them. Eventually, she had given up and signed up for the preparation lessons as well, but had been cross about it ever since. Especially whenever Ron dared to bemoan his loss of prefect status and Keeper position.

"Look at it this way," Hermione added brightly, "we won't be around for the final match of the year, so if we truly lose the Quidditch Cup today, at least we won't miss anything." With that, she strode toward the Entrance Hall, her bag swinging merrily.

Ron scowled at her back, but then sighed. "She has a point, though. At least we won't have to look at Slytherins' smug little faces when they win."

"Except today we will," Harry pointed out.

"Whose side are you on?" Ron groaned and stood up. "Come on. All the good seats will be taken if we don't hurry up."

Harry abandoned his mangled sausage and followed him. They found Hermione in the crowded Entrance Hall.

"What's the hold up?" Ron craned his neck to see better.

Hermione cleared her throat. "We need a wider door," she said dryly. The doors were open wide, but the students seemed stuck in the doorway, as though too many had tried to walk through it at once. "You know," she added with an air of nonchalance, "Head Girl and Boy should handle this. Make everyone form a column and walk slowly. Then no one would get stuck. But are they here? No, they're not."

"You would do it so much better." Ron nodded emphatically.

"I would."

Ron seized his opportunity. "Well, I'll be a better Keeper than Graham."

Hermione snorted. "Apparently, it all falls apart without our guidance."

Seamus Finnigan appeared next to them. He shook his head sadly. "Kids these days, I swear. They can't even walk through a doorway." He frowned. "Not that I'm in a hurry to see that match. It's probably better if we all just stay here."

"Stop pushing me!" someone upfront yelled. "I can't go through. There's something wrong with the door."

"Looks like you'll get your wish," Harry told Seamus.

"It's not fair!" another voice screamed. Harry whirled around, recognising Goyle's high-pitched tone. Gregory Goyle stood a little farther away, near the Great Hall entrance, vigorously shaking a small Ravenclaw boy by the shoulders. "You're a liar! And a thief!"

Hermione was by Harry's side in an instant, wand in hand.

But the little Ravenclaw did not appear to need rescuing. His wand was out at once. "Unhand me or lose your fingers!" he said with authority.

Goyle took a hasty step back, staring at his fingers, as though counting them to make sure they were all still there. He seemed to have trouble deciding whether any were missing or not. The crowd laughed. That must have enraged Goyle because he charged forward like a bull. But before he reached the boy, Malfoy was there, pushing him back.

"Knock it off," Malfoy said in a whisper that carried through the hall. "Come on, we have a match to see."

"But he robbed me!" Goyle insisted.

The boy scowled at him. "Hardly."

"Piss off, kid," Malfoy snapped at him.

"You piss off," the boy said but then must have decided his comeback was lacking, and added, "Death Eater scum," then kicked Malfoy in the shin and ran off.

To general amusement, Malfoy yelped. "Why you little—" He took out his wand, as though he planned to run after the boy and hex him, but as he turned around his eyes met Harry's across the hall and Malfoy froze. Then he flushed, looked away and tucked his wand back into his robes. Students were still laughing at him.

Harry had no time to ponder Malfoy's reaction because Professor Sprout strode into the Entrance Hall. "What is going on here?" she cried.

Before anyone could say anything else, someone yelled, "We can't get through the door!" and the crowd dissolved into giggles.

"Oh, really now," Professor Sprout said, shaking her head as she pushed her way upfront. The crowd shuffled and parted to let her pass and Harry lost sight of Malfoy. "Well, that's odd," he heard Sprout say before she yelled, "Finite Incantatem!"

Hermione groaned. "I should have realised the entrance was Charmed." She rounded on Seamus. "Did you hex it? You said it would be better if we just stay here."

"Why, yes," Seamus said promptly. "With my amazing telepathic abilities."

Sprout cleared her throat. "Finite Incantatem!"

Hermione still had her wand in her hand. She twirled it around, looking very impatient. When Sprout failed for the third time, Hermione pushed forward, wand raised. "Let me help you, Professor!"

She was not the only one with that idea, however. Several students cried, "Finite Incantatem!" together and the spells clashed in midair with a bang. Sparks flew everywhere and set Professor Sprout's hat on fire. Hermione quickly put it out.

"Dear me!" Professor Sprout said, examining her hat. "You all need to learn some self-contro—"

She did not finish her sentence because the crowd realised the entrance was open and pushed forward, nearly running over everyone who was in the first row.

"How's that for an omen?" Ron commented grumpily.

It was chilly outside, but the dark clouds that the Great Hall ceiling had threatened with seemed to have dissolved. The sun was peeking through, its reflection shimmering on the lake's surface.

"Too bad," Ron said, squinting at the sun. "I was hoping it would rain. Then we could blame the weather for our defeat."

They found empty seats on the south stands, behind the goal posts. They were not the best seats, the Slytherins posts were too far away, but the moment they sat down, Hermione reached into her bag and took out two pairs of Omnioculars.

Ron stared at them in wonder.

"I Summoned them earlier," Hermione said defensively. "If I hadn't, then I'd have to listen to you wishing you had thought to bring them all through the match."

Ron gave her a soppy sort of look and Harry quickly snatched his Omnioculars and looked away, anticipating a heavy snogging session.

A small first-year had sat next to Harry and was staring at him with his mouth open. Harry did his best to ignore him, looking down at the pitch instead. It was easy to spot Ginny when the Gryffindor team strode onto the pitch. Her fiery red hair was pulled back into a long ponytail, her pale face a mask as she shook hands with the Slytherin captain. Good luck, Harry thought, wishing the team could beat the odds and win. Last time Gryffindor won, Ginny had rushed into Harry's arms and he had kissed her. That was unlikely to happen again, but the memory of Ginny's smile and the look in her eyes when she ran toward him still filled him with warmth. He had made her miserable a few months ago; she deserved to be happy again.

"Ginny should be Seeking," Ron said suddenly, sounding a bit breathless. The snogging session must have

ended. "She's a million times better than Pyke."

Harry shook his head. "She has more control over the situation as a Chaser. We're unlikely to win, but we need as many points as we can get."

"Ugh. They're off. I can't watch," Ron said, watching avidly through his Omnioculars.

The teams rose, shooting up like a mass of red and green rockets. They were in the air for barely a minute when the Slytherin Chaser flew at the goal posts and spun the Quaffle at Graham. The Slytherins roared as Graham dodged.

Ron sighed. "Blimey. What a start."

Harry was scanning the Slytherin stands, masochistically wanting to see their gloating faces. Try as he might, he could not spot the familiar glint of white-blond hair.

"Malfoy's not here," he said.

"What?" Ron asked, distracted. "Oh well, he's probably sulking because that kid kicked his arse in front of everyone."

"Maybe." Harry spotted Goyle, sitting between Blaise and a Slytherin girl Harry did not know.

The stands erupted again as Pyke was hit in the shoulder with a Bludger and nearly fell off his broom.

"This is slaughter," Ron said mournfully. "Why am I even here?"

Why am I? Harry thought, trying to find Draco Malfoy again. There was a queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. Malfoy had looked so guilty earlier, flushing crimson when he saw Harry, avoiding his gaze. What was he up to? The last time Malfoy had missed a Quidditch match, his reasons had been worrisome. Though, those were different times.

Come on, we have a match to see. That was what Malfoy had said. Why had he changed his mind? Or had he purposely said it loud enough for everyone to hear? Harry scanned the Ravenclaw side of the stands, looking for the little boy Malfoy and Goyle had been fighting with earlier. He could not find him either. That was worrying. Malfoy had looked so furious when the other students laughed at him. And now both he and the kid were gone. The whole school was here, but not them.

The crowd cheered again.

I can't just sit here. Harry stood up. "I have to..."

Ron blinked up at him in confusion.

"Bathroom," Harry said. "I'll be right back." He left before Ron could question him. He heard him yell, "Are you joking?" but thought it best to ignore it.

As Harry made his way to the exit, he felt as though all eyes were on him, guessing he was abandoning the match to chase down Draco Malfoy. That seemed unlikely, though. Surely, the game was more interesting.

"Robins—Carmichael—Weasley—Robins!" Orla Quirke, the new Quidditch commentator, was yelling. "Weasley! GRYFFINDOR SCORES!"

The Gryffindor side of the stands erupted with cheers and Harry hurried back to the castle.

Only after he closed the heavy Hogwarts door behind him, did he realise his head was pounding. It had

been so loud outside.

In the gloom of the empty castle, his plan to find Malfoy seemed utterly ridiculous. What could Malfoy possibly be doing? Surely not something that required investigation. The little Ravenclaw boy who had humiliated Malfoy in front of everyone would one day sport turnips for ears, Harry had no doubt, but Malfoy liked to serve his revenge cold. He was more likely to stew and plot than to act impulsively.

He was also unlikely to do any real harm to anyone, especially over such a small matter. The Malfoys had been careful not to step out of line lately. Lucius Malfoy had been all but throwing Galleons left and right at every good cause that was most fashionable at the time. He had even sent a hundred Galleons to Hermione, claiming the gold was meant to support her S.P.E.W. organization and insisting he had always felt the house-elves should be free, which was why he had freed his only remaining house-elf, Dobby, years ago.

"You can be certain of my sincerity," Lucius Malfoy's letter had said, "for I call upon the testimony of our esteemed Saviour, Harry Potter, who helped free Dobby the house-elf and suffered no consequences for that act."

After laughing at the letter for a full five minutes, Ron had shaken his head. "Is this a joke? He wants us to be grateful he didn't murder Harry for freeing Dobby?"

"It's a threat," Hermione had argued. "He just wants to remind us that he could have and still can kill Harry."

It's desperation, Harry had thought. The Malfoys were the human version of the Elder Wand: eager to maintain the illusion of victory by siding with the winner. Harry did not doubt Lucius's sincerity. He believed Lucius would sincerely and eagerly crawl, forever hoping his time to rise would come. And if he threw enough gold at everyone, his time would come, and he would be as respected as he had always been.

Sometimes Harry regretted speaking up at the Malfoys' trials, acknowledging they, too, were Voldemort's victims in many ways. He had not counted on his words carrying that much weight. Helping Lucius, in particular, had not been Harry's goal. "You didn't have to say that, Harry," Ron and Hermione

had told him. "Last year was rough for them, too, yes, but Lucius Malfoy is a man without any mercy." But Harry had remembered Dumbledore, slipping lower against the railing, his eyes boring into Draco Malfoy, who held him at wand point. "It is my mercy, and not yours, that matters now," Dumbledore had told him. He had offered Malfoy protection, for him and his parents. Had Dumbledore lived, he would have kept his word. Perhaps it was on Harry to keep it for him. If was too late for protection, but not too late for mercy. Lucius was lucky no one had died in Harry's second-year when Lucius had planted Tom Riddle's diary in Ginny's book, and Draco was lucky Ron and Katie had survived his attempts to murder Dumbledore. If things had been different, Harry did not think he could find any mercy within him.

He had to admit, though, having Lucius Malfoy throwing gold around seemed more beneficial than having him rot in Azkaban while his gold collected dust in the Gringotts vault.

Reflecting on Lucius Malfoy's behaviour of late had given Harry a pause. Now that he thought about it, Draco's stares and embarrassment took on a different meaning. Had Lucius ordered his son to befriend Harry Potter? It was a definite possibility. Lucius had done it in the past, after all.

Harry's mouth twisted into a smile as he reached the main staircase. Draco would have been displeased with those instructions. That would explain why Draco had been so quick to tuck his wand away earlier when he had seen Harry staring. Shooting hexes at little boys must have been on the list of things Draco must not do in the presence of Harry Potter.

Harry grinned wider, warming up to his new theory. He fully intended to abandon his search of Malfoy and go back to the match, but his legs carried him to the seventh floor instead. He blamed the staircases rather than his distracted mind. They had always been tricky. Left and right and round they went, dozens of them rising in the air all the way to the towers, but one step on the polished marble and they would halt their motion, waiting to be left alone before they stretched their stone arms again. And then one could only hope that the route they took everyday had not been drastically changed.

The seventh floor was as quiet as the rest of the castle. I should go back to the match. Or up to my common room. But Harry's thoughts went back to the Malfoys, as though stuck in a loop. Lucius's and Draco's plans need not correspond, Harry reasoned. Draco was just as likely to obey his father, as he was to defy him. After all, if Draco had been told to befriend Harry, he was doing a poor job of it so far.

The tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy looked just like Harry remembered, but the entrance to the Room of

Requirement did not. Harry stopped short. Where once there had been a solid wall and one had to wish the entrance to appear now stood a massive oak door with a carved, large knob. Harry had not actually expected to find Malfoy here, but apparently there was something here to be found. Or had he wished for something accidentally?

The room required specific instructions, Neville had always claimed, but Harry could not recall asking for anything just now, even vaguely.

Shrugging, he opened the door. The room was barren and small, barely the size of the cupboard Harry had once slept in. There were no spiders here, though. Harry wished there were. Spiders and dust, webs and broken pieces of furniture would make it look more natural, like a cupboard long abandoned. Instead, the room looked dead. The walls were charred, painted black by the fire that had consumed it.

The sight was saddening. Centuries of hidden history had burned in that room. Hundreds of students had hidden their treasures and their rubbish in there and now it had all been destroyed.

Harry's potions book was gone, too. Or rather, Snape's potions book. It had been a useful thing. And what if someone walked this way in the middle of the night and needed to pee? Hogwarts was supposed to provide a man with a magnificent collection of chamber pots should he have an exceptionally full bladder. Harry grimaced. Another Hogwarts treasure has been destroyed, Professor. Perhaps the castle had other secrets, ones that Harry had not discovered yet, nor would he.

Harry closed the door with a bang. He was sorry he ever came here. To the seventh floor, to Hogwarts. It only seemed to remind him of all that he had lost. Sometimes he felt like he was going backward. I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't. He wanted to be out there. Catching Death Eaters, stopping people from getting hurt. Not here, wasting precious time on Quidditch. And Malfoy. Kingsley had offered him a job. He could have been an Auror already. An honorary position, more training than actual assignments, but still, that would have been something. At least he would not be feeling so restless. And bored.

Scowling, Harry turned around. And then froze on the spot. Draco Malfoy stood a little farther away, looking left and right in panic, as though he had seen a ghost. His face was flushed and sweaty, hair a mess, breathing shallow. He had been running, and running fast. His wide eyes found Harry and he went still, for all intents and purposes looking like an ice sculpture.

"Potter?" he whispered, as though he believed Harry was merely a figment of his imagination.

Harry took a few careful steps forward; he was tempted to reach for his wand. Either to protect himself against Malfoy, or whomever Malfoy had been running from. "What are you doing here?" Harry asked. Malfoy's face was ashen. He looked ready to run again. "Why aren't you at the match?"

"Match?" Something flickered in Malfoy's eyes. Several long moments passed before he managed to compose himself. He stood up a little straighter. "I could ask you the same thing," he said, now calm, as though nothing was wrong at all.

"You could," Harry agreed. "But you didn't. I asked you."

If eyes could whip, Harry would have bloody welts on his face. Malfoy replied with his typical drawl. "Why, I decided to stay behind and graffiti the bathroom walls with 'Potter sucks.'"

"Is that so? You looked like you've seen a ghost."

Confusion crept into Malfoy's eyes. "I have. Fat Friar. He said, 'Hullo.'"

Harry sighed inwardly. Some Muggle expressions were not applicable in the wizarding world. I still have much to learn, he thought ruefully.

"Is something wrong?" he asked instead.

"Wrong? With my morning tea? With the universe? With you? No, yes and quite obviously. You'll have to be more specific than that."

Harry considered and picked the wrong that could be most helpful. "What's wrong with the universe?"

"It keeps putting you in my way."

Harry nodded. "All right." He moved aside with a sweeping gesture, urging Malfoy to pass.

Malfoy pursed his lips and turned away instead. "I was going that way."

"Really?" Harry hurried after him. "This corridor is a dead-end, you know. Did you spring out of the wall, then?"

"Must you follow me, Potter?" Malfoy snapped. "I thought those days were over."

"You could stop acting suspicious," Harry suggested. He did not fail to note that Malfoy had avoided Harry's—very reasonable—question.

"You could stop looking my way. Then it wouldn't matter how I act."

Harry sighed. This was going nowhere. "Fine. Honestly? I'm here because I thought you planned to hex that little Ravenclaw kid."

Malfoy stopped abruptly. "Seriously?" He sounded amused; he even smiled, but the smile did not reach his eyes. "The kid's probably at the match with everyone else."

"He's not."

Malfoy shook his head and stepped onto the stairs. They groaned, as though unhappy they must stay still

again. "Well, I hate to disappoint you, Potter, but I don't plan to hex anyone today. Except you, maybe, if you don't leave me alone."

"And why do you want to be alone? You have something important to do?"

Malfoy stopped again. "Fine," he said, looking resigned. "Since you're so intent on interrogating me... I just don't care about the match. I'm not even on the team. Slytherin wins or loses, what's it to me? It's two hours of my life gone to waste."

It was something Harry could have said about himself. He wondered if Malfoy knew that and had decided to use it to spin a tale Harry would believe in.

"And the kid?" Harry asked. "Who is he? Why was he fighting with Goyle?"

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Tommy Wright is a little git selling Wit-Sharpening potions. Goyle spent fifty Galleons on them, hoping they would make him clever. They didn't." Malfoy sighed. "I told him it's a hoax. Honestly, it's his own fault."

"I see." Harry nodded. "What were you doing on the seventh floor?"

Malfoy narrowed his eyes at him. "You're taking this interrogation stuff very seriously, aren't you?"

"And you're seriously avoiding the question."

The muscle in Draco's jaw twitched and he gripped the banister, clutching it tightly; he might have been pretending it was Harry's neck. "Sometimes I go there, that's all."

"To the Room?"

"Yes," Malfoy all but hissed and then added, defensive, "It's a useful room. Gives you a swimming pool if you want it."

"Oh? So you went up there for a swim?"

Malfoy shot him a glare. "Maybe."

"Right. And how exactly would that work? The room's dead, broken. It doesn't work anymore."

Malfoy blinked. "What are you on about, Potter? The door's right there."

"Yes, it's there. No wishing required. It's empty, though. It burned down; the magic's gone."

Malfoy's voice lowered to a whisper. "You went inside?"

Harry stared at him. He could not tell if Malfoy was feigning surprise or he had truly never entered the Room. He was definitely lying about something, though Harry had no idea why. "As did you, apparently," Harry said. "To have a swim."

Malfoy's expression transformed in an instant. Only after it hardened did Harry realise how vulnerable Malfoy had looked before. He was suddenly sorry he had ever questioned him. Perhaps vulnerability was all that Malfoy was trying to hide. He had looked so terrified earlier. The Room of Requirement held some awful memories for him.

Perhaps Malfoy should not have come back to Hogwarts, either. Perhaps he was going backward, too.

"I think I had enough for today, Potter," Malfoy said coolly. "We should do this again, though. I'll be a

naughty student again, and you can be a professor." Malfoy smirked and leaned in closer to whisper conspiratorially, "Is that the sort of thing you're into?"

Harry scowled, suddenly uncomfortable, and he was almost relieved when Malfoy turned to leave. But as Malfoy reached the landing, Harry was seized with an urge not to let him go thinking he had won the argument. Before he could stop himself, he yelled, "Maybe we should, Malfoy. It would make your father happy to know we spent some quality time together, wouldn't it?"

Malfoy turned back sharply. He looked shocked.

I was right, Harry thought, stunned. He nearly laughed. Lucius Malfoy really had told his son to befriend him.

"How—" Malfoy began. "What's that supposed to—"

Malfoy never finished his question. With a mighty groan, the stairs shifted beneath their feet, and then bucked to the left. Harry saw Malfoy's eyes widen impossibly as he leaned backward, teetering above the chasm below.

Harry lost his footing and stumbled forward, gripping the banister as he all but flew to the edge and Malfoy. What happened next was a blur. Harry clung to the banister, its solidity reassuring, and his fingers grabbed a handful of Malfoy's robes, his shoulders protesting at the unnatural stretch of his arms. It felt like they were spinning; they probably were. Malfoy's weight was pulling them over the edge and Harry closed his eyes and pulled, as hard as he could. Pain exploded in his shoulder and his fingers lost their grip on Malfoy's robes.

The stairs shuddered, crashed against something with a bang and went still. Harry's head was still spinning and he realised he had closed his eyes. When he opened them, the light of the surrounding torches and candles strewn all over the castle seemed unnaturally bright.

Harry's shoulder felt like it was on fire. Pain spread down to his fingertips and up to his head. Warm

breath tickled his cheek. Malfoy was panting, crushed between the banister and Harry's body.

He didn't fall. Between the pain and their dizzy ride, Harry wasn't even sure whether he had managed to pull Malfoy to safety or not. But apparently he had. Malfoy was safe and the stairs were still, though not where they was supposed to be, no longer connected to same flight of stairs, and now they led to a narrow corridor on Harry's left.

"Potter?" Malfoy whispered. The warmth of his breath made Harry shiver. He pushed back and yelped. The sudden movement sent a hot flash of pain through his shoulder.

Harry cursed and pressed his left arm to his body, cradling it with his right. "I think my shoulder's dislocated."

Malfoy was staring at him. He glanced down, over the banister, at the numerous staircases stretched below, and then quickly looked back at Harry. "You should go to the hospital wing," he said at last, his voice ragged.

"I don't even know which floor we're on." Harry looked around. Fourth? Fifth, maybe. "What the hell just happened?"

Malfoy did not reply right away. He seemed to have trouble forming words. He was still pressed against the banister, apparently reluctant to move away.

We should get off the staircases. They all looked still now, as though nothing had happened.

"Maybe they were confused," Malfoy said.

"Right." Confusing they were, confused they were not supposed to be. They would refuse to take you to the Transfiguration classroom on Fridays, apparently convinced you should go to the Owlery instead. They got impatient when you stood in a corridor talking to a friend for a bit too long, and they would

sneakily spin away all the way to the other side. When you stepped on them, though, they were supposed to stay put.

"We're on the fifth floor," Malfoy said suddenly, looking around. "We should go... down." He looked at the staircases; it was clearly the last route Draco wanted to take, but it was also the only one. The landing they were standing on led to a corridor on the left and connected to another staircase to the right. "Hospital wing's that way." Malfoy waved to Harry's right. That was true. At the beginning of the year, the hospital wing had moved to the first floor again and seemed content to stay there.

Harry studied Malfoy's pale face. "It's unlikely the stairs will move again," he said with confidence he did not feel.

Malfoy shrugged and then—slowly, Harry could not help noticing—eased his grip on the banister. He moved toward Harry, arm stretched, as though he meant to give Harry a hand, but then he seemed to think better of it and moved aside instead. "You look unwell, Potter. We should hurry."

Harry would have wondered at Malfoy's sudden display of concern, but something caught his eye. The corridor they were led to was poorly lit and shadowy. A black lump lay on the floor, at the far end, unmoving and silent. Harry had originally mistaken it for a shadow, but a flash of white made him look again.

"Is that a..." Harry squinted. "Is that a trainer?"

"What?" he heard Malfoy ask.

The light shifted, illuminating the hallway. It was a trainer. Harry's heart skipped a beat. "Someone's there." Someone was slumped on the floor. It was definitely a body.

Harry moved too suddenly; his shoulder protested, but Harry gritted his teeth and tried to ignore the pain. He sprang forward, ignoring Malfoy, who said something else, and broke into a run that sent hot licks of pain through his arm.

His forehead was damp when he reached the body. He could barely breathe. Malfoy appeared beside him; he was pale, staring at the dark head of the person lying immobile before them. Cobwebs covered the body, thin silvery threads stretching over Hogwarts robes to the wall behind. It looked like it had been there for a long while. But it couldn't have.

Harry bent down, hissing in pain as he reached to turn the body around.

Malfoy grabbed his wrist. "Don't. If he's cursed..."

Harry yanked his wrist free and ignored Malfoy's warning. He recognised that haircut. Longish black hair, wavy and soft-looking. He turned the boy around. His pale blue eyes were staring blankly up at Harry.

Malfoy sucked in a breath. "I didn't—" he gasped. "I had nothing to do with this!"

Pain was making it hard to focus. Harry's fingers slipped to the boy's neck. "He's alive. There's a pulse." I think. He wasn't sure. His hand was shaking.

"I didn't—"

"Fine!" Harry snapped. "Never mind that now. We have to get him to Madam Pomfrey." He straightened and tore his gaze away from the stiff body of Tommy Wright. Malfoy was searching through his robes; his face was flushed. He took out his wand and held it unsteadily.

For a second, Harry expected Malfoy to raise his wand and curse him. He doubted he would be able to defend himself. But Malfoy pointed the wand at the Ravenclaw boy and muttered an incantation. A long stretcher appeared beneath the boy.

"I should Levitate him," Malfoy said, looking doubtfully at his shaky hand.

Harry forced himself to stand up straighter. "I'll do it." He waved his wand and the stretcher rose slowly, hovering beside them. Perhaps it would have been wiser to let Malfoy Levitate him. But not if Malfoy had been the one to curse the boy in the first place. Then all Malfoy had to do was pretend the grip on his wand was too loose, slip and let the boy fall down the stairs as Malfoy had nearly fallen a minute ago. And then Harry would never know if it was truly an accident or if Malfoy had decided to finish what he had started. He's not a killer. Surely. But then what had happened here?

Harry pushed those thoughts away. He could not afford to think about this now. He had to concentrate on keeping the stretcher and the boy upon it steady.

"Run ahead," Harry told Malfoy. "Pomfrey's probably at the hospital, but who knows. Find her and tell her what happened." And which curse you have used. Harry bit his lip. Malfoy looked more scared than guilty, but that meant nothing.

Malfoy stared at him, looking very much like he wanted to argue, but then he nodded, glanced at Tommy again and sprinted off, not even taking a second to hesitate before he ran down the stairs. Harry wondered if he would really do as he was told, or if he would seize the opportunity to run away. If he runs, at least I'll know he's guilty.

The trip to the hospital wing took longer than Harry would have liked. A slight lapse in concentration and the boy could have tumbled to the ground. Harry walked slowly, telling himself his shoulder barely ached at all. You had to re-grow the bones in your arm once; you've been struck with the Cruciatus Curse; this is nothing. Your hand is not shaking.

Portraits were staring at him in concern. "Oh dear!" a thin, sallow-faced woman cried from her wooden chair. "Careful now. Don't drop him!"

"Thanks for the tip," Harry said testily. "Wouldn't have worked out that one without you."

"No need to be rude, young man," a burly knight put in, clutching the reins of his black stallion. The horse whinnied in agreement. "At times like these we must all stand together and save our anger for our

true enemy."

"Like Malfoy?" Harry suggested.

The knight pulled out his sword; it shone white, illuminated by the painted sun. "Indolence, my boy! Indolence!"

Harry frowned at him, affronted. "I'm not lazy."

"Then run!" It was said with so much fervour, Harry panicked and looked around, thinking it was a warning, but no one was chasing him. He was about to point out he could not run because he was injured, but then thought better of it. He had no time to waste on fighting with portraits.

He had barely taken two steps when another voice startled him.

"Harry!" it screamed.

Harry nearly toppled over in surprise when Hermione sprang from behind the corner with Ron at her heels.

"Oh Harry, are you all right?" she asked, breathless. "Malfoy told us what happened." She looked from Harry to Tommy, her concern morphing to surprise.

Ron was staring at the stretcher. "Isn't that the kid Goyle was fighting with earlier?" His expression darkened. "Malfoy didn't tell us that part."

"He's not dead, is he?" Hermione whispered as though she did not want poor Tommy to know he was dead in case he really was.

"No," Harry said, hoping that was true. "What are you two doing here?" They both looked worse for wear; Hermione's hair was wild around her face and Ron was flushed and sweaty.

"The match's over," Ron said as Hermione waved her wand at the stretcher.

"Oh, you should have seen it, Harry." Hermione clutched her wand. "It was a complete massacre." Worry must have shown on Harry's face because she quickly added, "Not literally! Sorry. The Bludgers were a bit enthusiastic, that's all—you can let go now."

"What? Oh." Harry realised Hermione added her Levitation spell to his. He lowered his wand.

"I'll be quicker," she said and ran off, the stretcher flying in front of her in a steady line.

"We should hurry, too." Ron's brow furrowed. "You don't look so well, mate."

"I'm fine." Harry took a step forward. One foot before the other. Simple as that. "Just not very fast."

Ron was staring at him. "Blimey. Murdering staircases? That's a first. And what were you thinking, saving Malfoy again? The git clearly has a death wish. Next time, just let him be."

"He told you about that?" Somehow, Harry thought Malfoy would have omitted that part of the tale. Perhaps insist Harry had tried to push him over the edge instead.

"Well, he told Pomfrey, and we were listening. He forgot to mention who the cursed kid really is, though. It was him, right? Malfoy cursed him?"

"I honestly don't know. I found Malfoy on the seventh floor and we found Tommy together." They

rounded a corner; the sound of excited voices floated through the corridor. They must have been nearing the hospital wing; though, Harry could not tell for sure. The pain in his shoulder was disorienting. "Tell me about the match," he added before Ron could ask him what he was doing on the seventh floor.

Ron hesitated for a moment, but answered. "It was chaos. Bludgers smashed half the Slytherin team, including their Keeper. Ginny and Demelza scored quite a few goals, thanks to that. But then another Bludger got Demelza, both our Beaters and almost got Pyke. And then Harper caught the Snitch—supposedly—I couldn't tell because in the next second he smashed into a goal post, trying to avoid a Bludger—it still hit him right in the head." Ron grimaced. "Anyway, Harper went down, and Pyke caught the Snitch. Apparently, one of the little Snitch-wings was broken, and now we're not sure if Pyke broke it or Harper really did catch it, broke its wing when he crashed and then dropped it. Honestly, the latter seems more likely. There's no way Pyke caught the Snitch unless it was broken in the first place. But we still don't know who won. Now Hooch's saying the Bludgers were cursed because they were a bit too homicidal. A bunch of teachers stayed behind to inspect them."

"And everyone's fine?"

"Harper's pretty banged up."

"And Ginny?"

"A few bruises, but she's fine. We had to carry Demelza back to the castle, though. Poor thing. Her hip was shattered."

Harry winced in sympathy.

They reached the hospital wing shortly after. The doors were open and there were several students outside, hovering at the doorway and peeking inside.

"Bloody hell, Harry!" Jimmy Peakes yelled when he saw him.

"What happened?" someone else asked. "Malfoy's full of it, right?"

"The staircases couldn’t have moved with you on it," another voice insisted.

"That kid's alive, isn't he? They won't tell us." Jimmy was full of questions.

"Is You-Know-Who coming back?" Pyke whispered.

"No," Harry said sharply, surprised. Everyone fell silent. Harry found Pyke's pale face in the crowd. "Voldemort's dead."

"Out of the way, you gossiping ninnies." Ron's voice boomed. "Injured man coming through." The crowd parted, glaring, to free the hospital's entrance. "Come on, Harry," Ron added more quietly. "Let's get you healed up."

Harry followed him, looking around with a frown. He spotted Hermione, hovering near Tommy Wright's bed, and Ginny, who was helping Demelza to her feet. He searched for a glimpse of white-blood hair in vain. Malfoy was gone.

Chapter Two

Auror Potter

"Alohomora!" Ron cried.

"Right. Because that's going to work." Hermione tapped the box on the desk in front of her with her wand. Shimmering green ribbons flew from the tip, wrapped around the box, turned red and then rushed through the keyhole and disappeared. It was a highly impressive performance, but the box remained just as closed as Ron's. "The solution won't be so simple. This is a challenge, Ron."

"You're not doing any better," Ron pointed out.

Hermione grimaced and shot another spell at the box. Harry suspected she had tried to blast it into smithereens. It did not work. The other students were all failing miserably as well. Each had a small wooden box with an elaborate Hogwarts crest before them and every single one of them was still closed. Flitwick was sitting behind his desk, grinning widely at them. He had promised there was a reward in each box, which they could keep if they actually manage to open it. Knowing Flitwick, it was probably sweets. And bragging rights, obviously.

"Don't know why he looks so smug." Ron glared at Flitwick. "Had he done his job properly, Harry wouldn't have nearly died yesterday."

"That's an unfair thing to say, Ron," Hermione said. "Quite a few people were trying to repair the castle this summer. They've missed something; it happens."

Harry snorted. "That's not how you felt yesterday."

Hermione blushed and shot another—unsuccessful—spell at the box. "I was upset. It had been a strange day."

That it had.

Ron grinned. "You were brilliant."

"I don't think Professor McGonagall agrees," Hermione said in a small voice, though she looked pleased.

Yesterday, McGonagall had shown up at the hospital wing while Pomfrey tended to Harry's injuries. Hermione had rounded on her immediately, declaring an oversight had been made and the castle was

unsafe. Apparently, long ago the Hogwarts staircases had been Charmed to carry students where they wished to go. It had proven to be unsafe, however, and the stairs were hurriedly forced to stay put and were allowed to move only when no one was using them.

"One of the Charms must have been cancelled back in May. Has no one thought to make sure? Harry and Malfoy could have been seriously injured today. Or worse."

McGonagall's lips had thinned into a harsh line. "If you like, Miss Granger, you can all pack your trunks and leave. I'll be more than happy to secure the whole castle myself and make sure nothing has been missed. I expect you'll be able to come back and feel sufficiently safe—in a year or two."

That had shut Hermione up. She had looked so miserable, the Headmistress's expression had softened. "The school was opened too soon. I agree, Miss Granger. I will report this incident to the Board of Governors, and Professor Flitwick will secure the staircases. It seems to me, however..." McGonagall had glanced at Tommy Wright's still form, "that wayward charms are the least of our concern."

Harry agreed with that sentiment. Tommy Wright's condition was unchanged. He was alive but not waking up. Madam Pomfrey confessed she had not yet discovered which curse had been used and she feared that if she did not, he would not live much longer. Finding the caster of the curse would be of much help.

"You should have told McGonagall it was probably Malfoy," Ron had chastised him yesterday as they made their way to the Gryffindor Tower.

"But I don't know if that's true," Harry had countered. "And I accused Malfoy of cursing someone before, and McGonagall hadn't been very understanding."

"But you were right two years ago!"

He was, but that did not mean he was right now. If Tommy was selling fake—and expensive, apparently—potions to students, then he had more enemies than Goyle and Malfoy, perhaps some with a better motive. And Malfoy had looked shocked when they had found him. And so scared before, at the

seventh floor. He must have seen something; he must know something. Harry had spent a long time staring at Malfoy's dot on the Marauder's Map yesterday. Malfoy had not ventured outside of his dormitory, doing no further mischief or attempting to run away. Ron had caught Harry staring at the Map, but he had merely shaken his head and refrained from commenting.

Irritated, Harry looked back down at his box. He had to stop thinking about Malfoy. The box was not helping. The tiny lettering on the Hogwarts crest proclaimed: Draco dormiens nunquam titillandus. The word Draco seemed to be mocking him. Harry glanced at the back of the room where Draco Malfoy was trying to open his box. He looks pale, Harry thought. But then again, Malfoy always looked pale.

Malfoy cast another series of spells in quick succession and then scowled. Harry looked away.

"I'll be a wretched Auror," he said.

Hermione reacted immediately. "Don't be ridiculous, Harry. None of us have opened the box yet." She sounded frustrated. "This just proves my point: we all still have much to learn."

"I wasn't talking about the box. I meant yesterday; I should have cast Prior Incantato on Malfoy's wand. It would have told me whether or not Malfoy cursed Tommy."

Hermione looked up at him with wide eyes. "Oh."

"Can't you still do it?" Ron asked.

Hermione shook his head. "It's too late. The Reverse-Spell Effect is limited. Malfoy has cast too many spells since then."

Malfoy cast another one right then, as though mocking them.

"But..." Ron grimaced. "Then all Malfoy had to do yesterday was cast a bunch of spells after cursing Tommy and Prior Incantato would reveal nothing."

"In theory," Harry agreed. "But perhaps he didn't think of it. Or he didn't have time. Either way, I missed my chance."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Hermione said. "You were injured. You couldn't be expected to think clearly."

Harry snorted. "I can imagine my first Auror mission now: I'll get hurt, let the Dark Wizard run away and end up stuck in a cupboard because I won't be able to open the enchanted door."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Fine. Mope, if you must. Just do it quietly." She cast another spell on the box.

A loud bang made them all jump in fright. And then the classroom dissolved into giggles at the sight of a red-faced Seamus Finnigan rubbing his wrist and Vanishing a large axe. He had apparently tried to split his box in half with brute force.

Professor Flitwick's head bobbed as he laughed. "There's no need for violence, I assure you. The right spell and the lid will pop open." He grinned again.

He did look too smug. Harry looked back at the box. It had to be a trick of some sort. Ron might have had a point: the solution was probably something simple. Something they would all be unlikely to think of, but would make sense in retrospect.

Harry narrowed his eyes. The Hogwarts crest was beginning to look suspicious. But perhaps, by now, Harry thought that everything with the word Draco on it was suspicious. On the other hand, Flitwick could have given them a bunch of boxes without the Hogwarts crest on them. It was meant either to distract them or to give them a clue. Hermione had already poked the crest with her wand but it did not help.

Draco dormiens nunquam titillandus.

Harry stared. Then blinked. Oh. Oh. If you want someone to open their mouth, or lid, so to speak, there was a spell that never failed to achieve that. Harry tapped the box and muttered the incantation—very quietly so no one would hear his ridiculous idea if he was wrong. The box shuddered once, twice and the lid snapped open, flapping wildly until Harry cancelled the spell with Finite Incantatem. The box calmed down and remained open. A colourful wrapper was inside. It might have been a lollipop.

A small gasp made Harry look sideways. Hermione was staring at Harry's open box in shock. "How did you—?" She cut off and focused back on her box. "Don't tell me! I'll work it out myself." She started casting spells with renewed vigour.

"Tell me," Ron whispered.

Harry was about to, but Flitwick showed up by his side. "Excellent! Excellent, Mr Potter!" he exclaimed in his squeaky voice. "Now, if you don't mind, collect your reward and off with you."

"Yes, Professor." Harry gave Ron an apologetic look, picked up his reward—which was indeed a lollipop—and threw his bag over his shoulder.

As he turned to leave, he heard Ron hiss and Hermione sigh. "I doubt Parseltongue will work, Ron."

Harry could not help smiling. He was already at the door when he glanced back at Malfoy. Their eyes met but Malfoy quickly looked away.

Back to that, then.

The corridor was quiet and brightly lit by the afternoon sun. It illuminated the tiny specks of dust floating

through the air. It reminded Harry he wanted to stop by the hospital wing and see if the cobwebs that had covered Tommy yesterday had returned. Pomfrey had failed to Vanish them and had removed them manually. Last Harry heard, which was this morning, they had not come back. Pomfrey could not explain why they were there in the first place, but they had actually made her hopeful because their presence might be able to help track down the curse cast on Tommy.

The trip to the hospital had to wait until after double Transfiguration. With barely five minutes left to the end of the lesson, Harry could do little but wait for Ron and Hermione. He leaned against the wall only to flinch a minute later when the classroom door flew open and Malfoy strode into the hallway.

Malfoy promptly scowled at him. "Don't look so surprised, Potter. Do you think you're the only one who realised the boxes are ticklish?"

"I'm more surprised you haven't opened your box sooner. I thought you were an expert on opening doors, boxes and cabinets."

Malfoy regarded him coolly, though his cheeks were tinted pink. "I never knew you appreciated my intellect. Or are you just easily impressed?"

"The curse cast on Tommy was very impressive."

For a moment, Harry was sure that Malfoy was about to punch him. Instead, Malfoy turned away. "I don't have to listen to this." Two seconds later, he changed his mind. He rounded on Harry, getting so close the tip of his shoes knocked against Harry's. The inch or two he had on Harry were more noticeable now, which was undoubtedly Malfoy's intention. Harry forced himself not to reach for his wand.

"I did not curse Tommy." Malfoy's voice was low. He sounded furious. "Why would I? Because he kicked me? Because he tricked Goyle? How thick are you? Goyle was an idiot and refused to listen to me. He had it coming. And for the record, when someone kicks me, I kick them back, and I might do it more than once just because I can, but I wouldn't curse them." Malfoy's pale grey eyes seemed darker now. "He's not a killer. Isn't that what you said at my trial? Did you change your mind? Or you didn't want to send me to Azkaban so you'd have something to do this year in Hogwarts? Is that it?"

"What I want, Malfoy," Harry said, "is for you to tell me the truth."

"I didn't curse him!"

"Why did you miss the match? What were you doing in the castle?"

"I told you I just wanted—"

"Stop lying!" Harry snapped. "You showed up on the seventh floor looking like you were running away from someone. You say you didn't curse Tommy, fine, but you know something. Tell me what it is."

Malfoy was shaking his head. "I don't know anything about the curse cast on Tommy."

"Then tell me what you do know."

"It's none of your business!" Malfoy had clearly had enough. He took a sharp step back as though he was ready to run away. Instinctively, Harry's hand shot out to grab Malfoy's upper arm and pull him closer. Malfoy froze, eyes going wide.

Harry spoke quietly. "Believe it or not, Malfoy, Tommy Wright isn't the only person I'm trying to help here."

Malfoy's cheeks were flushed. He was panting, as though he was so angry he could not breathe, but he remained obstinately quiet, doing nothing but staring at Harry.

He'll tell you. He will. Just keep eye contact.

The bell rang. Malfoy wrenched his arm free and shot backward as though burned. The Charms classroom burst open. Harry glanced at the door and when he looked back, Malfoy was already running away. He wouldn't tell me anything, anyway, Harry consoled himself. His heart was beating very fast and when Hermione showed up by his side, exclaiming, "Rubbish!" he almost jumped.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked. He hoped he did not look upset. His cheeks burned. He half-expected Hermione to notice, but she seemed to have other concerns.

"This whole lesson!" Hermione huffed. "Tickling Charm! Honestly. I thought we might actually learn something. But it was just a silly trick."

"Not that she's upset or anything," Ron said seriously.

"I'm not upset! It was just so random. What was the point of this lesson?"

"I assure you, Miss Granger, there was nothing pointless about this lesson."

Hermione whirled around to see Professor Flitwick smiling up at her. Embarrassed though she clearly was, she seemed unable to stop herself. "Sorry, Professor. Solving a problem at hand is always a useful exercise, I agree, but I don't see how this can help us in the future. If we are trying to open a door, I doubt we'll achieve it with such a simple spell or that we'll have a convenient crest to guide us."

Flitwick was grinning again. "You are quite mistaken," he said happily. "The Hogwarts crest was meant to help you, yes, but there's a reason why the Tickling Charm opened the box. Nothing random about it. I cast many Charms on those boxes, most of which you disarmed, it should be mentioned, but I daresay it would have been near impossible for anyone to disarm them all. I am rather an expert," he assured them. "The Tickling Charm's success is an error. I have aimed to achieve it, but many skilled enchanters had no such goals, and yet it happened. When one infuses an object with magic, too much magic, trying to protect it, the object in question might develop a certain degree of sentience. The caster protects it against intrusive spells and physical violence and believes his job his done. And then someone does nothing more than tickle it lightly and the enchanted object, having a mind of its own, imagines it has a

mouth—and laughs. A chink in the armour that often goes unnoticed." Flitwick beamed at Hermione. "But well, we'll learn more about quirks of magic in our next lesson, which, I hope, you will find less pointless."

Hermione nodded, looking appropriately abashed; though, it was possible she was biting her lip only to stop herself from asking Flitwick to tell her more right this instant.

Flitwick gave them a little bow. "Miss Granger. Mr Weasley. Auror Potter," he added fondly and trotted away.

Harry beamed at his back. Hermione looked miserable, however. "I should have realised," she said sadly. "Did you know the bathroom door on the fourth floor open only if you tickle it on the right spot? I thought that was just someone's idea of a joke."

Ron frowned. "Er, that's the boys' bathroom, Hermione."

"Yes, well. Nonetheless. I should have opened that box."

"To be fair, you probably would have, if you'd had more time," Harry assured her. "Tricks or no tricks." He reached into his pocket and took out the lollipop. "Here, your needs are greater than mine."

She snorted and took it. "Well done, Harry. I really am proud of you."

"Oi!" Ron exclaimed. "Don't praise him too much. He only ever focused on the crest because it had the name Draco on it and he's obsessed. Again."

"Hey!" Harry cried, indignant, even though that was technically true.

Hermione laughed. "That's a good point."

The thought seemed to cheer up both of them immensely. "Sore losers," he accused them, but that only made them laugh harder. The smiles slipped off their faces only after he reminded them they had double Transfiguration next and should hurry. Their new Transfiguration teacher, Justus Plunkett, was skilful at Transfiguration but unfortunately lacked talent as a teacher. His droning was likely to put students to sleep sooner than even Professor Binns could manage. On one memorable occasion, even Hermione's eyes had closed and her notes-taking had slowed, something Ron liked to remember with fondness.

It was therefore understandable, in Harry's opinion, that he spent most of today's never-ending lesson glancing at Malfoy, hoping to catch his eye. Malfoy never lifted his gaze to his, though, and after the lesson, he disappeared faster than Harry could blink.

For a moment, back in front of the Charms classroom, it had looked like Malfoy not only had something to confess, but it seemed that he would. But that was clearly too much to hope for.

Harry scanned the Slytherin table during dinner and Malfoy was not there. He's avoiding me. That was not how an innocent person would behave.

"Not obsessed at all," Ron said.

Harry hurriedly looked back to his plate. "Well, excuse me. There's a cursed kid lying in the hospital and I think Malfoy knows more than he's telling."

"About what?" Ginny asked, slipping onto the bench on the opposite side of the table.

Harry was about to reply, but Ron talked over him. "How did the meeting with Hooch go?"

Ginny grimaced. "It's a draw."

"The match?" Harry frowned. "I thought you'd have to play again."

Ginny dropped a large portion of shepherd's pie onto her plate. "Hooch said the Bludgers weren't cursed, so we get to keep all our points. And after examining the Omnioculars' recordings, she concluded that Harper really did catch the Snitch first."

"Bloody Harper," Ron grumbled.

Ginny looked at him sharply. "Haven't you heard? Harper is still in the hospital wing. A Bludger smashed his head. He's in a coma. Pomfrey says he'll live but... there might be some damage."

"Oh dear!" Hermione gasped. "What a horrible sport!"

"No need for that," Ron hurried to say. "This sort of thing doesn't happen that often."

"Even so. This needn't have happened at all!"

"With our Beaters out of commission," Ginny said, "he must have thought he was relatively safe from Bludgers and wasn't paying attention. It was an error of judgment. He relied on Slytherin Beaters too much."

Hermione huffed. "It doesn't matter whose fault it was. It's a dangerous game with very little meaning."

Ginny and Ron looked mortally insulted, and though Harry shared their indignation, he was relieved when Parvati Patil tapped his shoulder, stopping what would undoubtedly turn into a heated discussion, which Harry had heard more times than he could count.

His relief was short-lived, however. Parvati handed him a note, her eyes red and puffy.

"It's the password to McGonagall's office. She wants to see you," she said haltingly.

"What happened?" Harry asked, staring at Parvati's pale face. McGonagall had promised she would let him know what happened with the stairs yesterday, the moment she found out, but now Harry was dreading something terrible had happened.

Parvati's eyes widened. "Nothing! I don't know. Something about the staircases, I think. I just... I'm not crying. I just have a cold." She sniffed. "A nasty cold." She turned and strode off, sniffing loudly. She even remembered to cough once.

Ron stared after her. "What was that about?"

Harry shook his head but Hermione sighed. "Oh, it's about Anthony, I'm positive."

Ron and Harry gave her blank looks. Ginny snorted into her pumpkin juice and Hermione shook her head at them. "Anthony Goldstein, her boyfriend. They've been fighting for weeks. Apparently, he's really jealous."

"He's a git," Ginny assured them. "She should dump him."

Hermione nodded. "And on top of that she's been at odds with Lavender, too," she added.

Ron said, "Oh," and stuffed a huge piece of shepherd's pie into his mouth, putting slightly too much effort into trying to appear uninterested in anything having to do with his ex-girlfriend. Hermione looked faintly amused by his display.

Harry's eyes found Lavender as he got up to leave. She was staring morosely at her plate, picking at her

food. Her long blond hair covered the left side of her face and neck, concealing nasty scars left by Fenrir Greyback. Now that Harry thought about it, he realised she was alone more often than not, avoiding both Hermione and Parvati.

Harry pushed down a surge of pity, having no idea what to do with it.

Hermione's voice broke through his thoughts. "We'll wait for you at the tower."

Harry nodded and headed toward the exit. He somehow doubted that McGonagall called him to her office just to discuss the staircases. A part of him hoped that she had some good news about Tommy's condition, but that was wishful thinking, he knew. They had stopped by the hospital wing before dinner and Tommy was still asleep—and cobwebless, Harry had noted. It was doubtful something miraculous had happened in less than half an hour.

The stone gargoyle that guarded the Headmistress's office looked as grumpy as ever. Harry opened McGonagall's note and frowned. It contained only one word: Magic. Which was more than a little odd considering Parvati told him McGonagall had sent him the password. It would be a strange password, indeed. Nonetheless, that was what the note said and Harry opened his mouth to say it, when the gargoyle spoke.

"That which cannot be Vanished or Conjured; that cannot die and lives forever."

Harry scowled at the gargoyle and then at the note. McGonagall was using riddles and apparently thought Harry required the answer.

"Magic," Harry grumbled, indignant. He would have worked it out. One did not fail to know these things if one's friend was Hermione Granger. She had mentioned the laws of magic more times than necessary.

Harry climbed the winding steps, determined to point that out to McGonagall. However, when Harry entered her office, McGonagall's expression stopped him. Her face was lined and worried. Even the faces of her predecessors looked sombre. Though, they always did. Dumbledore's portrait, however, smiled at

him, his blue eyes kind.

Harry looked back at McGonagall. "Professor? What's wrong?"

"Sit down, Harry," she said kindly, though she did not smile.

Harry sat on one of the sturdy chairs next to her desk, missing the squishy armchairs Dumbledore favoured.

McGonagall set her quill down and stared at him with a look that suggested she was about to give him some grave news. Harry braced himself.

"As you may know," McGonagall began, "Rowena Ravenclaw Charmed the Hogwarts staircases long ago and they are likely to move." She frowned, clearly disapproving such nonsense. "However, every staircase is equipped with a Sensory Charm. They can move as they like, but the moment someone steps on them, they are to stay put."

"And the Charms don't work anymore?" Harry asked. "Does that mean the Hogwarts staircases are no longer—"

McGonagall raised her arm and Harry fell silent.

"On the contrary, Harry, the Sensory Charms are still in place. All of them, including the one cast on the staircases that you and Mr Malfoy used. Professor Flitwick examined them yesterday and again today; he recognises his own spellwork. There is no doubt."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, those stairs did not move on their own; someone moved them. And I assure you, that is no

easy task."

Harry thought he understood why McGonagall looked at him with so much worry. "Are you saying someone tried to kill me?" Or kill Malfoy?

"I fear so." She wrung her hands together. "Have you heard of Oswald Ardenton?"

Harry shook his head, surprised by the turn in conversation. "Oh wait." Something clicked in his brain. "I saw him at the trials. And read about him in the papers. He's a member of the Wizengamot." Harry only remembered him because Ardenton had very vocally demanded the highest sentence for every Death Eater. He had been most displeased when the Malfoys were freed. And he was the one who had suggested forming a special squad of Hit Wizards to hunt down the Death Eaters still on the loose. Hit Wizards were famous for interpreting "bring them to justice dead or alive" as "preferably dead." They had already killed Rabastan Lestrange.

"Then you know he's no friend to anyone who had been Voldemort's supporter. To put it mildly. He is also Tommy Wright's grandfather."

"Oh. So... you think someone tried to kill Tommy because of Ardenton?"

"I do not know what to think. Either one of you could have been the target and the other one was dealt with simply because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. The fact remains: at least one Dark Wizard has breached the castle and attacked Hogwarts students. The curse cast on Tommy was no child's trick. I have never seen Poppy fail to give a diagnosis."

It wasn't Malfoy, then; although... "Will there be an investigation? Do the Aurors have a suspect?" Harry did. A number of Death Eaters had disappeared after the Battle. It had been a chaotic day and the Aurors had made a mistake. When Fenrir Greyback's broken body had been found, his death had seemed imminent. The amount of damage was terrible. But the werewolf was more durable than anyone could have imagined. He had escaped and taken several Death Eaters with him. Two Aurors had lost their lives.

One Death Eater in particular worried Harry. They said Rodolphus Lestrange had gone mad after his wife

had died. He had already murdered a witch who had had the misfortune of recognising him in Knockturn Alley, and he was the prime suspect in two Muggle murders. And he had been spotted again in London a mere month ago, right after he had suffered another blow—the loss of his brother.

The Lestranges had grown bold. And one of them was now dead, and Tommy Wright's grandfather was indirectly behind it. If Rodolphus had really cursed Tommy and Malfoy had seen him in the castle, what would Malfoy do? Rodolphus was not his blood, but he was family. And he probably knew more about the Malfoys than anyone. Exposing him would not have been easy. Lestrange could have blackmailed Malfoy into helping him.

"There's no investigation, I'm afraid." The frustration in McGonagall's tone was palpable. "The Board of Governors insists that students are likely to fall down the stairs and Tommy Wright should be examined by experts at St Mungo's. As though Poppy is not a better Healer than the lot of them put together," she sad furiously. "At least Oswald Ardenton has some sense. He was here this morning and agreed Tommy should stay in Poppy's care."

"Can't he do something? Or Kingsley?"

"They can do little while the Board of Governors insists this is merely my wild speculation. And they don't want to induce panic. Kingsley can arrange a safe place for you—" Harry opened his mouth to argue, but McGonagall continued, "and of course we agreed you'd never consent to it." She gave him a disdainful look. "What we need are Aurors on the school grounds, protecting students, but we'll never get them here without firm evidence that the school has been breached. Not even Kingsley can help; he cannot justify it when the Aurors are stretched thin as it is. We lost too many good people in the war."

Harry considered this. He could understand the lack of evidence would make it difficult for anyone to act. Hogwarts students were no strangers to injuries, hexes and even curses. One did not call Aurors for such things. They needed evidence. Or a witness.

"What if someone saw a Death Eater in the castle? They would have to send Aurors then, surely."

McGonagall stared at him. "I do hope you aren't suggesting we should lie?"

"No, of course not!" Harry said quickly. "I just... I think it's possible Malfoy has seen something."

"Has he said something?"

"No." Harry shifted in his chair. "But before we found Tommy, I saw Malfoy on the seventh floor. He looked like he was running away from something. Or someone. He was terrified."

McGonagall studied him. "If I may ask, what were you doing in the castle during the match? I saw you leave right at the beginning."

Harry wished he didn't have to explain that to McGonagall, of all people. He feared she would declare him obsessed just as Ron and Hermione had. He had little choice now, though, after she had asked. "I noticed Malfoy wasn't at the match, and I thought that was odd, so I went to find him."

McGonagall's frown deepened. "You suspected Malfoy of something before anything happened?"

"Yes, see, right before the match, Goyle was fighting with Tommy Wright in the Entrance Hall. Malfoy intervened and Tommy kicked him and ran. When I couldn’t find either Malfoy or Tommy in the stands, I thought maybe Malfoy wanted to pay him back for humiliating him in front of everyone."

McGonagall did not call him obsessed. She looked more surprised than anything. "But then... you think Draco Malfoy cursed him?"

"Well, not anymore. Malfoy was on the stairs when they bucked. If he enchanted them to move, he would surely avoid them."

"No. You misunderstand, Harry. The stairs were not enchanted in such a way. If they had been, we would know. The only way they could have been moved is if they had been literally pushed by magic. By a

Banishing Charm, for example. A strong one. Meaning, someone was there with you, out of sight."

"In that case... Malfoy was the one standing on the edge. He must have been the target. He either saw something, or had helped someone get into the castle, and they wanted to eliminate the witness."

"You think he's likely to help a Death Eater enter the school? I realise he did it in the past, but you spoke well of him at his trial."

Harry felt a stab of guilt. That had been Malfoy's argument as well. It was a good point, too.

"Because if you think that Draco Malfoy is a liability," McGonagall added, "then I am more than prepared to have him expelled."

"No!" Harry said quickly. "I don't... Professor, honestly, I don't know what he is and isn't likely to do. At this point, he could go either way. I spoke well of him, as you say, at his trial because I thought he deserved a chance, one he didn't get before. And it seems to me, that even if he had helped a Death Eater into the castle, he hadn't done it willingly. He'd been surrounded by these people all his life. He knows what they're capable of. He might have just been scared. Bullied, blackmailed into helping. I don't think he should be expelled; I think he should be helped."

McGonagall rubbed her temples. "Are these your words or Dumbledore's?"

Harry blinked. "Mine!" He glanced at Dumbledore's portrait, but Dumbledore was carefully examining his cuticles. "But, well, I suppose Professor Dumbledore would agree with me."

"Indeed." McGonagall sighed, but the look she gave him was full of affection. Harry had to look away. He wasn't sure whether the affection was meant for him or if he just reminded her of Dumbledore. Both possibilities gripped his heart. "Very well, then," McGonagall said and Harry dared to look up. "I'll speak with Mr Malfoy."

Harry nodded. He thought it would be rude to point out that Malfoy would be unlikely to speak. It must have shown on his face, however, because McGonagall added, "It's worth a try. I also owled these experts from St Mungo's to consult with Poppy. I hope, after they fail to diagnose Mr Wright as well, the Board will be more inclined to listen. In the meantime..." McGonagall fixed him with a glare and Harry knew what she would say next. "I expect you to be careful. We cannot know if, whoever was here, they have achieved what they wanted or they might yet come back. Perhaps you were not the target this time, but there are Dark Wizards out there who would like to see you dead. I would rather not say this to a student, but I am certain you are aware of it yourself. I wish... I wish you could have had at least one year of peace." She looked truly sad.

Harry shrugged. "I'd probably just get bored."

Her glare was pointed but her mouth twitched. "Off with you now," she said. "You should study. The wizarding world is short on Aurors. Do remember you are not one yet, however."

"I'll be careful," Harry said, smiling as he stood up. He hesitated a moment, but could not help himself. "You know, Professor, you didn't have to send me the answer to your riddle. Really."

McGonagall harrumphed. "My apologies, Mr Potter," she said solemnly.

Harry caught sight of Dumbledore's twinkling blue eyes and, with a smile, he added, "Though, I would argue Love also fits."

McGonagall's lips pursed; she looked like she was trying not to smile. "In which case I would argue love is a form of magic."

Harry laughed. "Fair enough."

As he headed for the door, Harry heard Dumbledore say, "Why, Minerva, I never knew you were such a romantic."

Harry walked out, smiling. A student had been cursed, and that was horrible, but a tiny part of Harry felt hopeful. And useful again. As he descended the stairs, he could not help thinking it was a good thing he had come back to Hogwarts.

I might catch myself a few Death Eaters after all.

Chapter Three

Peevish Patrol

Harry's secret joy was short-lived. The reality was much more problematic than his fantastical plan to catch a stray Death Eater.

Saturday afternoon found him—against his better judgment—walking toward the Charms classroom with Ron and Hermione in tow. Panic had already spread through the Hogwarts castle and Harry feared that what he was about to do would only encourage it. But then again, there was a good chance that the students had not been panicking without cause and, as Hermione said, better safe than sorry.

It had started on Wednesday. Demelza Robins, who was supposed to meet with her boyfriend, a sixth-year Hufflepuff, after midnight, had been attacked by a cloaked and hooded figure. Mercifully, she had merely been Stunned, but after she had told her tale, the real trouble began. Suddenly, several other students claimed they, too, had seen a dark figure, hooded and cloaked, roaming around the castle. Two students said they had seen it on Tuesday night, near the place Demelza had later been Stunned. On Thursday, Jimmy Peaks told them he had seen a cloaked figure running up the stairs. "Those same stairs where someone tried to murder Harry Potter," he was quick to point out. And then another Hufflepuff insisted she had seen it, too, a little earlier, when she was returning to her common room, and not only had the figure raised a wand to curse her, but she had seen clearly beneath the hood and the figure's mouth was dripping with blood.

On Friday, Seamus Finnigan dubbed the cloaked person the Hufflepuff Vampire and, though most students had laughed, many looked terrified.

Harry was not overly concerned, at least not about that; it was all beginning to sound like a joke, but he

was reluctant to dismiss it completely. Especially since Hermione pointed out that, even though it was unlikely that a Death Eater had broken into the castle and was lingering just so he could skulk around at night to yell "Boo!" at Hufflepuffs, it was interesting that the figure was most often placed near the Hufflepuff common room, and therefore, near the kitchens. And sneaking around at night to steal food was exactly the sort of thing a person living secretly on the Hogwarts grounds would be forced to do. Harry still found it unlikely but, unfortunately, he had no way of discovering the real truth, aside from camping out in front of the kitchens the whole night. Which he would have done, but McGonagall had already arranged for the teachers to patrol the castle, told Argus Filch to keep an eye on the Hufflepuff common room, and instructed the house-elves to set up guards. She was obviously taking no risks. She even berated the Hogwarts portraits, urging them to keep better watch, but that had probably been a bad idea. Ever since the war, the portraits had been proven to be quite paranoid and were seeing shadowy figures everywhere.

"Bloody map," Ron said as they were nearing the Charms classroom. He said that a lot and every time Harry felt a stab of sadness. His trusted Marauder's Map, which would have been more than useful in this situation, was apparently broken. It had become difficult to activate it, and even when he managed and the ink spread to draw the map of Hogwarts, the mapping was incomplete and inaccurate. Whole sections of the castle had been erased and the dots labelling the students were sparse or nonexistent.

Ron suggested someone had jinxed it, since it had apparently worked fine last Sunday, when Harry had used it to find Malfoy after the incident on the stairs. "Wormtail knew about the Map," he had said, "perhaps he told one of his fellows, and they took care of it so you wouldn't see they'd broken into the castle." But Harry could not see how someone could jinx the Map when it had been at the bottom of Harry's trunk, in the Gryffindor Tower. Or why wouldn't they aim to destroy it or steal it, rather than mostly disable it. "To mess with your mind!" Ron suggested, then laughed and admitted they needed a new theory.

Hermione had one that sounded more likely. Hogwarts castle had suffered serious damage. Whole sections of it had been blasted and had to be repaired. "Perhaps the Map is confused. Perhaps it needs to be... updated." Harry had not been entirely happy with that theory, either. It still did not explain why the Map had appeared to be working fine on Sunday, though admittedly Harry had only focused on Malfoy's dot. Perhaps it had already shown signs of deterioration and he had simply failed to notice it. But the Map had been able to update itself in the past without any problem: it had always shown the current map of Hogwarts, taking into an account all the classrooms and stairs that might have wandered off somewhere else in the meantime. "This is different, though," Hermione had said. "The Map only knows what your father and his friends knew. The Battle and the repairs that followed is a new variable that the Map knows nothing about."

In the end, Harry admitted defeat and carried the Map to Professor Flitwick, who had been utterly delighted by it. He had promised to try to fix it and not mention it to anyone. Though, he had pointed out it might be easier to make a new map rather than fix the old one. Harry would have preferred to see the old one fixed, instead, but was more than ready to take whatever was offered. He had suggested Flitwick speak with George Weasley, since he and Fred had worked out how to use the Map in the first place. Harry feared Flitwick might be insulted by the suggestion he needed help, but the tiny professor had been thrilled by the idea. "So very talented, those two," he had said, not without sadness.

The loss of the Map had been a blow. Harry had never felt so blind. He relied on it to help him find Malfoy, which had proven difficult as it was, since Malfoy was avoiding him. The only remaining option, as far as Harry could see, was to seize Malfoy by the collar, tie him up, drag him somewhere and question him until he confessed everything he knew. It was a fun thought and Harry fantasised about it several times, but in the end he decided it was the sort of thing Malfoy would do and Harry refused to stoop to his level. McGonagall had questioned Malfoy as promised, but the only thing Malfoy had confessed was that Harry Potter was harassing him and that if he did not stop, he would file an official complaint.

All that meant Harry had found out and achieved nothing. Tommy Wright was still in the hospital wing, showing no signs of improvement after the St Mungo's Healers stuffed him full of potions. The only comfort was that his condition had not deteriorated, either. Though, Madam Pomfrey liked to repeat that finding the person who had cast the curse was Tommy's best chance of recovery.

Harry stopped so abruptly in front of the Charms classroom, Hermione nearly ran into him.

"This is a terrible idea," he mourned. "What if all I'm doing is creating even more needless panic?"

"We've been through this, Harry," Hermione said. "A student has been cursed. This isn't needless, it's precaution. Honestly, we should have done this the moment we returned to the castle this year. It's not over, you said it yourself, not while Death Eaters are still out there."

Harry turned to look at her. His expression must have told her he needed more convincing because she added, "You can't wait for Flitwick to fix your map; this will be your map."

Harry looked back at the door, sighed and gripped the knob. Maybe the classroom will be empty.

It wasn't, though. It was filled with students. Harry was so surprised, he froze at the doorway. Ron gave him a little push and Harry quickly stepped inside, looking around at familiar faces. Every member of Dumbledore's Army still in Hogwarts had shown up, except Zacharias Smith, which was only to be expected. This did not include Dennis Creevey, however, whose parents had not allowed him to return after losing Colin in the Battle. But everyone else was there; Harry could hardly believe it. He had insisted Hermione should use enchanted Galleons rather then send messages by owl or deliver them orally; after all, this year there was no need to sneak around, but Harry had secretly hoped no one would notice their Galleon had activated, which would neatly sabotage Hermione's idea. It occurred to him, though, that Hermione might have sent owls without his knowledge. Even Lavender came and Harry was sure she would not, since she had so persistently avoided everyone; though, Harry noted she was sitting at the far side of the classroom, well away from Parvati and her boyfriend, Anthony Goldstein. Parvati was fortunately not crying today. She looked fairly pleased.

Ron and Hermione found a pair of unoccupied chairs and sat down with the rest of the students, leaving Harry standing next to the teacher's desk alone. Traitors, Harry fumed. He forced a smile, however, and said, "Thanks for coming."

"Is this about the Hufflepuff Vampire?" Seamus asked promptly.

The room erupted with laughter and objections, and a number of questions: "Has someone else been cursed?" "Has someone tried to kill you again?" "Did You-Know-Who return?"

Ron and Hermione alone remained silent. Hermione looked at Harry expectantly.

Harry grimaced and took out his wand. He flicked his wrist and a loud bang echoed through the room. Everyone jumped and fell silent at once.

Don't apologise, they'll just start again, Harry scolded himself after almost saying, "Sorry."

"Voldemort hasn't and won't come back. And I doubt very much there's a vampire in Hogwarts," he said.

"I told you there's no vampire." Susan Bones glared at Ernie McMillan as though Harry's word had settled the matter. Harry heard Ron snicker.

"Well, something's up," Dean Thomas said. "You didn't call us here to exchange recipes."

"I'd love to exchange recipes," Luna said. "Though, I wouldn't mind learning how to stake vampires, either."

"What?" Lavender cried suddenly, looking very worried. Harry wished she had not come. The talk of Death Eaters and Hogwarts intruders would merely upset her further. She's a Gryffindor, he reminded himself. She'll be fine.

"We won't be staking any vampires," Harry said. "They have rights, remember? Though, if Dean wants to share a pie recipe with us, I won't mind."

Several people laughed and Dean scowled at him.

"But you're right," Harry told Dean. "Something is up." Everyone was looking at him now, silent. "Someone cast a very Dark curse on Tommy Wright and apparently tried to kill me." Careful now. Harry was determined not to even mention Malfoy. Telling a bunch of students that Malfoy might be involved somehow would not help. One of them might end up cursing Malfoy and that was the last thing Harry wanted. He had shared his doubts with Ron and Hermione, but had no plans to share them with anyone else. "McGonagall thinks that no student could have cast that curse. We believe a Death Eater breached the castle last Sunday."

Parvati gasped.

"That's worse than a vampire," Neville said.

"It is," Harry agreed. "We're not sure about their motive—"

"They want to do you in!" Seamus said.

"Maybe. Tommy could've been the real target, though. His grandfather is an important Wizengamot member and a great enemy to the Death Eaters. Maybe this was meant to subdue him. We can't know for sure. What we do know is that if the castle has been breached once, it can happen again."

"I think I liked the recipes exchange idea better," Hannah said weakly.

Neville looked worried. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"I am," Harry said. "And there's more." He hated telling them this. It was merely a rumour, one that found them last night by way of Aberforth Dumbledore. "Apparently... the Carrows were spotted near Hogsmeade yesterday."

The silence was deafening. Hogwarts students would not have forgotten the Carrows. The torture they had inflicted on them all last year was still the cause of many nightmares.

"And I thought everyone was panicking without cause," Neville all but whispered.

"It's just a rumour," Harry added quickly. Though a troubling one. "A wizard claims he saw them both. But it wouldn't be the first time someone drank a little too much mead and made up ridiculous stories."

Some students looked a little less pale after that.

"As for Hogwarts students panicking without cause," Harry said. "That is the problem. People aren't panicking, they're just gossiping. No one is actually taking it seriously. If there's one thing that surprised me about this whole thing, it's the fact that so many students are casually strolling all over Hogwarts after midnight. And that's after people claimed Voldemort returned to do me in and there's a vampire hunting down students. Apparently, neither of these things have stopped anyone from wandering about."

"Well, you do know why, though?" Parvati asked.

"I do?"

"War's over, mate." Seamus grinned. "Love is in the air."

"Right." So people had been sneaking off to snog in secluded corners, Voldemort, vampires and Death Eaters be dammed. "Well, it's not over. Everyone seems to think they're safe now, and I wish that were true, but it's not. Just look at Tommy Wright."

"So we're hunting Death Eaters?" Neville beamed. "I'm in." Murmurs of agreement and cries of "Me too!" echoed around the room.

"No," Harry said, though he was pleased to see so many eager faces. "I called you here to ask you to hunt down students, not Death Eaters."

Luna frowned. "That sounds much harder than hunting Death Eaters."

Harry could not help smiling. "Yes, it probably will be."

"Wait!" Hannah looked upset. "What are you saying, exactly?"

"I'm saying, I need you to help me keep the students in their respective common rooms after curfew. Apparently, prefects aren't taking this seriously enough, either."

"And how are we supposed to do that?" Neville looked much braver when he suggested going after Death Eaters. Harry sympathised.

"Place extra protection on the common room doors," he said. "Check the dormitories, count the students. There are quite a few of us here. Enough to keep an eye on everyone in our houses. You just have to remember how many students there are in each year. If we divide it amongst ourselves—"

"Wait!" Hannah said again, a bit hysterical now. "But... so, let's say we do that. We place charms and count students and then realise several of them are missing. Then what?"

"You team up and go looking for them." That statement earned Harry some odd looks.

"And when we find them? Are we supposed to drag them back?"

"If need be."

"But, Harry," Seamus said slowly, as though speaking to a small child. "You want us to sneak around at night, find couples and drag them back to their common rooms? Blimey! You might as well call us Cockblocker's Army."

The classroom burst into laughter. Harry kept a straight face with difficulty. "If you like," he said. He caught sight of Ginny with her hand high in the air. "Yes?" The laughter was dying down.

"I will happily hunt down every student and drag them wherever you want," Ginny assured him. "But...

er, won't that put all of us out past curfew, which isn't allowed. I mean, we don't have any authority. Other students don't have to listen to us. We're not prefects. We'll just be... bullies. And others can report us."

"Good point!" Seamus said. He was clearly none too pleased with Harry's plan.

"Everything I told you today, McGonagall will tell the Head Girl and Boy, and all the prefects tomorrow. We've discussed this; stricter rules were her idea. I offered you as additional backup." Harry smiled at them.

"And she agreed?" Neville asked just as Hannah said, "Well, you could have mentioned that sooner." They exchanged a glance and grinned at each other.

"She will," Harry said. "I think I was rather convincing."

"Think again." Seamus still looked doubtful, apparently not eager to be a cockblocker.

"Look," Harry said. "This will be a hassle and it won't make you popular among other students. And honestly, there's a real possibility that whoever cursed Tommy is long gone and won't be coming back. And the Carrows... who knows if they were really in Hogsmeade or not? But, if there's a slightest chance that another Hogwarts student could get hurt, tell me that's not worth the bother. You've protected Hogwarts once, you can do it again. One day we might be able to relax, but not yet. And it seems that's exactly what we all did. Too soon."

Anthony Goldstein raised his hand. Parvati looked inexplicably annoyed by that. Anthony grinned at Harry. "We'll get prefect privileges, right? We're official now? I don't see anything wrong with that."

Parvati spoke before Harry could. "Yes, well, but I'm sure we can't just go around and hex random students."

Anthony argued he was not suggesting that and Harry spoke over him. "Of course not! You'll be allowed to be out of your common rooms until eleven, but not alone. You must have a partner. You'll be able to file reports against resisting students and have them lose points and get detention. That will give you authority, but you cannot use force. If there's trouble, find a professor to handle it."

"Cockblocking snitches," Seamus mourned.

"Seamus," Harry said testily, "you don't have to do it."

"I didn't say I won't do it," Seamus hurried to say. "I'm just not happy about it."

"Good. Neither am I." Harry glanced at Anthony. "Please remember you're protecting students. Well, that is, if you agree to do this." No one said a thing and Harry added, "That was a question." Ron and Hermione raised their hands and everyone else soon followed. Harry breathed a little easier. "Excellent! We can work on a schedule now. And Hermione wanted to place an additional charm on the Galleons."

Hermione hurriedly took out a piece of parchment and her wand. "Yes," she said. "If everyone could give me their Galleon, please. I can Charm them so we can send messages to a specific person, not just the whole group. And I already drew a chart, assigning students to every member. For example, one can be in charge of first and second-year boys and the other..."

"Sorry, Hermione," Neville said, "but I just wanted to ask..." He looked at Harry. "What about Malfoy?"

Harry stiffened. "What about him?"

"Well, we all saw him fighting with that kid and then..."

"Draco Malfoy has nothing to do with this," Harry said sharply. The last thing he needed was for everyone to turn against Malfoy and harass him. "He was with me on the stairs when they moved. He nearly died himself. Which reminds me..." Harry aimed to change the subject as quickly as possible. "We

are also protecting Slytherin students. Protecting, not looking for a way to deduct points." Except Ginny and Luna, all of them were here attending N.E.W.T. preparation lessons and as such could not earn or lose house points, but that did not mean no one cared which house would win the cup.

A few people looked indignant, as though insulted by Harry's chastising, or perhaps they were disappointed. This might be a problem.

"But who will make sure they are all accounted for?" Parvati asked. "I mean, we don't have any Slytherins here." Harry noticed Lavender look at Parvati sharply. Parvati's boyfriend, Anthony, seemed displeased by her concern for Slytherins, too.

"They have prefects," Harry reminded her. "It will have to do." For now.

The rest of the meeting went by peacefully, with Hermione boring them all to death with her charts. Another person complained that Tommy was cursed in broad daylight and Harry had pointed out that the school was mostly empty at that time because of the match, but he agreed they should keep an eye on any possible stragglers during daytime as well.

Despite the fact that he was pleased his friends had agreed to guard the castle, Harry found himself brooding over Seamus's complaints. It was unfair they would have to destroy the little bits of happiness of Hogwarts students and police their free time, but they were being so careless.

So were you, a little voice reminded him. And that was true, but the mere thought of a first-year student skulking about, trying to catch Death Eaters or find a Basilisk, or tempting fate in any way, seemed horrifying. Harry would have hated an army of older students trying to stop him at every turn. And he would hate them even more if they had tried to stop him snogging his girlfriend.

But he was not the one deciding things, then. He was not the person responsible, no matter how much he had liked to pretend he was. But now... By returning, you may ensure that fewer souls are maimed, fewer families are torn apart. If that seems to you a worthy goal, then we say good-bye for the present. Dumbledore had told him that. He told Harry he had a choice. And Harry had made it. He came back. He came back and defeated Voldemort and saved lives. He could not stop now. That was why he came back. It is important to fight, and fight again, and keep fighting, for only then can evil be kept at bay, though

never quite eradicated. And Harry meant to do just that. After all that had happened, if a Hogwarts student lost their life and Harry had done nothing, then he might as well have stayed at King's Cross station.

An hour later, Harry, Ron and Hermione headed toward the Gryffindor Tower. Neville lingered, speaking to Hannah, and then hurried after them.

Hermione beamed at him when he caught up. "Someone looks happy."

Neville coughed, abashed. "Yes, well." Then he lowered his voice. "She's quite brilliant. Do you know I found a Flitterbloom—with a blue blossom!—on my bedside table the other day? I've wanted one for ages. They are very rare. Hannah must have sent it. She's denying it, but she's the only one I've told." He sighed happily. "Brilliant!" Then he frowned, looking ahead. "Oh, there's Lavender. She's my partner. Better catch up with her and arrange tonight's patrol." He took a few steps forward then stopped suddenly. "Harry," he said seriously, "we won't let anyone else get hurt."

"Er, okay. Thanks."

Neville nodded, thumped Harry's back and ran off.

"Oh my, someone's hyperactive," Hermione commented.

Harry nodded, staring at Neville's retreating back. Love really was in the air.

*

Things went surprisingly well over the next few days. The Carrows had not breached the castle, nor were they seen again, and neither was the Hufflepuff Vampire. At least, none of the vampire sightings seemed ever remotely plausible. Whenever someone claimed they had seen a dark figure with bloodied lips in the castle, Harry instantly dismissed it.

The D.A. had little trouble finding wandering students, which, in turn, had not resisted when taken back to their common rooms. Hermione was quick to point out they had more luck than Head Boy and Girl and assorted prefects. Neville had proven to be especially resourceful and had found students hiding in the most unlikely places.

Harry was relatively pleased. Dumbledore's Army had taken things seriously and most of the students as well, after the Headmistress urged everyone to be careful on Sunday at dinnertime.

The only problem was the Slytherins. Though they had seemed subdued before Dumbledore's Army started their patrols, on their very first night it was obvious the Slytherins were purposely trying to sabotage them. The Slytherin prefects claimed they did their rounds and found no missing students, but the D.A. had found an alarming number of them out past curfew. When found, they would go back to their common room without resistance, but some fifteen minutes later, the same students would pop up somewhere else in the school, forcing the D.A. members to escort them back yet again.

Curiously, no one had ever found Draco Malfoy out past curfew. If the Slytherins had organised themselves to give as much trouble as they could to the D.A., Malfoy seemed not to be a part of it.

Harry also suspected Harper, the Slytherin Seeker, was not a part of the organised sabotage. After he had recovered from his accident, he had developed a tendency to wander off a lot. At times, he appeared to be entirely lost, staring blankly ahead, and popping up all over the school in random locations. On one occasion, they had found him in the Gryffindor common room, and no one, including Harper, could explain how he got there. Several people insisted Harper was feigning confusion and was there to murder them while they slept. His parents were Dark Wizards, after all, and Voldemort's supporters, Seamus claimed. Whether that was true, Harry did not know, but even the Slytherin prefects seemed exasperated by Harper's behaviour, and they had begun to report his disappearance. Pomfrey had told them his brain had suffered some damage, but promised he would recover fully in time.

The Slytherins were rapidly losing house points, however, so Harry hoped they would give up soon. He did think of another way to stop their spiteful behaviour, but was wary of suggesting it.

On Thursday morning, snow unexpectedly covered the Hogwarts grounds and lifted everyone's spirits, though the upcoming Hufflepuff-Ravenclaw match was the cause of some trepidation. Someone had

hexed the Hufflepuff Seeker, Jane Bradshaw, and turned her feet into jelly. She was still recovering in the hospital wing. The teachers feared that was an ill omen and this match, too, would end bloody.

Hannah had burst into tears when they told her about Jane, insisting she had failed to protect the Hufflepuff students as promised. But Neville, as well as Harry, had pointed out that if they were aiming to stop the students from ever hexing each other, they might as well confiscate everyone's wands.

Although, after the incident, Harry had to admit that if a Death Eater broke into the castle, intent on cursing someone, he could easily succeed. His only comfort was the belief that the Death Eater in question would not be as bold as to curse a student in broad daylight, while the castle was swarming with students and teachers. The hexing students, on the other hand, had the luxury of losing themselves in the crowd after the deed.

That Friday afternoon, Harry was sitting alone on one of the squishy armchairs by the fire. Ron and Hermione had gone to the library to study, which meant they were off somewhere, snogging, because Ron had looked entirely too cheerful when he had waved Harry goodbye. Harry took the opportunity to stare blankly at his Potions essay and mourn his lack of enthusiasm for the subject.

The portrait hole burst open and Harry glanced up, hoping for a distraction. Ginny climbed inside and smiled when she spotted him.

"Don't you have lessons?" Harry asked when she sat on the armchair next to him.

"Nasty nosebleed." Ginny sighed dramatically. "I had to run to the hospital wing."

Harry grinned. Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes were still as popular as they were useful.

Ginny glanced at Harry's essay. "Ugh. Potions. I ran away from that." She stood up. "I better go do something productive, instead. Napping sounds promising."

Harry bit his lip, telling himself to shut up. Ginny had already turned when Harry said, "Wait!"

She looked at him expectantly, expression bright.

"Er, I just..." Harry began but lost his nerve quickly. Instead of asking what he wanted, he said, "I thought maybe we could go out, play some Quidditch. I'm dying of boredom here."

If Ginny was surprised by the question, she did not show it. "Better not. What if someone sees me?"

"Right. Good point."

"Next time." Ginny smiled and took a step back.

"Wait!"

Ginny paused again, biting her lip. "Yes?"

"Are we..." Harry steeled himself. "Ginny, are we okay?"

She hesitated. "Of course we're okay, Harry."

It was hard to believe her. "You've been avoiding me. For months now." Harry tried hard not to sound accusing. He was the one who had ended things. She had the right to avoid him. But knowing that did not help much. He missed her. He missed the way she would comfort him with soft words or punch his shoulder and glare at him when he was being an idiot.

Ginny shoved her hands into her pockets and then kicked the carpeted floor with her foot, reminding

Harry strongly of Ron. She slumped back into the armchair with a sigh. "We're okay, Harry. We are. Or will be. I just..." She looked at him steadily. "It's over. I know that. And I've given up. This time for good." Her voice lowered. "It's just easier to remember that when I'm not around you."

Harry's stomach twisted. "Oh. Of course. Okay." He wished he could fix things, but he had tried that in the past and it had not worked. His relationship with Ginny had started like a bright spark. Harry had been so hopeful. But then, somehow, the spark had died. It turned into a thick blanket you could wrap over yourself and feel cosy and safe, but never warm enough. There was no fire to put a flush to his cheeks and heat him up down to his toes. Harry had told himself it was enough, it was better than nothing, but then he realised Ginny deserved better. She deserved fire, too.

Of course, it had been a mistake telling Ginny that. Especially the part about her being a blanket. As well as telling her she deserved better. "If you want to break up with me, Harry, then break up with me," she had said. "But don't you dare tell me it's for my own good. I'll decide what's good for me." The weeks after their break up had been miserable. At least she was speaking to him again and treating him kindly, if distantly. That should have been enough. More than he could have hoped for.

Ginny punched his knee suddenly, so hard Harry feared she had busted his kneecap.

Harry looked up in surprise. Ginny was on her feet. "Blimey, Harry! Do you practice the kicked-puppy look in front of your mirror every day? Come on, then. Let's go play Quidditch."

"Er, it's fine. Really." Harry rubbed his knee. "I just thought... It doesn't matter."

Ginny crossed her arms and tapped her foot impatiently. "No. You asked. Now we'll play Quidditch. You can guard the hoops and I'll throw Quaffles at you."

"You mean the hoops. You'll throw Quaffles in the hoops."

"Will I?"

Harry shook his head and stood up. Ginny had superb aiming skills, which meant that if she aimed the Quaffle at Harry's head, that was where it would end up. But still, it beat staring at his Potions essay.

They fetched their cloaks and brooms and headed outside. Their conversation revolved around Quidditch and tomorrow's match and Harry soon forgot his gloomy thoughts.

When they opened the Hogwarts main door, cold air and snow greeted them, together with Draco Malfoy. Snowflakes melted in Malfoy's blond, windswept hair, barely visible among pale strands. His cheeks were flushed, his lips red and his scowl deep. He muttered a curse and pushed between them, nearly knocking Ginny backward along the way.

Ginny raised an eyebrow at his back, nonplussed. "I think he's growing fond of us."

"Definitely. He actually brushed against our clothes."

"Our dirty blood-traitor clothes."

With a laugh, they stepped outside into the cold. Harry could not help wondering what Malfoy was doing outside. He'd been flying, obviously, but it was interesting that he had been alone. Though, now that Harry thought about it, Malfoy was alone more often than not.

The grounds were beautiful, purely white and peaceful, with ripples of untouched snow covering rocks and old yellow grass. Harry forgot all about Malfoy and cursed students and Death Eaters when he rose into the air. I should fly more often. He resolved to do so. Everything looked smaller from above: the castle, the lake, his worries.

Ginny and he spent the rest of the afternoon playing Quidditch and racing around the pitch. Ginny had not thrown Quaffles at his head, but she had scored more goals than Harry would have liked, and in one awkward moment, after Harry said, "Blimey! It's cold," she replied with, "I bet you could use a blanket,"

and then a Quaffle hit Harry in the chest and knocked the air out of his lungs.

But as they walked back toward the castle, exhausted and frozen, Ginny looked much happier and more relaxed.

They missed dinner, but Hermione greeted them with sandwiches when they returned to the common room.

"We went to the kitchens," Hermione said. "And I took the opportunity to ask the house-elves if they noticed anything strange. Food gone missing, that sort of thing."

"I thought the Hufflepuff Vampire had gone underground," Ginny said.

"Yes, well, I thought it wouldn't hurt to ask."

"And?" Harry prompted.

"If there's missing food, they haven't noticed. But they did have something to say." Hermione bit her lip and looked at Ron.

"Oh, just tell him," Ron said.

Harry held his breath.

"Well, er, I'm not sure what this means, but... they said that they usually have trouble keeping the classrooms, and especially the trophy room, neat and tidy, because Peeves keeps showing up and makes a huge mess. But lately, that hasn't been happening. And then I, that is we, thought about it and spoke to several students and some ghosts and... no one has seen Peeves for a while. And that's very unlike him.

It appears as though he has... vanished."

"Peeves?" Harry frowned. "You're saying, what? Someone kidnapped him? Destroyed him? No one can get rid of Peeves. Not even Dumbledore could."

"I know," Hermione said. "But with Dumbledore's Army roaming the halls every night, you'd think someone would have seen him. Or the ghosts! Sir Nicholas always kept an eye on him, as well as the Bloody Baron. But they haven't seen him either."

"That's..." Harry was not sure how he felt about this. Peeves was a part of the school. He was indestructible. Annoying and downright insufferable, but always loyal to Hogwarts. He had fought with them in the Battle. "Unsettling."

"Is it?" Ron grimaced. "I never really liked him, I have to say."

"Well, no one did, but that's beside the point," Hermione said. "He's been in the castle since the founding. How could he just vanish?"

"Maybe he'll turn up," Ginny said. "Maybe someone stole his hat and he's sulking."

"Maybe," Harry said.

But that night Harry could not sleep. So many familiar things seemed to have vanished. The Room of Requirement, the Map, and now Peeves. Harry turned in his bed, his thoughts running in circles until he finally fell into a fitful sleep.

Chapter Four

A Stunning Discovery

The dragon was huge. As tall as any Harry had seen, rising from the ground like a green mountain; its

wings cast shadows that shrouded the castle in darkness. It roared and flames erupted from its wide mouth.

We'll all burn, Harry thought. I have to kill him. But how do you kill a dragon?

Peeves flew in circles above Harry. "Oh Potty, Potty! You shouldn't have tickled it!" he cackled.

I didn't! Harry wanted to scream, but his throat was dry and no sound came out. Malfoy was by his side suddenly. He pulled on Harry's sleeve. "The door, Potter," Malfoy said urgently. "We have to get to the door!" Harry stared at Malfoy's pale face; his grey eyes were dark. Snowflakes melted in his hair.

Harry found his voice. "I can't. I can't run. I have to kill the dragon."

"It's not a dragon!" Malfoy was so close but sounded so far away. "Get out, Potter!"

It is. But when Harry turned, the dragon was gone. In its place stood Voldemort.

"No. You're dead," Harry told him but reached for his wand. He could not find it. He struggled and searched his pockets, but it was not there. He realised his hands were shaking.

Voldemort was on him. His long white fingers gripped Harry's neck. "You're dead!" Harry screamed.

Voldemort's eyes burned red. "Tell me, Harry Potter," he said as his fingers tightened. Harry could not breathe. "Tell me your last wish."

I have to answer, Harry thought, his vision blurring. It's important. I have to. What do I wish for?

"Harry!"

Harry gasped and opened his eyes. The sheets were tangled around his body and sweat trickled down his forehead; his heart was pounding in his chest. Harry struggled to get free.

Ron was standing over him. His freckled face shone pale in the moonlight. It must have been the middle of the night.

"All right, mate?"

"I'm fine." Harry's voice broke, and he cleared his throat and rose up a little. "Fine, just... a dream."

"Oh. Right, get dressed."

Harry noticed Ron was wearing a dressing gown. "What—?"

"The Galleons, Harry. Yours and mine. Look!"

Harry looked to the beside table; his D.A. Galleon was there, glowing faintly. I should have put it under my pillow. Throwing away the covers, Harry picked it up. It said: Slytherin dungeons. Now.

Harry's heart skipped a beat. Trouble in the dungeons. Did the Death Eaters come? Did they come for Malfoy? The dream seemed even more ominous now. Harry grabbed his dressing gown and found his slippers. Perhaps I should dress. I can't fight Death Eaters wearing slippers. But there was no time for that, he concluded.

"Should I wake the others?" Ron glanced at Neville's bed. Neville was snoring lightly.

"No. No, just come on." The fewer people were there, the fewer could get hurt.

They snuck outside and bounded down the stairs. They nearly ran over Hermione on the last step.

She was wearing her cloak, with her hair pulled up in a messy sort of knot on the top of her head. She wrung her hands nervously. Her wand was out. "I was just coming to get you," she whispered, though it sounded too loud in the quiet common room. "My Galleon went off."

"Yeah, ours too," Ron said.

Behind Hermione, Parvati Patil was shivering. The light from the fireplace illuminated her face. Harry saw her eyes were bloodshot. "And yours?" Harry asked.

Parvati shook her head. "No. But Lavender's gone!"

"It's true. Last I saw her she was sleeping," Hermione added. "But she's gone now."

Harry grimaced. They had paused on the steps, wasting time. "Come on," he said and headed toward the portrait hole. "We'll see what's going on and find Lavender."

They followed him silently. Harry ran ahead, faster with each step. The castle was empty; their slipper-clad footsteps barely made any sound. They dashed down the countless flights of stairs, making for the dungeons. It had never seemed as distant as it did now. They met no one along the way, though some portraits glared at them and one of them cried, "Faster!"

By the time they reached the torchlit corridor that led to the Slytherin common room, they were all breathless. Light was coming from the far end and Harry realised that the common room door was open.

Harry sprinted forward, wand in hand.

He burst into the faintly lit room, expecting Death Eaters. What he found was smoke; thick grey smoke that filled his nostrils and tickled his throat. Someone cursed, another person yelled, and then the smoke cleared so suddenly Harry thought he had dreamt it.

Hermione was behind him, her wand still pointing upward. She must have Vanished the smoke.

The common room was empty, and as dour and cold as Harry remembered, with green lamps and leathered chairs and a very low ceiling. The door to their left was open and through it Blaise Zabini emerged, smoke following his entrance like a misty veil. He was coughing and cursing, and he appeared to be carrying something over his shoulder like a sack. A little boy, Harry realised, horrified. It was a little boy.

Harry rushed to his side. "What happened?"

Blaise squinted at him and grimaced. "Oh, I don't know, Potter. All the smoke must mean someone drowned," he said and shoved past him toward the exit.

"Where are you going?" Harry yelled after him.

"To have a pint of ale." Blaise stepped outside and disappeared from view. His attitude calmed Harry's nerves somewhat. Blaise was neither panicking nor looked to be in a hurry. That was a good sign. Though, the unconscious boy was not.

"Ron, go after him," Harry said quickly.

"Why? He's probably going to the hospital wing."

"I know," Harry said. "But he's alone and it looks like someone set the dungeons on fire."

Ron hesitated for a moment longer and then went, cursing.

"Get them outside!" The scream was muffled and distant, coming somewhere from the deep ends of the dungeons.

Harry was about to enter the narrow corridor, which he assumed led to the boys' dormitories, but Parvati pushed past him with a cry of "Lavender!"

Harry realised she was right. That had been Lavender's voice. He dashed after Parvati with Hermione close behind. The corridor was very narrow and filled with smoke, but Hermione was waving her wand, muttering, "Evanesco," as they went, and Parvati and Harry joined her. The smoke was slowly clearing.

They could hear other voices now and they ran in their direction through what looked like an impossibly complicated labyrinth of corridors. They reached a thick group of Slytherins of all ages, pilled by the doorway that was still spitting smoke.

Parvati cannon-balled through them with all her might, pushing them all rudely aside. All Harry had to do was follow the path she had cleared. If any of the Slytherins thought it odd to see a bunch of Gryffindors in their midst, they did not show it. They looked too shocked to question anything.

Harry paused in surprise, as well. Behind him, Hermione was still Vanishing smoke, slowly revealing the state of the dormitory they had found themselves in. Silky, green drapery was everywhere, most of it burned to blackness and ash. The furniture had fared better and so had the beds, though some posts had burned through and one had broken off. The room was filled with students; Harry counted at least nine; two of them carried another two boys outside. Harry and Hermione quickly stepped aside to let them through. Another student rushed past, escorting a boy who was conscious, if unsteady on his feet. Hermione's brown eyes were bright and big when she glanced at Harry.

"Lavender!" Parvati cried again and sprang forward, slipping and almost falling down in her haste before

she straightened and threw herself at her friend. "Are you all right?"

Lavender stood in the middle of the room, her face smudged with black soot. "I'm fine," she said, though she did not look it. Her voice sounded shaky.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry spotted a tall, pale figure. The force of Harry's relief left him feeling dizzy; before that moment, he had not realised how worried he had been. Malfoy was standing by a long underwater window that glowed green, illuminated by two tiny lamps fixed on each lower corner. A Grindylow had its nose pressed against the glass from the outside, pulling faces at them as it floated in the green water of the Hogwarts lake.

A little boy was hunched on the bed in front of Malfoy, sobbing quietly. Malfoy stared at him, looking horrified.

Harry and Hermione moved to their side at once. Harry slipped and almost fell just like Parvati had earlier. He realised the floor was slippery, covered with something black and oily. He filed that thought for later perusal and hurried toward Malfoy.

Hermione put her hand on the little boy's shoulder. "Come on. Let's get you to the hospital wing."

"I'll take him!" Malfoy said, so sharply Hermione pulled her hand back and the boy stopped crying, as though too startled to continue. Draco grabbed a handful of the boy's pyjama top and pulled him to his feet. "Come on." He kept his grip on the boy, guiding him toward the door. He did not look at Harry once. Harry noticed a few other Slytherin students—the younger ones—hastily moved out of Malfoy's way, as though afraid of him. They were giving him wide-eyed looks.

Harry looked at Hermione imploringly. "Go with him."

"But..." Hermione scanned the burned room.

"Please, Hermione," Harry said. "No one should wander alone in the middle of the night. Especially not now. Especially not him."

She was still hesitating.

"And then go get McGonagall," Harry added, pretending she had already agreed to go.

"No need!" Lavender said, freeing herself from Parvati's grip and coming over. "A couple of prefects already went to get her. Malfoy wanted to go, but I told him he can't because he's not a prefect."

Harry wished he could have seen that confrontation.

Hermione looked somewhat appeased now that she knew a grownup was on their way. She turned and ran after Malfoy.

Lavender gripped Harry's arm so tightly it hurt. "Oh Harry, it was so horrible."

Parvati was by her side again. "What happened?"

"A fire!" Lavender cried, as though she truly believed they hadn't summarised that fact for themselves.

"Yes," Parvati said patiently, "but what are you doing here?"

"And who started the fire?" Harry asked. "Do you know? Did you see something?"

Lavender shook her head. "No. I just, I found Harper on the fourth floor earlier and—"

"Harper?" Parvati squeaked, but Lavender ignored her.

"He was confused, as ever, so I escorted him back here. Only, when the wall opened to let him through, I noticed smoke. So I went inside, too, and when we opened the door to the dormitories, there was so much smoke I panicked. So I took out my Galleon and thought of you three." She waved her hand vaguely at the door where Hermione disappeared a minute ago. "And then, well, I thought I'd go see where it was all coming from and..." She sniffed. "When I opened this door, I thought... It was so hot and the walls were on fire. All of them."

Harry looked at the small patches of draperies still stuck to the wall. He thought maybe the entire room had been curtained with green silk. He had heard that was how the Slytherin dormitories were decorated.

"And what did you do?" Harry asked.

"Well, I screamed. A lot. And then I started yelling Aguamenti. And it was working. And then the other students showed up and helped. We put out the fire pretty fast."

"Aguamenti worked?" Harry asked, surprised, and Lavender nodded.

Harry had expected cursed fire, not regular fire. He remembered his dream and the dragon. But that was just a dream.

The other Slytherin students were lingering by the doorway, a few were in the room with them; Theodore Nott was standing by the door with his arms crossed. They were all staring at them, listening.

"You didn’t hear anything before Lavender showed up?" Harry asked the room at large.

Nott replied. "These are the dungeons, Potter. The walls are thick and we were asleep."

"It wasn't an accusation," Harry said, but he didn't think they believed him. "I just want to know how the fire started." No one had an answer to that. Harry looked back at Lavender. "You haven't seen anyone else? In the corridors? The common room?"

Lavender shook her head. "Sorry, Harry."

"Don't be." Harry could not help smiling at her a little. "You were brilliant."

Lavender beamed and Theodore Nott turned and walked out of the room. Harry imagined he was not pleased a Gryffindor had rushed into their common room in the middle of the night to save the students who could have burned without any of the Slytherins noticing. And it seemed Lavender was bossing them around earlier.

Harry smiled at Lavender again, quite proud of her. "No one got burned, right? The beds seem to be in good shape."

"A few bed curtains caught fire, but we put it out in time. I think the first-years just inhaled a lot of smoke."

"So did you," Harry said. "You should probably go—"

Parvati cut across him. "But, Lavender, what were you doing on the fourth floor in the middle of the night? Alone?"

"That's none of your business." Lavender wrenched free of Parvati's grip. "The important thing now is that I was."

Harry wanted to mention that the whole point of the D.A.'s patrol was to stop the students from wandering off in the middle of the night, which meant they could not break the rules themselves, but Lavender had a point. Who knew what would have happened if she had been asleep like the rest of them? And the last thing she needed now was chastising.

Besides, he thought he might know how Harper ended up in the Gryffindor Tower recently. Lavender could have given him the password. It was possible she had not found Harper on the fourth floor by chance. Perhaps they had arranged a meeting. After all, love was in the air.

"But we're not supposed to—" Parvati began but Harry intervened.

"Parvati, can you please take Lavender to the hospital wing?"

Parvati pursed her lips but nodded. Lavender looked like she was about to complain, but instead she started coughing violently. Parvati pulled her toward the exit and Lavender followed, looking resigned.

Moments later, Slughorn pushed his way into the room. He was sweating and panting, his nightcap wobbling dangerously on his head and his velvet dressing gown flapping madly around him.

"Oh dear. Oh dear," he could not stop saying. He spotted Harry. "Oh dear! Harry, my dear boy!" He slipped when he reached Harry, nearly knocking them both to the ground. "Oh dear!" he said again, fixing his cap.

"I don't think anyone's seriously injured," Harry said, wishing Slughorn would calm down. Some of the younger students still lingering about were beginning to look very nervous, as though Slughorn's panic was contagious.

Slughorn looked around in shock. "How did this happen?" He gave Harry a watery sort of look. "Oh, we're so lucky to have you, Harry Potter."

"I didn't do anything," Harry said, distracted. He remembered he had wanted to check why the floor was so slippery. "Lavender Brown stopped the fire. And the Slytherin students."

Harry bent down and poked the floor with his wand as Slughorn insisted he had always known Oleander Brown was a brilliant witch.

"Lavender," Harry corrected. He knelt down on one knee and used the tip of his wand to peel off a bit of black, charred mess that clung to the floor. It was greasy and stuck to his fingertips.

McGonagall found him on the floor. If she thought it odd he was kneeling down, she did not show it. She looked around the room, leaning heavily on her cane. Ron and Hermione were behind her and Harry spotted Malfoy and Blaise outside in the corridor.

Slughorn said, "Minerva! Oh dear!" and Hermione walked briskly to Harry's side.

"Harry, what is it?"

Harry stood up, frowning. "Wax, I think."

"Candle wax?" McGonagall asked sharply. She took out her wand and whispered, "Lumos." A beam of light scanned the floor.

"There!" Hermione said, pointing toward the window. "Look!"

McGonagall sprang forward, apparently forgetting to limp. There were now three Grindylows floating outside in the lake. They looked stuck to the glass, staring at them and grinning. McGonagall tapped the window with her cane and they scurried off, leaving a mass of bubbles in their wake.

The light of McGonagall's wand illuminated the floor beneath the window. "Candles," she murmured.

True enough, there was a pile of half-burnt candles on the floor. Now that the room was brighter, Harry noticed melted, burned wax everywhere. "Lots of candles," he said.

"But then..." Slughorn was staring at the little pieces of candles. "This must have been an accident. The kids must have Conjured a bunch of candles..."

"They're first-years, Horace." McGonagall said.

"It's not unheard of!" Slughorn insisted. "I accidentally Conjured a jellyfish when I was twelve."

"Well, this is not a jellyfish," McGonagall said tightly. "All this wax... Someone Conjured hundreds of candles."

Harry glanced at Hermione. "Don't the first-years know anything?"

She shook her head. "They were all conscious when we left the hospital wing and none of them had even seen the fire. They were sound asleep."

"Dunno how's that possible," Ron commented. "Hundreds of lit candles. It must have been very bright in here."

"They could be lying. Or shock made them forget." Slughorn wrung his hands, looking displeased. "It must have been an accident."

Harry scanned the room, considering. The boys were carried off; they must have left all their possessions behind. "Well," he said, "we can check and see if they were Conjuring or not." He concentrated and

cried, "Accio wands!"

Five wands flew toward him from all corners of the room. Harry caught three of them but two tumbled to the ground. Ron and Hermione bent to pick them up. They took out their wands and cast Prior Incantato at nearly the same time. Silvery shapes rose high in the air: books, parchment and quills. Soon, the wands stop regurgitating spells and Harry handed them each two more and invoked the Reverse-Spell Effect on the wand that remained in his hand. More silvery books and quills and even a few pillows flew up toward the ceiling. There were no candles, though.

McGonagall was staring at the ceiling where the shapes twinkled faintly. "They were practicing Levitation Charms," she said, pointing her wand upward and whispering, "Deletrius." The shapes vanished.

Slughorn followed her gaze, clearly unhappy, but apparently not ready to give up. "Minerva, I know you have your theories..." McGonagall gave him a cold look and he hurried on. "But these kids are young. Perhaps one of them still has little control of his magic and this was the result."

"They are too old for accidental, wandless magic of these proportions and too young to perform Conjuring spells."

"Indeed!" Slughorn cried. "But... it is unlikely, I agree, but not impossible. Say one of them is afraid of the dark, or those horrid Grindylows, and he had seen candles floating about in the Great Hall. It is possible he was half-asleep, upset enough, lacked control and protected himself unknowingly."

McGonagall eyed the students that were still lingering by the door and outside in the corridor. "Did anyone see anything?"

A few people shook their heads.

"Peterson was scared of the dark," one of them said, pointing toward the window. Harry did not know him but he had seen him around and thought he might be a prefect. "That's his bed over there. He's scared of everything." The scowl on the boy's face was worthy of Malfoy. Harry almost laughed at the boy's exaggerated disdain, unsure where that urge came from. Perhaps it was some strange sort of

nostalgia. He glanced toward the corridor, hoping to see Malfoy, but he was not there.

McGonagall studied the boy for a moment, then said, "You should all go back to your dormitories. It's three in the morning."

Some turned away at once, others hesitated, a few looked at Harry, Ron and Hermione grudgingly.

"You three, as well," McGonagall added, glancing at Harry.

Harry expected as much. He would have preferred to stay, hear more theories, find out if the castle would be searched, just in case. Why someone would want to burn down the first-years' dormitory, Harry had no idea, but that did not mean the matter should be dismissed like Slughorn seemed to want. Harry was half-tempted to suggest they cast Prior Incantato on every wand in the castle, but knew he was being irrational.

He said nothing, just nodded. Disobeying McGonagall in front of a bunch of Slytherins was not something he wanted to do.

They left the dormitory and that seemed to have appeased the other students. They retreated as well, disappearing in the poorly lit corridors, whispering to each other. Someone had whispered, "Saviour," and soft laughter carried through the corridor. Harry searched for a glimpse of blond hair but found none.

Ron shivered as they moved through the corridors. "It's so bloody cold here. And dark. And depressing. I wouldn't mind Conjuring a bunch of candles myself."

"McGonagall's right, you know," Hermione said. "It's highly unlikely that a first-year managed such powerful accidental—" Hermione broke off when they reached the common room. She was frowning in the direction of the fireplace. Harry followed her line of sight only to see Malfoy sitting on one of the green-leathered chairs by the fire. He was staring at Harry, looking haughtier than ever in the shadowy light.

The common room was otherwise unoccupied; Harry noticed another door on the other end of the room, which must have led to the girls' dormitory. They were closed; its occupants were not even aware of what had happened.

"Go ahead," Harry told Ron and Hermione. "I'll catch up in a minute."

They exchanged a look, frowning, but then left despite their obvious reluctance. Harry knew for a fact that they would be waiting outside the common room door, possibly eavesdropping.

Malfoy watched the exchange silently. When Harry reached him, he noticed his hair looked messy and tangled, which was an odd look for Malfoy. It softened his features and made him look younger than he was. Though, his skin looked sallow, painted with a greenish tinge from the lamps.

"Must everything be green here?" Harry asked.

Malfoy ignored his comment and stood up, looking rather agitated. "I just have one thing to say to you and then you can get out," he said. "I'd rather avoid having you follow me around tomorrow trying to question me, so here's your answer: I didn't set the dormitory on fire."

Harry blinked. "I never thought you did," he said honestly.

Malfoy snorted. "Right. So you didn't send Granger with me to make sure I didn't finish off Peterson?"

I sent her so she could protect you. Harry thought it better not to say that aloud. "It didn't even occur to me you had done it. Especially... well, not fire."

Malfoy winced and looked away.

"Although..." Harry frowned. "Why would I think you'd want to hurt Peterson? Why him, specifically?"

Malfoy glanced back at him. "Right. Because you don't know why." Malfoy's tone was scanting; he had obviously assumed Harry knew more about the little first-year than he claimed.

"Did he kick you in public, too?" Harry asked.

Malfoy stared at him. "Merlin. You don't even..." He ran a hand through his hair, making it stick out on ends. "I might as well tell you," he said, even angrier now. He had clearly misspoken when he mentioned Peterson. "Petersons are an old pure-blood family, but Jamie's—the little kid's—father is a Squib and his mother is a Muggle. He's... practically Muggle-born." Malfoy shrugged. "He hasn't adjusted well. He should never have been sorted Slytherin."

Harry remembered the young Slytherin prefect back in the dormitory who had sneered when he told them how Peterson was afraid of everything. He hasn't adjusted well. Which meant some of the other students must have been bullying him. Once upon a time, Harry would have easily accused Malfoy of being a part of that; once upon of time, Malfoy could have been a part of that, but the Malfoy that stood before Harry now seemed... too preoccupied to even bother.

Harry must have been silent for too long because Malfoy was losing patience. "There, Potter. Motive. Handed to you on a silver platter. I suppose now you think I really did do it. Well, I'll say it again because you're quite slow and I have pity—I didn't."

Harry's lips threatened to stretch into a smile. "Well, if you had, it would mean you're more unhinged than I thought. Considering you felt the need to point out you had a motive."

Malfoy was clearly unhappy with Harry's comment. "It's not my fault you're a shoddy Auror and I have to do your work for you."

"Oh? So you want to help out? Because you can. You said the kid hasn't adjusted well; I assume that

means some of the other students..." Bullied him, Harry thought, but reconsidered. That statement might make Malfoy too defensive of his house and its students. How would a Slytherin put it? "Didn't care for him much," Harry finished. "Can you tell me who they are?"

Malfoy turned defensive anyway. "How would I know? I don't keep an eye on first-years. Besides, what does it matter? There were other first-years in that room. All of them pure-bloods. If someone wanted to do in Peterson, they'd do it away from the others. They wouldn't put them in jeopardy. One of them is Zabini's little brother. You'd have to be daft to try hurting him."

Harry was more than a little surprised. The boy Zabini had carried off when Harry had burst into the common room must have been his brother, then. Zabini had looked so calm and opted for biting comments rather than giving clear answers. His attitude had calmed Harry down. But Zabini must have been panicking something fierce. He had rushed to the hospital wing faster than anyone else. Bloody Slytherins. Had the cold of these dungeons frozen their blood and muscles, making them unable to react like normal people? Malfoy had always been more easily provoked and quick to anger, always the loudest in their silent bunch.

"Perhaps you should give me a list of daft students, then?" Harry suggested.

Malfoy's jaw tightened. "I'll be making no lists for you."

Harry guessed as much. "Tell me, Malfoy, if you think this was such a poor motive, why did you even bring it up?"

"Because you're irrational and you'd fail to see there was no logic in assuming someone went after Peterson, at the same time risking the lives of other students."

"Oh, I don't know. I know some people who were so intent on getting what they wanted they didn't care who else got hurt in the process."

A deep flush crept on Draco's cheeks. His voice was low when he said, "If you're talking about me..."

"I meant Voldemort," Harry said. "He was the one who claimed he cared so much about blood purity and pure-bloods, but I seem to recall he'd forget how oh–so-sacred pure blood was when it suited him. He had no problem spilling it." Harry considered. "Though, he was pretty daft, I grant you."

Malfoy looked away again. He seemed to have trouble looking Harry in the eye for an extended period of time. Which was curious. Malfoy never had qualms about it in the past.

"I assure you," Malfoy said, "no one is missing... him around these parts."

For a moment, Harry was sure Malfoy would say Voldemort's name. His lips had moved to form a V, but he seemed to have changed his mind at the last minute. But the mere sight of Malfoy trying to say the name, wanting to say it, cheered Harry up, though he was not sure why.

He coughed to hide the involuntary smile. "Perhaps," he said. "But can you claim that none of these students think Voldemort had the right idea?"

Malfoy looked tired suddenly. "I don't know. I can't help you, Potter." He ran his hand through his hair again, this time combing through it and making it stay put.

"You can." And you will. Harry had been forming a plan for a while now. A vague one. He was not sure how to make it happen, but it had been in his head from the moment he had reassembled Dumbledore's Army. But now was not the time to discuss it. "You just don't want to."

Malfoy did not deny Harry's conclusion. He said nothing at all and Harry concluded the conversation was over.

"Don't let McGonagall find you here," Harry could not help saying before he moved to the door.

"Potter!" Malfoy called and Harry turned, eyebrows raised. Malfoy was scowling at him again. "For the record," he said, "I fucking hate green."

Harry nodded, nonplussed, wondering if that was a jab at his eye-colour or if Malfoy had the Killing Curse in mind. "I'll remember that when I send you a Christmas present," he said and walked out.

Ron and Hermione were exactly where Harry thought they would be: right in front of the door.

"So you think one of the Slytherin students tried to kill little Peterson?" Hermione asked, not even bothering to pretend they weren't listening in on his conversation with Malfoy.

"I think I'm running low on plausible theories," Harry said sadly. If there was one thing he was sure of, it was the fact that there were too many accidents happening in Hogwarts this year.

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"I have a theory," Harry said as they walked down to breakfast the next morning.

"Is this one plausible?" Hermione asked.

"Does it involve Malfoy?" Ron added.

No and yes, Harry thought, but decided against saying it and presented his theory instead. "For seven years, we've all been sleeping in the same dormitories, right?" Ron and Hermione looked at him blankly. "I mean," Harry hurried on, "when we first arrived, we were given a dormitory and we slept in it for seven—well, six, in our case—years, with only the label on the door changing. I assume that's how it is in other houses."

"Er, I suppose..." Hermione said.

"And this year, house-elves had to cast Extension Charms in the tower, so we could all fit. We're no longer in our original dormitories, because that one had to be put back into rotation. After the seventh-years vacate a dormitory, next year, it's assigned to the first-years."

Hermione stared at him, then groaned. "This is about Malfoy."

"How so?" Ron asked.

"Well," Harry said, "if that's how it was done in the Slytherin house, then that means that the dormitory that burned down last night was the dormitory Draco Malfoy slept in for seven years."

"So..." Ron scratched his head. "You think Malfoy was emotionally attached to it. And, in a moment of absolute fury, decided: If I can't sleep in it, neither can you! BURN! BURN!" Ron yelled and then laughed uproariously.

Harry glared at him, though he had to bite his lip to stop himself from smiling.

Hermione snorted. "No, he thinks that someone was actually trying to murder Malfoy. Don't you?"

"But it does make sense, doesn't it?" Harry argued. "The Carrows, for example, would know where Draco's dormitory was and they probably wouldn't be aware of the Extension Charms. So if they wanted to kill him, they would assume he's still in his old dormitory."

"No, that doesn't make sense, Harry," Ron said. "I mean, never mind how they got in the Slytherin dungeons, or even the castle, let's say they did. And then what? They burst into the dormitory, ignored the fact that Malfoy and his classmates had apparently shrunk and now look like tiny first-years, and decided to Conjure a bunch of candles, hoping they might burn the room down, instead of using Fiendfyre, which would actually get the job done."

"But they could have Imperiused someone! One of the students. Not do it themselves."

"And tell them: 'Burn down the third dormitory on the right,' rather than, 'Kill Draco Malfoy'? The Death Eaters might not know where Malfoy is sleeping this year, but the students do."

Harry stopped walking. "That's a good point. But that only means that whoever was Imperiused, it wasn't a Slytherin student."

"Or any other student, or anyone else in the castle, since they would all know not to look for Malfoy in his old dormitory. And you said it yourself, the doors are labelled."

"But how would that subject even come up? If the Death Eaters thought they knew where to find Malfoy, then they would give the Imperiused person directions. They wouldn't think to ask a person who had never, unlike them, been to the Slytherin dungeons whether they knew where Malfoy sleeps."

Ron shook his head. "But why bother with the dungeons at all? And the fire? If they had Imperiused someone, then that person could simply cast the Killing Curse on Malfoy in a random corridor."

"Maybe they wanted it to look like an accident. Or they just wanted to intimidate Malfoy. A fire would have done it."

"You know that. Do they? Has Malfoy even told anyone about what happened in the Room of Requirement?"

"He could have. Lestrange is still out there, too, and he's practically his family. Besides, a fire would scare anyone."

"But, Harry," Hermione intervened, "why would they even bother with Malfoy? If Tommy Wright was the

target and Malfoy had seen something and they had tried to get rid of him because of it, like you say, why risk going after him now, again, weeks later, when Malfoy hasn’t even said anything?"

"Well, that doesn't mean he won't. Why risk that?"

"I just think they care more about not getting caught than making sure there's no evidence against them. After all, there's lots of evidence against them already! The Wizengamot has enough to put them away for life, for other crimes."

Harry deflated a little. "That's true," he had to confess. "Though, if it becomes known that they've cursed Alderton's grandson, it might mean the Hit Wizards are even more likely to kill them on the spot if they catch them."

"Eh." Ron shrugged. "Like they weren't instructed to do that in the first place."

"These Death Eaters don't have much to lose," Hermione added. "I mean, if Malfoy saw something when Tommy was cursed and they were still in the castle and had the opportunity, sure, why not get rid of him? But going back to it now? Why?"

Harry sighed. "Perhaps I'm just looking at it all from the wrong perspective. Perhaps Malfoy was the target all along. Perhaps he knows something or did something... or he's being forced to do something. Again."

"Or whoever cursed Tommy is long gone and yesterday was an accident?" Ron asked hopefully.

"What about Peeves?" Harry asked. "He hasn't shown up yet, has he?"

"But how could that possibly be related?"

"How could it not? In a matter of few weeks, a student was cursed, Malfoy and I nearly died on the staircases, Peeves vanished, and now five more students almost burned to death. If Lavender hadn't shown up, they would be ash by now. Six students in three weeks! Eight if you count Malfoy and me. Nine beings if we're counting poltergeists. Who are indestructible, by the way. But I suppose we could ignore Peeves since we've never found the body." A couple of students went past, glancing their way, and Harry realised he had been shouting. It was possible he looked slightly hysterical. Ron and Hermione seemed to think so. They had exchanged a look and went very still. "I'm not imagining things," Harry found it necessary to point out. Was he? Could all those things he had listed be completely unrelated events? They certainly looked like that. What if he was going insane and was looking for something that wasn't there? And he had dragged his friends, Malfoy, the D.A. and even McGonagall into his madness.

"Harry," Hermione said softly, "I agree it's all very odd, but maybe we were expecting everything to go too smoothly from now on and it just doesn't work like that. Death Eaters are still out there and they might have found their way into the castle, there are still students here who hate Muggle-borns. Like you said, it's not over. And it's a good thing we put Dumbledore's Army back together, because the students were being too careless, acting like nothing bad could happen to them now. And tonight proved how very wrong we all were to think that.

"And I can't explain Peeves. I tried the library but poltergeists are very rare and there isn't much to be found. I agree it's very strange he's gone, but I just think... I think you're trying too hard to connect everything and blame a single powerful Dark Wizard who's behind it all. One you could catch and destroy and make it all better. And I just don't think that's the case here."

That stung. Mostly because Hermione was making too much sense. Was he doing that? Was he just looking for another Voldemort? I really am going backward.

Ron was staring at his feet, seemingly addressing them when he said, "And you're focusing on Malfoy too much."

Harry must have scowled because Hermione quickly added, "Although! I do agree it was odd he had just happened to be in the castle when Tommy was cursed. If he knows something, it could help Pomfrey cure him. If he heard the incantation or saw the colour of the curse, it could all help."

To Harry, it sounded like Hermione was saying, "It's okay, Harry, you can continue to harass Malfoy if it

makes you happy. It's useful, not crazy at all."

"And we should do something about little Peterson," Ron said.

"Yes!" Hermione exclaimed. "If he's being bullied and the prefects are in on it, that's terrible."

See, see, his friends were saying, see how useful you can be? Even when there's no Voldemort to defeat. You can still have your little army and save people.

They mean well, Harry told himself, trying not to get irritated. And you probably are crazy.

"Right, Harry?" Ron was staring at him; his feet must have stopped being interesting.

"Yeah." Harry nodded. "It's a problem. We should focus on that."

The plan Harry had concocted in his bed yesterday went up in smoke. He had wanted to suggest inviting Malfoy to join the D.A., but he could not mention Malfoy now. He wasn't even sure if he would ever find it in him to suggest it to Malfoy. It was unlikely Malfoy would be willing to be a part of any group Harry was leading and it was downright ridiculous he would ever join something called Dumbledore's Army. It had been a fanciful daydream. He had thought maybe Zabini would join them, too, now that his brother almost burned.

It could be good for them, the Slytherins, the school. More common goals, less division. And if Harry showed Malfoy some trust, maybe Malfoy would trust him in return and be more likely to share any information he might be withholding.

Though, if Harry were honest with himself, he had to admit he would probably have more luck if he just forced Malfoy to drink a Truth Potion. Which was a possibility Harry had not yet excluded.

The rest of the way, they discussed how best to protect Peterson and agreed that—aside from bringing up the matter to McGonagall, of course—one of them could approach the kid and give him a D.A. Galleon so he could contact them if someone tried to hurt him.

"If he's in the dungeons, he could message us with the password," Hermione said.

"We'll have to ask McGonagall for permission. And Slughorn," Harry pointed out. House passwords were a sensitive matter. Telling someone your house password was simply not done. Unless, perhaps, they were your boyfriend or girlfriend, but even then, it was frowned upon.

Hermione smiled at him. "I'm sure McGonagall will agree if you ask her, Harry."

"Er, what does that mean?"

"Oh come on, mate." Ron grinned. "She agrees with everything you suggest."

Harry was scandalised. "That's not true!"

"She's just very fond of you," Hermione said. "And she trusts your judgment. Most people do, you know."

Harry huffed. "Except you two, apparently. You're spitting on my carefully constructed theories."

Ron snorted. "Yeah well, most people don't know you, mate."

Harry could not help laughing a little. "Git."

They paused at the Great Hall entrance, surprised. The atmosphere in the hall was more than a little

unexpected. Considering there had been a fire only last night and students had nearly died and, on top of that, McGonagall had cancelled the Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff match, the smiles and excitement seemed out of place. Harry had expected gloom and worry. Only the Slytherin table was subdued. Harry was surprised when he realised he was indignant on their behalf.

But Harry's indignation vanished soon enough. Ginny all but flew toward them, accosting them before they even managed to step into the Great Hall.

"Look!" She grinned madly and held up the Daily Prophet so they could see the front-page news.

Harry blinked at the article in shock. He heard Hermione gasp.

"Well, it's a good thing we dismissed the 'Death Eaters did it' theory earlier," Ron murmured.

The headline read: DEATH EATERS TURN THEMSELVES IN. Beneath it, there was a picture of Rodolphus Lestrange, the Carrows and a few others Harry did not recognise.

Hermione snatched the paper from Ginny's hand, scanning the article quickly.

"They turned themselves in?" Harry asked in disbelief.

Ginny laughed. "No, of course not. They were caught when they broke into the Ministry last night. The title's a joke. Apparently, they wanted to retrieve Voldemort's body from the Department of Mysteries."

Ron looked horrified. "Is it really there?"

"Dunno." Ginny shrugged, though she looked shifty. "They seemed to think so. The rumour is the Unspeakables were performing experiments on it, but the Ministry is denying it. Either way, Lestrange and the rest had it all planned out. They Polyjuiced themselves into Ministry officials and everything, but

the Aurors caught them. Every single on of them." She beamed. "There was one thing they hadn’t counted on."

"What?" Harry asked.

"Well, you."

"Er, sorry?"

Ron frowned. "What did Harry do?"

Ginny looked around at the other students, as though to make sure no one was eavesdropping, and then lowered her voice. "Well, it was mostly George, actually. Here..." She took out a letter from her robe pocket and handed it to Harry. "It's from George. The owl came this morning, before the papers. There's a message in it for you, Harry."

Baffled, Harry opened it and scanned it quickly. With every word he read, his smile grew wider.

"Why did George write to you and not me?" Ron complained.

"Because I write back." Ginny huffed. "I have to go," she added. "I'm famished."

"I write back, too," Ron mumbled after she left. "Sometimes... Harry, would you mind telling me what my brother wrote, already?"

Hermione looked up at him, too, and Harry grinned at them. "George is brilliant," he said a bit too loudly. Some students were already looking their way curiously. Harry lowered his voice and Hermione leaned in to listen. "You know George's been helping Kingsley with security, right? Well, he and Flitwick made a map of the Ministry, one just like the Marauder's Map and he had the idea to spread a rumour of

Voldemort's body being held in the Department of Mysteries. And Lestrange took the bait! In the matter of days. Of course, they had Aurors monitor the map non-stop and the moment the Death Eaters showed up on the map, they saw them. It was a trap and they fell right into it."

"Blimey," Ron said. "That is brilliant. No one got hurt, right?" he asked, probably worried about his dad and Percy, who both worked at the Ministry.

Hermione answered. "I just reached that part in the paper." She lifted and scanned them again. "It says here an Unspeakable, Jeremiah Smith, was seriously injured, and two Aurors were hurt. They caught all six Death Eaters that broke in."

That meant Voldemort's most loyal and vicious supporters were all accounted for, except Greyback. There were others, surely, those the Aurors suspected and those they did not, but Lestrange had given them the most trouble.

Ron took the letter from Harry's hand to read it for himself. "George could have told us about this sooner. And so could Flitwick, really."

"It's not the sort of information you share through owls, Ron," Hermione pointed out. "Or with too many people. If the Death Eaters knew about the map or suspected the rumour was untrue, it would never have worked."

Ron grumbled, unappeased.

Flitwick could have told them, Harry agreed with that, but he had also promised not to show the Map to anyone except George. He must have been reluctant to share George's plan with them before he knew whether it would even work or not. Harry felt a pang of guilt. He should have thought of that. He should have realised that such a map would serve the Aurors well. These were different times. Before he did not know whom he could trust, the Ministry seemed as dangerous as the Death Eaters at times, and the Map was a powerful object, which gave quite a bit of control to the owner. Harry had made a mistake once before, when he had given the Map to fake Mad-eye Moody.

"Speaking of Flitwick," Hermione said. "Does this mean he can now fix the Marauder's Map? Or at least make a new one?"

Harry shook his head with a sigh. "No, unfortunately. It says here they tried to make a new map of Hogwarts, too, but for some reason it's just not working."

Hermione looked puzzled but waved it off. "The important thing is that Lestrange has been caught. And the Carrows. And I bet the Ministry will question them thoroughly. If one of them was here and cursed Tommy Wright, the truth will come out."

"Except the Aurors didn't believe McGonagall when she told them that Tommy Wright was cursed by a Death Eater," Ron reminded her.

"Oswald Ardenton did." Harry hoped that meant the Death Eaters would be questioned about Tommy.

"Wait!" Ron looked up from the letter. "Does this mean we're disbanding the D.A.? I mean, these Death Eaters were the main reason we set it up in the first place. And now that they've been caught... there's not much point to it, is there? No one has seen the Hufflepuff Vampire in awhile, either." Ron grinned. "We still have prefects. Let them worry about rule-breaking."

"But..." Hermione looked very unhappy. "The students were finally beginning to respect the curfew. And that really is much safer for everyone, Death Eaters or no."

"Ron's right, though," Harry said. "That's what prefects are for. With Lestrange and the Carrows caught, it really makes no sense we continue to monitor the students." Harry was suddenly eager to disband the D.A. as soon as possible. He should never have gone through with it in the first place. Hermione's earlier statement bothered him. Apparently, others trusted his judgment and that included McGonagall. The Death Eater attack had been McGonagall's suggestion, re-forming the D.A. Hermione's, but Harry could not help wondering if he had somehow caused all this panic. If, by taking it so seriously, by all but proclaiming that the Hogwarts castle was under attack, he had inspired others to do the same. Causing paranoia was probably a simple undertaking these days.

"Maybe we should at least wait and see if one of them really did curse Tommy," Hermione suggested.

"Who else?" Harry asked. "Greyback? If he had been here, he'd bite, not curse."

Hermione shuddered a little. "It could have been someone else entirely. Someone we don't even know. Voldemort had many supporters and not all of them are accounted for."

"But there will always be someone who could attack the school. We'll be leaving in two months, anyway. And then what? No." Harry shook his head firmly. "We've done our part. We can't go around fancying ourselves the school's protectors."

Hermione looked like she wanted to argue more, but instead she nodded gloomily and said, "Well, we should still give a Galleon to Peterson."

"Agreed. I'll ask McGonagall and see what she thinks."

Harry did just that, right after breakfast.

McGonagall looked tired and somehow even older when she greeted him in her office. She immediately agreed that Peterson should be given a Galleon and approved the suggestion to contact them with the Slytherin password should he be in any trouble. She had been most furious when Harry had told her he suspected the other students were harassing Peterson because he was Muggle-born, though she had confessed she had feared it would happen from the moment he had been Sorted.

Harry had been surprised she had not suggested Peterson ought to contact the teachers, instead. And even more surprised when she disagreed with disbanding the D.A.

"Harry," she said, "five students nearly burned last night and it was a member of Dumbledore's Army who had saved them. Miss Brown had found herself in the dungeons by chance but nonetheless. You're setting an example that I feel is very much needed. After everything that happened last year, the

students learned they must stand together and protect themselves, protect each other. I would not have them forget that lesson so soon. You were not here last year, but I was. I was here when the D.A. formed a resistance against the Carrows. I've seen them fight and fight again, and so have the younger students. They have earned respect and trust; the others look up to them. They trust them more than they trust prefects, or even the teachers." McGonagall hesitated. "If D.A. drops its guard, so will everyone else and I fear the consequences might be catastrophic. Especially since I think that Lestrange and the Carrows are not responsible for Tommy Wright's condition."

Harry was taken aback. "What? But... Have they been questioned already? Are they denying it? They could be lying, of course."

"I'm afraid I do not know anything more about their arrest than what I've read in the papers. I think they are not involved because they could not have been here yesterday, and I do think Mr Wright's condition and the fire are related."

Harry's head filled with Ron and Hermione's arguments against this theory. He almost blurted out all of them, afraid he had somehow inflicted his madness on McGonagall and determined to fix it, but McGonagall had reached into a desk drawer and said, "Let me show you something."

She took out a small wooden box, opened it and pushed it closer to Harry. He had to lean in to see what was inside. It was filled with half-burned candles. "Are those the same candles we've found in the dormitory yesterday?"

McGonagall nodded. "Yes. And they are... a bit unusual."

"Unusual how?" They looked like regular candles to Harry.

"Well, I'm sure you'll remember this from your lessons..." She gave him a pointed look. "But let me remind you that there's a difference between Vanishing objects and Vanishing Conjured objects. For example, if I were to Vanish my quill..." She took out her wand and did just that. Her black, elegant-looking quill that had lain on a sheet of parchment disappeared instantly. "It has now gone into non-being. If I wish to—though, that depends on skill and my original intent—I can retrieve it. Like so." She waved her wand again and the quill reappeared. "This is the same quill. However, if I Conjure a

quill..." She did, one just like the other. "And then Vanish it..." She did that, too. "It is gone forever. I cannot retrieve it. I can only Conjure another, just like it. By Vanishing it, I have cancelled my Conjuring spell. The reason for this is: everything that has been Conjured by magic is not permanent. A very skilful, powerful wizard could Conjure an item that can endure for quite some time. That's highly advanced magic. Additional charms have to be cast. But even then, if that item is Vanished, it is gone.

"However, these candles..." McGonagall waved her wand and every single candle in the box disappeared. Then she waved it again, and they reappeared. "I haven't Conjured them; I have retrieved them. These are the same candles."

Harry struggled to understand where she was going with this. "So... er, does that mean they haven't been Conjured at all?"

"There are ways to established if something has been Conjured or not. And these candles were, there is no doubt."

Harry was utterly confused. "What are you saying, then? The candles are breaking the laws of magic?"

McGonagall smiled indulgently. "Would that the laws of magic are as clear as that. Laws we call them, but exceptions exist, and many of them we are not yet aware of." She shook her head. "These candles have shown a level of stability I've not yet encountered in Conjured objects. Whoever Conjured them possesses a great deal of power."

Hermione's voice echoed in Harry's mind. You're trying too hard to connect everything and blame a single powerful Dark Wizard who's behind it all. One you could catch and destroy and make it all better.

Harry bit his lip and hoped McGonagall was not crazier than he was. "If the candles are so stable, why did they even burn? They have been destroyed."

"They are candles, Potter. They are meant to burn. They are exceptional for Conjured candles."

"Oh. Right. But, what does this have to do with Tommy, exactly?"

"I've been discussing this with Poppy all morning. We think we might know what happened to Mr Wright. We now believe he was Stunned."

"Stunned?"

"Indeed. You see, Dark Magic's most inconvenient characteristic is that it's difficult to counter. Healing spells have no effect on werewolf bites, for example; if one's fingers have been severed by Dark Magic, they cannot be re-grown. Poppy tried to heal Tommy, but none of her spells had any effect. Suspecting Dark Magic is par for the course in such cases. But the fact that he has no visible injuries and his internal organs have not been damaged is suspicious. There were no potions in his system, either. It seems as though he is merely asleep. And now, after seeing these candles, I believe that's what he is—asleep. Stunned with as much power as it was needed to Conjure these candles. So much, reversing it would be very difficult."

"Are you saying Tommy will stay asleep? How long? Until he dies?"

"I'm saying we know more today than we did yesterday, and that is something. Our choices are still limited, though." She looked at the box of candles. "If I wanted to Vanish these candles, truly Vanish them, I would call the other teachers and we would cast Evanesco together. I have not tried that yet—though, I plan to—but I do believe it would work. I do not know how many spells and how many people I would need but eventually we would be successful."

"So, if loads of people cast Rennervate on Tommy, he would wake up? He'd be cured?"

"Yes and no. It is not that simple. If you will recall, I was hit by four Stunners once. Had there been any more, I would not be here today. Tommy is young and more resistant, but his system has suffered through one shock already; trying to wake him up in such a way would be another. A greater one. One he would likely not survive. If we try it, we could kill him, not save him. And that's assuming we manage to find the right combination of intent and power. How many spells would we need? Four, ten? Too little,

and he would not wake and we would have to try again, yet so many spells cast simultaneously could be damaging; too many, and he's dead. I've said we will experiment with candles, try to determine the measure of power used, but even then it will only be guesswork. Healing is a delicate branch of magic. Waiting for the spell to run its course would be a wiser choice."

"Waiting? For months, years? Is there really nothing else that can be done?"

"Madam Pomfrey will consult with other Healers. I'm hoping this case is not unprecedented. Also, finding the person responsible could be of some use. Reversing one's own spell is normally easier."

"Wouldn't that be a shock to his system, as well?"

"Yes, but a lesser one. Several Stunners cast by a group of wizards of various skills, power and focus is much more hazardous than a single powerful Stunner cast with clear intent. This is how we know there was only one caster; if there had been more, his body would be damaged, likely beyond repair. This is why we are having trouble finding a precedent; victims of multiple Stunners have either awoken on their own after awhile, or they are dead. Tommy is still unconscious because the person who Stunned him had a single, clear intent and had the power to make it happen. More casters means more damage, but it does not necessarily mean the spell will be effective. The results are too unpredictable."

"So Tommy was meant to stay Stunned? Not dead, but unconscious indefinitely? And, well, if someone wanted to murder the Slytherin first-years, they could have done it. There was no need to Conjure a bunch of candles and hope they'd start a fire. And they didn't have to be extraordinary candles, either." Did that mean they were not dealing with a murderer? Someone so powerful could easily kill if they had wanted; they must have chosen not to.

"Indeed. My only guess is we are dealing with someone powerful who is very unstable. Impressive magic though it is, it was unnecessary for the results that have been achieved. I imagine this was done by someone who is scared and confused and relies solely on their magical skill, putting everything they have behind their spells. It feels like an impulsive reaction of a desperate individual. As for their motivation... I could not hope to guess."

"Could it be a student? A teacher? A house-elf? Or someone else in the castle with us? A magical being

of some sort?"

"Well, one of those must be right." She smiled faintly. "I've suggested Death Eaters in the past. It seems I was wrong. I would rather not guess blindly again. I would assume that if someone in the castle has so much power, we would have noticed."

"Could they have Vanished Peeves, as well?"

McGonagall frowned. "Ah! Peeves. I heard he has gone missing. Poltergeists cannot be Vanished. One would have better luck Vanishing the castle. It is possible he was contained or he's merely hiding. Would that Peeves was the worst of my troubles. The students are at risk, that is a bigger concern."

"And apparently they aren't safe in their dormitories, either." Harry hated saying that, but it was true. How could they protect themselves if they didn't even know what they were up against?

"I will bring this up to the Board, but I fear they'll give me blanker looks than you have when I start babbling about Conjured candles. And now that Lestrange has been caught, they will be even less likely to listen. After all, the Board was probably right when they claimed no Death Eater had breached the castle. They will surely point that out. In either case..." She looked at him. "Keep your eyes open and make sure your friends do the same. For now, that is all we can do."

Harry left soon after that. He had nearly reached the Gryffindor Tower when he remembered he had not asked McGonagall about the cobwebs that had covered Tommy Wright's body. Harry had assumed it was part of some curse, but if Tommy had only been Stunned, they had no reason to be there. He concluded McGonagall could not yet explain that or she would have mentioned it. He had no idea how to explain it either, though the more he thought about it, the more it seemed like he should know where they had come from. As though the answer lingered at the back of his mind and refused to surface.

He dreamed of spiders that night. They had tangled a web around Harry's body as he lay on his bed.

"Stop!" he yelled at their scurrying, thin little bodies. "You can't do this! I have to go! I have to save the

castle!"

Ron and Hermione were there, too, staring down at him, looking quite unconcerned.

"Oh Harry," Hermione said. "There's nothing to be afraid of. I've told you. You should start worrying only when you see the spiders fleeing."

No! The Basilisk is dead! This has nothing to do with it! he wanted to yell at her, but the cobwebs had covered his mouth.

"I hate spiders," Ron said. "I hope they do flee. And soon."

Malfoy was by their side suddenly. He stared at Harry, grinning madly. "If they flee, we're all dead, Potter." He sounded delighted. "And it's all because you didn't listen."

Listen to what?

Malfoy's face contorted with rage. He leaned in and screamed: "GET OUT!"

Harry woke with a gasp. The night was dark; there was no moonlight to brighten the room. Harry reached under his pillow and clutched the Galleon in his hand. He did not go back to sleep that night.

Chapter Five

Draco's Plight

Monday morning was sunny and bright. The Hogwarts grounds sparkled with slowly melting snow. To general delight, their Transfiguration teacher, Professor Plunkett, had developed a nasty cold and their afternoon lessons were cancelled.

Harry, Ron and Hermione went to see Hagrid right after lunch, hoping he would offer them tea and distracting tales rather than rock cakes. He offered neither, but rather enlisted them to help him feed a pair of giant Abraxan horses. Apparently, Madam Maxine had sent them as a gift and they had been none too happy with Hogwarts and their new owner.

"I've always wanted one," Hagrid told them. "But they don't like the cold."

"And they probably miss the rest of their herd," Hermione added.

They were wild and their hind legs had to be chained to the ground or they would fly off. The chains were long, however, so they could still rise into the air and stretch their wings. The problem was they refused to come down to eat.

Hagrid had Harry, Ron and Hermione fly on broomsticks and shoot Stinging Hexes at the horses, hoping to make them retreat to the ground where Hagrid waited with huge barrels of single malt whiskey. It worked in the end, but not before the horses knocked them all down several times. They were not flying high and the snow broke their falls, but both Harry and Hermione had the misfortune to fall right into one of the barrels once and, as a result, were feeling a bit tipsy.

They were exhausted but in high-spirits when they made their way back to the castle. Harry was feeling less worried than he had before, but he suspected whiskey was the reason behind it. Though, he was also pleased the members of Dumbledore's Army had not questioned his decision to continue their nightly patrols. It was likely they merely loved bossing around other students, but as long as they did it, Harry was satisfied. Another satisfying thing had been telling Ron and Hermione about McGonagall's theories. Hermione had frowned at them, but had not lectured him again, and Ron was quick to point out they were right about Malfoy not being the target, since all their arguments against that still applied. Neither had a convincing theory on the mystery attacker's identity nor his or her motivation. They had spent most of Sunday discussing it, feeling none the wiser.

"Do you hear yelling?" Hermione asked. Her wand was emitting hot air, melting the snow on their path with a sizzling sound. She cancelled her spell and Harry heard loud cries coming from the castle.

"Sounds like... cheering," Ron said.

They quickened their pace to see what was going on. The door of the main entrance was half-open and they pushed through into the Entrance Hall. A large group of students had gathered a little farther away, standing in a circle and yelling.

"It's a fight!" Hermione said indignantly and rushed forward. "Seamus!" she yelled as they pushed through the crowd. "Why are you just standing there? Stop them!"

"Why?" Seamus yelled back. "They're both gits. Who am I to intervene? Let them knock each other out."

"Malfoy!" Hermione gasped suddenly and Harry pushed forward with more force, and then froze. Malfoy was straddling a student, repeatedly punching his face.

Harry flew toward him without another thought. He grabbed Malfoy's shoulders, trying to bodily pull him off the other boy, but Malfoy was wild and he twisted out of Harry's grip.

"Malfoy! Stop it!" Harry yelled and grabbed Malfoy again, this time trying to restrain Malfoy's punching fists by wrapping his arms around Malfoy's torso from behind. He remembered in that moment that he should have used his wand, but it was too late for such regrets.

Malfoy froze at Harry's shout and his head whipped to the side so sharply their noses almost bumped. Malfoy's lip was split and bleeding and there was a purplish bruise forming around his left eye. He stared at Harry as though he had never seen him before in his life; his breath was hot on Harry's face.

Harry seized Malfoy's moment of distraction to pull him up and away. The other boy—who, Harry realised, was Zacharias Smith—was on his feet at once. He lunged at Malfoy and Malfoy jerked forward, almost breaking Harry's grip.

"Ron!" Harry yelled, managing to push his leg forward to trip Malfoy enough to slow him down. He stepped around him and placed himself between Smith and Malfoy just as Smith's fist flew toward Malfoy's head.

But then Ron was there, pulling Smith away. "Careful who you're hitting there, Smith!" he said, then added, "Ew."

Harry realised Smith's skin was covered with boils, which burst open when touched, oozing yellow, sticky pus.

Smith lunged forward again and, as though magnetised, Malfoy attempted to run over Harry to get to him. Harry pushed Malfoy against the wall and held him pinned against it with all his might. Smith was still trying to get away.

"Seamus, help Ron!" Harry yelled.

Hermione stood nearby, her wand out, looking like she did not know whether to hex Seamus or Smith.

"Fuck," Seamus moaned, but rushed toward Ron and grabbed one of Smith's arms. He made a disgusted face; Smith's boils must have burst beneath his clothes.

"Ugh," Hermione commented. "Take him to the hospital wing," she told Ron. "And the rest of you!" she added much more loudly. "The show is over. Move along!"

The students looked disappointed, but Hermione had her wand out and none of them were stupid enough to disobey her.

"I'll get you, Malfoy!" Zach Smith screamed as Ron and Seamus pulled him toward the hospital wing.

"I'll report you both! At once!" Hermione screamed after him. "You too!" She pointed toward Harry and Malfoy. For a second, Harry thought she meant him, but then he remembered she was a bit drunk and her aim was probably off. "At once!" she repeated.

"Er, perhaps..." Harry hesitated. "Have something to eat first?"

She frowned at him. "Right. No. I'm fine." She tucked her wand away. "I'll go and speak to..." She seemed at a loss.

"Head Girl!" Harry suggested quickly before she decided to see McGonagall instead.

"Yes!" she agreed happily. She turned to leave but then looked back at Malfoy. "Get him to the hospital wing, too. That looks nasty. But do wait a bit. Until they calm down." Then she left, but not before she looked back at Malfoy and Harry again, frowning.

Harry turned back to Malfoy, who was slumped against the wall, his head leaning backward, baring his throat. Harry cringed at the sight of it. There was a mass of ugly purplish bruises around Malfoy throat. Hermione must have been referring to those when she told Harry to get Malfoy to the hospital wing.

"What happened?" Harry asked. He was still clutching Malfoy's upper-arms, holding him in place. Malfoy pushed against Harry's chest and Harry's grip gave too easily. He stumbled backward, slightly dizzy. If he hadn't nearly drowned in whiskey earlier, it would be easier to restrain Malfoy. Fortunately, Malfoy did not try to escape and go after Smith.

"The idiot shot a Strangling Hex at me," Malfoy said. His voice was raspy; his throat must have been sore. "And I defended myself."

"And why would Smith do that?"

"Ask him, why don't you?"

"I'm asking you."

Malfoy straightened suddenly. "And I'm telling you to fuck off and leave me alone."

"If I had left you alone, you could have killed him. Would you prefer that?"

Malfoy pulled a face, either because he was mocking Harry or he was in pain. "Oh, right," he sneered. "Another victory for the great Harry Potter! You have saved a poor Hufflepuff's life and an evil Death Eater's soul. Now, if you will excuse me, I must write a poem about your heroic deeds."

"Malfoy." Harry groaned and hastily grabbed Malfoy's robes before he could run away.

Malfoy jerked away violently. "Stop touching me, Potter!"

"Er..." Harry was not sure what to think of that reaction. Unhinged. Malfoy was definitely unhinged.

Malfoy took a step closer and scrunched up his nose. "And for your information, you stink. Of alcohol. I'll be sure to include that in my poem, too."

Harry almost laughed, for a second amusing himself with the thought of explaining to Malfoy how he had fallen into a barrel full of whiskey while a winged horse laughed at him. That would have surely cheered Malfoy up. Instead, he said, "Before you write your poem, you should go see Madam Pomfrey."

"I've seen her. I don't fancy her much. And I think I'll go wherever I like." He turned and strode down the

corridor.

"Malfoy," Harry said, staring at Malfoy's back. "If you don't go, I swear I'll drag you there."

Malfoy did not stop nor did he look back.

Harry sighed. I swore. What choice do I have? Harry took out his wand and pointed it at Malfoy's retreating figure.

"Petrificus Totalus!" he cried. The spell caught Malfoy in the back and he went down, stiff as a board.

Harry took his time walking to Malfoy's fallen body. When he reached him, Harry looked down at him. Malfoy was staring at the ceiling. Frozen still, with his eyes open, he looked dead. Harry's stomach twisted at the thought. I saved him; I can't let him die. The bruises around Malfoy's neck stood in stark contrast to his pale skin. Could the Strangling Hex have killed him, too?

"I'll release you," Harry said, "but if you don't go to the hospital wing, I'll hex you again and then Levitate you there."

He did as he had warned and cancelled his spell. Malfoy glared at him, wordless, and then stood up slowly.

"Fine," he said hoarsely, demurely. Then he lurched forward, shoving Harry against the wall.

Pain exploded in the back of Harry's head as it hit the hard surface. Malfoy's hands held Harry's arms in place and one of his legs pushed between Harry's thighs, shoving upward sharply. That hurt.

Harry blinked, wincing. Malfoy's face was right next to Harry's, his grey eyes pools of rage.

Malfoy's voice was very low when he spoke. "I can't even begin to describe how much I hate you, Potter." Malfoy's thigh pushed harder against Harry's crotch; Harry realised he had no strength in his arms left. His wand was still in his hand, but he could not lift it. It's the whiskey. It's the stupid whiskey. His head was pounding.

Malfoy pulled away so suddenly, Harry nearly fell over. He had to take a few deep breaths to steady himself.

"You're drunk," Malfoy said.

Harry squinted at him. "Probably," he said. Malfoy's face was flushed; the bruise around his eye looked even worse than before.

"Fine. Whatever." Malfoy sounded very tired now. "I'll go to the hospital wing. You can follow me, since you seem to like that." He turned and added, "I will be telling Pomfrey all about your inebriation, though."

Malfoy left and Harry did not follow him. His head hurt, his crotch hurt and he did not particularly feel like staring at Malfoy anymore.

Harry avoided thinking about Malfoy on his way to the tower, but he popped into Harry's head again, just as Harry was relieving the day's tension in the showers. He could not help feeling resentful that Draco Malfoy had turned out to be the first person who had ever rubbed against Harry's dick. It was a depressing thought, more so since he had been stuck with a persistent erection afterward.

He felt better after the shower, though. He resolved never to drink again, purposely or accidentally, and decided he needed to find himself a girlfriend. One day. Not now. He did not have time for that at the moment.

Not thinking about Malfoy was not something Harry was allowed to do, however. Malfoy's fight with

Zach Smith was the main topic of conversation in the Gryffindor common room.

Neville Longbottom had brought them fresh information about the fight and why it had occurred. He had heard it from Hannah Abbot, who had heard it from Wayne Hopkins, who had been with Zach Smith when the latter had received an owl from his father earlier today.

The Unspeakable, Jeremiah Smith, who had been seriously injured by Rodolphus Lestrange the night before, was, in fact, Zach's uncle. And he had succumbed to his injuries and died this morning.

Smith's father, who also worked at the Ministry, had told his son that the arrested Death Eaters had been thoroughly questioned on Saturday, under Veritaserum. During his interview, Rodolphus Lestrange had named Lucius Malfoy as the man who had organised the Ministry break in. He told the Aurors it had been Lucius's idea and he had even provided them with Polyjuice Potion.

"I don't believe it," Harry said promptly. "Lucius Malfoy helping to steal Voldemort's body? Why? So he could dance on it?"

"Oh, I don't know," Seamus commented. "Malfoys. They're rotten, the lot of them."

Harry was suddenly irritated. "That's beside the point. If they were stealing packages of bottled fame, then sure, Malfoy would be all over that, but Voldemort's body? They don't want to see him back."

"You can know that for sure, Harry," Seamus insisted.

Harry opened his mouth to argue, but Hermione gave him a sharp look and turned to Neville. "Was Lucius Malfoy arrested? Do Aurors think he was really involved?"

Neville shrugged. "I don't think so. Because apparently Smith was ranting about the unfairness of it all. Saying Lucius Malfoy had bought the Ministry again and will get away with this, too. And then he went

and took it out on Draco Malfoy."

"Rubbish," Hermione said. "Kingsley Shacklebolt is an honest, fair man. Malfoy didn't buy him. If he wasn't arrested, then Rodolphus was lying. Veritaserum is fallible."

A few students muttered their disagreement but did not challenge Hermione directly. She was sober but still in a foul mood, and no one was willing to test her patience. Except Harry, much later, when they were left to sit alone in front of the fireplace.

"What was that look about? Seamus is wrong. You should have let me argue—"

"Oh Harry, don't you see?" Hermione whispered. "If Lucius Malfoy told Rodolphus about the body and gave them Polyjuice, and he hasn’t been arrested for it, that must mean he was helping the Ministry all along. George did say they started a rumour. Maybe that's how they did it. They had Lucius Malfoy convince Rodolphus to break into the Ministry. Lucius would do anything to get back his status and respect. That was your theory."

"Oh." That made some sense. "Someone should tell Smith that before he murders Malfoy."

"Hmm." Hermione shook his head. "It is just a theory and we were told the rest of it in confidence. Perhaps the Ministry's hoping to lure someone else into the Department of Mysteries."

Harry thought it was unlikely the same plan would work twice, but keeping it quiet was a reasonable precaution. They would have to keep an eye on Smith, then. He was clearly enraged and, from his perspective, quite rightfully. Grief could push him to do something terrible.

"Where is Smith?" Harry asked.

"Still in the hospital wing," Ron said. "Pomfrey had to restrain him when Malfoy showed up. She ended

up giving him a Dreamless Sleep Potion to calm him down."

Harry was pleased to hear Malfoy had really gone to the hospital wing as promised. He had almost asked Ron whether Malfoy was all right, but quickly decided against it. The mere thought of earlier, when Harry had run to have a shower, made him feel like he was hiding something shameful, and if he mentioned Malfoy too much everyone would realise it.

That night Harry dreamt of Malfoy again. More or less. He dreamt about the Marauder's Map and one of the dots was labelled with Draco's name. It flew from one side of the Map to the other, as though it had no idea where it was going. Harry had to cast Petrificus Totalus to make it stay still. But the moment he did, the dot disappeared.

I killed it, Harry thought, and wept.

*

"What could she possibly be doing?" Ron checked his watch again. They were waiting for Hermione by the foot of the stairs that led up to the girls' dormitories. "We'll be late for breakfast," he said with all the air of someone proclaiming a catastrophe was about to strike.

"Making sure her books are sorted in alphabetical order?" Harry suggested. He was famished himself, but at the moment he was more concerned about listening to Ron and Hermione bicker all the way to the Great Hall. Ron had already worked himself up into a state.

"Great. We'll be here forever."

"Probably," Parvati said darkly, bounding down the stairs.

"Why? What's wrong?" Ron looked ready to brave the tricky stairs that liked to fold into a slippery slope when they sensed boys.

Parvati gave him an indulgent sort of look. "She probably does need rescuing, but not by you. She's helping Lavender with her Cosmetic Charms."

"Oh." Ron took a step back, as though afraid Parvati would change her mind and insist Hermione and Lavender required his assistance.

"Hermione's helping her?" Harry asked. "Wouldn't you..." Harry stopped speaking abruptly not sure if noting that Parvati and not Hermione would be the more likely expert on such charms was an insult or a compliment.

However, Parvati was already busy agreeing with him. "I know!" She looked as though she had only been waiting for a chance to explode with indignation. "But did she ask me? No, she didn't! She all but told me to go away!"

"I thought you two made up?"

Parvati huffed at Harry's question. "That makes two of us."

"Er," Ron said, hesitating. "But... can't Lavender put on her own Cosmetic Charms?"

Parvati levelled a glare at him. "You're so insensitive," she informed him and pushed past them.

"What the—?" Ron glanced at Harry.

"I think hiding Lavender's scars might be a problem," Harry said.

"Oh." Ron looked uncomfortable. "Damn. Bloody Greyback."

"Ginny! Are you all right?" Parvati's question made Harry and Ron look to the portrait hole where Ginny had just entered. She looked terrible. She had her broom with her, using it like a cane, and her hair was damp and wild around her face, bright red strands escaping her ponytail. Her cheeks were flushed red and her eyes bloodshot.

Ron flew toward her, Harry at his heels.

"What happened to you?" Ron asked in alarm.

"I'm fine," Ginny said quietly. "I just..." She looked up at them. "It's been a long morning."

For a second, Harry was sure she would burst into tears; instead, she said, "I need to sit down," then went to the empty armchairs and collapsed on the one closest to the fire.

Ron and Harry exchanged a look and followed her. Parvati was there, too, shoving a glass of water into Ginny's hand. Ginny took it but looked like she did not know what to do with it.

"Ginny, you're scaring me." Ron knelt down by her side. "Tell us what happened."

She wrapped her hands around the glass and shook her head. "It's Malfoy."

"What?" Harry gasped, coming around to sit on the small table in front of Ginny. "What about him? Is he all right? Is he..." Harry was sure his heart had stopped beating. "Dead?"

Ron coughed. "Or maybe he murdered someone?"

"No, he didn’t murder anyone, Ron. He'd been attacked," Ginny said. "And he's fine. I mean, he will be. Now."

"Blimey!" Ron laughed a little. "I was sure someone died, by the look of you." He eyed her suspiciously. "Why are you so distressed about Malfoy?"

Harry was staring at Ginny, mentally willing her to talk faster. "Attacked? By whom? And what do you mean he will be fine? What happened?"

"It was Smith," Ginny spat. "And, I know, Ron, but Malfoy or not it was too horrible."

"Smith? But..." Harry gulped some air and forced himself to calm down. "What was too horrible?"

Parvati plopped down on the armrest of Ginny's chair. "Ginny, just start from the beginning."

"Right. Okay." Ginny took a deep breath. "I went flying early this morning. I do most days. I was at the Quidditch pitch for awhile, flying around; I didn't even see him at first."

"See who?" Harry asked and Parvati shushed him.

"Malfoy. He was on the ground. I thought he might have come earlier and had a little tumble. But he was just lying there, so I went to check up on him, just in case. But when I reached him... Oh Merlin. The sight of him. He had fallen off his broom. He was all... broken, with limbs at odd angles, and there was blood. And his face... He looked dead. I was sure he was dead. He looked like a doll someone threw away. But then I realised he was still conscious. He'd moan and blink occasionally." Ginny suddenly remembered the water in her hands and took a large gulp. "I didn't know what to do. I didn't dare to move him. So I went to find Madam Hooch, because I know she gets up early sometimes to help Professor Sprout in the greenhouses. They were both there, thank Merlin. Sprout went to get Pomfrey, and Hooch flew back with me to the pitch. We didn't know what to do for Malfoy. We covered him with a cloak and waited for Pomfrey. Hooch said there was so much damage, she didn't dare to try and heal him. We saw that his

watch broke when he fell. He'd been there since a little after midnight. Can you imagine? Until six in the morning. And he was conscious. He couldn't speak but he could moan..."

Harry gripped the edge of the table beneath him to stop himself from running out of the room. There was nothing he could do now. He could not go back in time and help Malfoy.

"How is he even alive?" Ron asked. "He should have frozen to death."

"Oh, he was half-frozen, but the heat of the stands helped keep him warm."

Ron looked at her blankly. "Heat of the stands?"

Parvati replied. "The benches are Charmed to stay warm and dry, free of snow. Winter snogging heaven, the Quidditch pitch."

Ginny nodded. "If he hadn't been above the Quidditch pitch when he fell, he would surely have frozen."

"You mentioned Smith? He did this?" Harry reminded her. He could no longer stand to hear about Draco's injuries. His own limbs hurt and skin prickled with cold at the mere thought of Draco's condition and his solitary night spent in the cold.

"Yeah." Ginny pursed her lips. "He was there, too. We almost missed him. He collapsed between the benches, still in his pyjamas with a wand in hand. Pomfrey said he was just drowsy because of the Sleeping Potion she gave him before."

"So Smith actually tried to murder him?" Ron looked shocked. "I thought he was just... Are you sure Malfoy didn't just fall off his broom?"

"Oh, it was definitely Smith," Ginny said. "McGonagall showed up at the hospital wing and examined

Smith's wand. He hit Malfoy with a Confundus Charm and then broke his broom in half."

"Ginny," Harry said, "didn't you have your Galleon with you? Why didn't you call me?"

Ginny gave him an odd look. "It was a medical emergency, Harry. There was nothing you could have done."

Nothing I could have done. The truth of that statement was a twisting knife in Harry's gut. What was the point of Dumbledore's Army, what was the point of him if there was nothing he could have done?

"Yeah," Ron said, standing up. "But it was about Malfoy."

Ginny frowned at Ron. "So?"

"Shut up, Ron," Harry said.

Ron did not shut up, however. "Harry had this theory, you see. He kept saying someone was trying to murder Malfoy."

"What?" Ginny looked back at Harry. "But... you mean before yesterday? But Smith didn't have a motive then."

Harry felt like growling in frustration. Why did nothing make sense anymore?

"How did this even happen?" Harry asked. "Why was Malfoy outside so late? How did Smith know he was?"

"Anthony and I found quite a few Slytherins outside yesterday," Parvati said. "Including Harper, of course. Not Malfoy, though. But well, he could have gone outside to fly later."

"There were supposed to be Charms on the common room exits. The Slytherin prefects aren't even trying," he said resentfully. Though, of course, Locking Charms were unlikely to stop Malfoy, anyway, and he could have left his common room whenever he wanted. Exiting the castle was not that difficult, either.

Idiot. Why did he go outside in the middle of the night?

"Well," Ginny said, "Pomfrey was actually really worried Smith would try to escape and go after Malfoy. He wouldn't shut up about it. So she locked him in the hospital wing and even hid his wand in her office. But he got the wand and went out anyway."

"That's..." Ron scratched his head. "Impressive. Wouldn't have expected it from Smith. Never looked like a bright fellow to me. Got his wand, disabled Pomfrey's charms, found Malfoy and then hexed him while Malfoy was flying."

"Maybe he searched for Malfoy for a while? Saw him through a window?" Parvati suggested.

"A window?" Ron asked. "Malfoy might be blonder than a fairy but I doubt he's glowing in the dark."

"Well, I don't know how he found Malfoy," Ginny said. "Unless he had help? But either way, McGonagall was very impressed Smith had managed to hit Malfoy from the ground. I mean, Malfoy probably wasn't flying very high, or he'd be dead, but still. That's some aiming. Plus, Nimbus always insisted their brooms are very safe and can't be hexed or broken easily."

Harry had a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. "So McGonagall said some really powerful magic was involved?"

Ginny nodded. "And she called the Aurors. Seems Smith is guilty of attempted murder."

"Great." Harry groaned. "Now Smith will get blamed for Tommy and the staircases and the fire in the dormitory."

"But he had no motive for those things," Ginny said.

"Exactly! But now it looks like Smith is capable of some really impressive magic and he's the most convenient scapegoat. For the Aurors and the Board, at least. But don't you think it's a bit suspicious that Smith was right there, with a wand in his hand, conveniently unconscious? And the wand is not the best evidence. Anyone could have knocked out Smith, hexed Malfoy and then put the wand back into Smith's hand."

Ginny stared at him. "You think Smith is innocent? But the Aurors already took him away!"

"I don't know what to think," Harry confessed. "But what if he is and whoever wanted to kill Malfoy is still out there? Did Smith say anything? Did he confess?"

"No. He said he doesn't remember anything. He claimed he must have been sleepwalking. But he did say he was sad Malfoy didn't die."

Good riddance, then. Although, it was not the sort of thing a guilty person pretending to be innocent would say. "And Malfoy, what did he say?"

"He hasn't woken up yet. Pomfrey stuffed him full of potions. He won't be waking up for a good long while. But he'd been Confunded, anyway, so..."

"Malfoy is unlikely to know what hit him," Harry finished for her.

Maybe Smith really had hexed Malfoy. For all Harry knew, Smith just got lucky. Perhaps literally. Maybe he had a vial of Felix Felicis in his pocket. Or maybe his uncle, the Unspeakable, had taught him some tricks. Or he was more talented than Harry gave him credit for.

But on the Sunday when Tommy Wright was cursed, Malfoy had been running from someone. That could not have been Smith. Harry wished he could talk to Malfoy, make him tell him everything he knew. He must have known something.

There was little point to dropping by the hospital wing now since Malfoy was asleep, but Harry nonetheless tried to think of an excuse to go there. Just to make sure with his own eyes that Malfoy was alive. He remembered his dream. The way Malfoy's dot had disappeared from the Map and Harry had cried, desperately hoping Malfoy was alive.

Harry thought of nothing clever, however, and then Hermione and Lavender showed up, demanding to know why they all looked so worried. Ginny almost told them, but Ron put his foot down. He promised to tell them everything but only if everyone moved their arses already and headed down for breakfast.

Ron, Hermione and Lavender left, but Harry lingered, insisting he wanted to wait for Ginny to change out of her damp clothes. In truth, he did not want to hear the story of Malfoy's fall again, especially the part about him lying on the ground alone and in terrible pain for six hours.

Parvati stayed behind, too, probably avoiding Lavender. She stared at the portrait hole after Ron had exited. "If those three make it all the way to the Great Hall alive, I'll be impressed," she commented.

Harry realised Ron had left accompanied by his current and ex girlfriend. Which would have been amusing if Harry had not remembered that he was now stuck in the company of his two ex girlfriends. Granted, he had only ever attended Yule Ball with Parvati but that had been a disaster and therefore memorable.

Harry struggled to start a conversation as they waited.

"So..." he said. "Why are you fighting with Lavender?" The moment he asked that, he realised he

shouldn't have. Parvati's expression soured at once.

"Wish I knew!" she ranted. "She's so different, ever since... the Battle. Moody and nervous and constantly cross with me! I don't know why. I didn't do anything."

Harry struggled to say something helpful. "Maybe she just needs some time to... adjust?"

Parvati huffed. "She has no problem with Hermione. And she's the one dating her ex!"

Harry did not know what to say to that, so he kept his mouth shut, hoping Ginny would show up soon. Fortunately, she did, and the three of them headed down to the Great Hall. But not before Parvati stopped him at the portrait hole, saying, "Harry, you forgot your bag."

Harry forced a smile, said, "Thanks," and accepted the bag. He had left it beside an armchair on purpose, planning to remember he had forgotten it later, then double back and sneak away to see Malfoy in the hospital wing.

With that plan ruined, he had to think of another excuse.

They had reached the staircases when Harry decided to simply claim he had to go to the bathroom. He had already opened his mouth to say it, when Parvati spoke.

"We should invite some Slytherins to join the D.A."

Harry must have given her an odd look, because she hurried on. "I mean, if there really is someone in the castle, hexing students and starting fires, the Slytherins are the easiest targets. They have no respect for curfew and they are sneaking out on purpose at all hours, just to spite us. And I get them. There we are, three houses banded together, protecting our own, and the Slytherins aren't a part of that. Sure, they have their prefects, but it's not the same. Besides, their prefects aren't being very helpful. It's like we

made them all even more spiteful and careless."

Harry hoped he sounded neutral when he said, "That's a good idea." He had planned to invite some Slytherins to join them from the start, but he had thought none of the other D.A. members would agree to that. Now it's not even my idea.

"But, er," Ginny began, "would they even want to be a part of something called Dumbledore's Army?"

"Surely we'd find one or two who would," Parvati said.

Maybe Malfoy? "Maybe Zabini?" Harry said. "His brother nearly burned the other night. He might be interested in stopping whoever had started the fire from hurting someone else."

Parvati frowned. "That one looks like he cares about nothing and no one, but, sure, it's worth a shot."

"Astoria Greengrass might do it," Ginny said. "She shows up on the pitch sometimes, in the morning, and she's always polite and seems friendly. She looked very concerned after the fire. She's a sixth-year, though."

"Oh! Her sister Daphne always seemed all right to me," Parvati said.

"Excellent!" Harry said. "We could ask both." Here we go now. "And maybe we could ask Malfoy, too."

Harry was not happy with the stares that statement earned him.

"Malfoy? A member of Dumbledore's Army?" Ginny looked downright stunned.

Parvati shook her head, too. "And you just said someone is trying to murder him. Wouldn't it be wiser to keep him safe in his dormitory?"

Harry decided Parvati's argument would be more easily shot down. "But the dormitories aren't safe, obviously." He looked to Ginny. "Just imagine: what if Malfoy had a Galleon last night?"

"Oh Harry," Ginny said. "It wouldn't have helped him. He couldn't even move."

"Still," Harry insisted, pushing away the image of Malfoy lying helplessly on the ground. "If something happens to him again, it might be helpful."

"You could just give him a Galleon, then," Parvati said brightly. "Like we gave it to Peterson. No need to make him a member."

"He's not Jaime Peterson. He won't take it if he knows it's just meant for his protection."

"Harry, I don't think he'd take it either way," Ginny said. "And the other D.A. members... they might accept the Greengrass sisters and Zabini, but Malfoy? He's... he was a Death Eater, Harry."

"Exactly!" Harry exclaimed. "You said it yourself, Parvati, the Slytherins are feeling excluded. And the fact that it makes them spiteful and careless isn't the only problem. It's like McGonagall said: Last year the students of this school learned they have to stick together and instead of building on that, we're just going backward and making the Slytherins hate everything Dumbledore stood for even more. If we get Malfoy, of all people, to join us, wouldn't that send the best sort of message? I bet there are younger students in that house who think it's just brilliant Malfoy has the Dark Mark. I bet they look up to him." Harry remembered the looks the younger Slytherins gave Malfoy in the burned dormitory. Fear and awe. In a queer sort of way, he was their celebrity. "By joining Dumbledore's Army, he'd spit into Voldemort's face. And the Slytherins need to see one of their own spitting into Voldemort's face."

"They'd just say he's a blood traitor," Ginny said.

"Some would! But fuck them. Others would see that protecting their own and working with Muggle-borns isn't mutually exclusive. They would see him earn near-prefect privileges by doing that. Slytherins love ambition. They'd be intrigued by that. I mean, it's just like Lucius Malfoy. We can't change the way he thinks, but look at him pretending! Why? Because he realised that's the clever thing to do. If we could convince a few others to do the same, convince them that cooperating with Muggle-borns is now fashionable... What?"

Ginny and Parvati had both stopped walking and were staring at him.

"Er, you feel quite strongly about this, then?" Ginny commented.

Harry's throat was a bit sore. He might have been yelling.

"And quite cynical," Parvati added.

They don't understand. None of them understood. Didn't they realise that if things didn’t change, it was all for nothing? Didn't they realise that another Dark Lord could be rising right now? After everything Harry had done, people were still in danger, Muggle-borns were still bullied and the rift between them and the pure-bloods was still so deep. One more lunatic to take advantage of the situation and the weak wooden bridges they had built would come crashing down. And Harry would have fought for nothing, people would have died for nothing.

And Malfoy, even Malfoy, was mocking him; he kept trying to die as though Harry saving him had been pointless. As though he should not have bothered with any of it.

If there was really someone out there, someone wishing them harm, then this time they had to be ready. Do it differently. Do it together.

They were all going backward. And round and round, doing everything just like they had done it before.

"I'm going to the hospital wing," Harry announced. "To see how Malfoy is doing." He pushed past them and stomped down the stairs. They both followed him, however.

"Harry!" Ginny cried, grabbing his arm. "There's no need to get cross with us!"

"Especially me!" Parvati added, looking very indignant. "I was the one who suggested we invite the Slytherins."

"I know. But you also reminded me how everyone else will react when we tell them. And I just hate knowing the reaction will be the same now, as it would have been back in our fifth-year. On both sides. I know the Slytherins, and Malfoy especially, will laugh at our offer. And I don't have a solution. To any of it." Brilliant. Now he was whinging at them. He wished he could stop. "And I really want to go see Malfoy now. So..."

"Harry!" Ginny pulled on his arm again. "Wait."

"Ginny, I really—"

"Harry, we're on the ground floor," Ginny said quickly.

"Oh." The hospital wing was on the first. Harry turned to go back up the stairs.

"Wait!" Ginny said again. "We'll find a way to get Malfoy into the D.A. if it means that much to you. Nothing's impossible."

Harry looked at her warily. "You're just saying that because I look like a kicked puppy again, aren't you?"

Her mouth twitched. "I thought you said it doesn't matter what people really think, as long as everyone is pretending."

"Yeah, well. I just meant... I mean, I know it's hard and I don't expect everyone to suddenly start getting along, but I just want things to change. At least a little. And the more time I spend here, the more I see that just didn't happen."

"You know," Parvati said, "if we want to get Malfoy into D.A., then now is the perfect time to try it. Ginny, you should go around and tell everyone the story of how you found him all broken on the pitch. Oh! And do make sure your lip trembles the way it did earlier."

Ginny was scandalised. "My lip didn't tremble!"

It did. But Harry knew better than to say that out loud.

"It's just that Malfoy..." Ginny huffed. "Git. He made me feel so sorry for him."

"Exactly!" Parvati said. "I felt sorry for him, too. And I really don't like him. So you could probably make a few other people shed a tear or two. Start with Hufflepuffs," she advised.

Ginny looked doubtful, but said, "Most people didn't like Smith much, so that works in our favour."

"You don't have to do this, Ginny," Harry said, though he really wished she would. Parvati was right. This would be very good timing. When someone was so seriously injured people liked to tiptoe around them, show they were good people by being kinder.

Ginny snorted. "Oh, I'm sorry, Harry, was it your twin brother who yelled at me earlier when I dared to imply inviting Malfoy wasn't a good idea?"

"I'm done yelling now. Really."

Parvati laughed quite loudly, but then sobered when Harry looked at her. "Well, you do like to yell, Harry," she said.

Ginny sighed. "Dumbledore would want Malfoy in the Army, too, that's good enough for me, but just for the record, Harry, I can blubber all over every D.A. member and convince some of them to accept him, but convincing Malfoy? That's up to you." She studied him. "And I bet you a Galleon—a real one—I'll be more successful than you."

"A wager is hardly appropriate..."

"Coward."

"Name your terms."

Ginny grinned. "There are eighteen of us. I'll convince ten—the majority—to sign an official parchment saying they'll agree to have him, before you convince Malfoy."

"Done. And you'll lose that Galleon," he said with confidence he did not feel. He was quite sure she would win. Just as he was sure Malfoy would punch him in the face if Harry should ask him whether he would join Dumbledore's Army. Regardless, he felt much better now than he did a minute ago.

"If you really plan to see Malfoy," Parvati said, "you should go now. Lessons are about to start. We missed breakfast."

"Oh! Right. Thanks!" Harry hurried up the steps. He did not dare to look back down at them, afraid they were giving him odd looks again, wondering why he was in such a hurry to see Malfoy. Harry wished he knew the answer to that question as well.

Minutes later, he regretted his visit to the hospital wing. Seeing Malfoy had only made him feel worse, not better. Malfoy was sound asleep, the covers pulled up over his chin. Only tufts of white-blond hair were visible. Harry's fingers itched to pull the covers down a little to make sure it really was Malfoy.

He found himself wondering if someone had remembered to stroke Malfoy's hair and tell him everything would be all right as he lay down on the pitch. Someone should have. Maybe Ginny had, maybe Pomfrey. Maybe he could ask.

Or maybe not.

He did ask Pomfrey when Malfoy would wake and she told him to return in the evening. She had also noted her disbelief that Malfoy had survived at all. "The amount of damage... I truly don't understand how he's still alive," she said, though assured him he was out of danger now.

Harry had been tempted to stay in the hospital wing to confirm Pomfrey was telling the truth and see Malfoy wake with his own eyes, as well as to make sure no one tried to murder him again, but Pomfrey mentioned Malfoy's parents had been contacted and were on their way to Hogwarts. Harry bolted after that, not keen on seeing Lucius Malfoy. He realised Draco's parents were likely to take him home and forbid him to go back to school. Perhaps that would be for the best. But the thought was upsetting, nonetheless. Especially hours later, when he spotted Ginny sobbing on Michael Corner's shoulder, before shoving a piece of parchment in front of him so he could sign it.

If Malfoy left, he would not be a part of the Army. And they had a plan and everything. Ron and Hermione had signed Ginny's parchment as well; Ron had been threatened, Harry was sure, but signed he did. He was not fooled, though.

"You put Ginny up to this," he had accused Harry.

"I just want—"

Ron raised his hands. "Harry, I seem to remember flying through cursed fire to save that git. I injured my toe; it will never be the same. If Malfoy dares to die now, I'll kill him myself. So, fine, let's give him a stupid Galleon and call him a member. But if you think Malfoy will accept it and the rest of the Slytherins will be impressed... well, you're wrong."

"It's an admirable effort, though," Hermione said bracingly, though she clearly agreed with Ron.

Harry agreed with them, too, but felt there was a chance, as long he did not acknowledge his doubts aloud.

After dinner, Harry went out flying, staying close to the castle to keep an eye on the entrance.

Earlier, Hannah Abbot had gone to the hospital wing to ask Pomfrey for a potion to settle her stomach. She had been feeling ill ever since Ginny had told her the tale of Malfoy's misfortune. Harry had been tempted to ask Ginny to stop traumatising people, but Hannah was in a small company of students who were actually distressed. There were others who had claimed Malfoy had it coming. And most of the students did not particularly care either way, though they were eagerly retelling the story and adding their gory details. "I heard his eyes popped out of his sockets when he fell," Jimmy Peaks was heard saying. "They found one ten feet away and had to scrape the other one from the goal post. He'll have to wear an eye patch."

Irrational though that was, Harry had been tempted to run to the hospital wing to make sure both of Draco's eyes were still were they where supposed to be. He might have done it, too, but Hannah had told him Draco's parents were still there.

"They were fighting when I showed up," she added. "Sounded like they wanted Malfoy to leave Hogwarts, but he refused."

That was when Harry had Summoned his broom and gone outside. The Malfoys showed up on the Hogwarts stone steps a little before nine o'clock. Lucius and Narcissa were alone; Draco was not with them.

Harry was unsure whether to be glad or not. Maybe Malfoy would be safer at home. Maybe not. Either way, if he did not want to go home, he was of age and no one could force him. Harry had thought Malfoy would preferred to be home-schooled, but then he realised that if that were true, he would not have even come to Hogwarts in the first place. His parents would surely agree with everything he wanted.

From the Malfoys' perspective, the student that had been a threat to Draco's life had been removed and there was no real concern, though they would want to keep him close after the ordeal he had been through. Harry wondered if Draco felt the same. Did he think he was safe now? Surely if he thought someone else had been trying to kill him, he would go back home with his parents?

Harry went back into the castle and put his broom away. Soon he would have to go patrol with the rest of Dumbledore's Army, but he still had little time to stop by the hospital wing.

He had been waiting to talk to Draco the whole day; he was not about to miss his chance.

He lost more time hesitating in front of the hospital wing's door, unsure what to say to Draco when he saw him. Perhaps it would not be a good idea to try to question Draco again. What if Harry was wrong and no one else beside Smith was trying to kill him? Harry was not ready to dismiss the possibility and risk Draco's life, but Draco was likely in a terrible mental state at this point and telling him someone else might be after him seemed cruel.

Unless Draco already knew that. But then why didn't he go home?

Harry nearly gave up and went back to the tower to see if any of his charges, the sixth and seventh-year boys, were missing, so he could go pick up Luna and start his patrol, but he found himself pushing the hospital wing's door open, nevertheless.

It was quiet inside. One bed was occupied by ever-sleeping Tommy Wright and the other by Draco Malfoy. Harry tiptoed to Draco's bed, thinking, resentfully, that if he were a murderer, he could easily murder Malfoy right now. The hospital wing's protection was abysmal.

Malfoy looked fast asleep. Considering Harry had spent long minutes outside the hospital wing, worrying

about what he would say to Malfoy, it should have been a relief. But Harry had been promised Malfoy would be awake and he felt cheated.

There was an empty vial on a small bedside table next to Malfoy. Harry hoped it was not a Sleeping Potion. Carefully, he walked up to the table and then pushed the vial over the edge.

It landed on the floor with a loud crash and shattered.

Draco jumped, looking around, instantly awake.

"Sorry," Harry said and hastily took out his wand. "Reparo!" The broken pieces flew together and Harry picked up the vial and returned it to the table. "Broke a vial." He felt compelled to point that out since Malfoy looked rather confused. Harry happily noted both of Malfoy's eyes were hale and accounted for.

Malfoy visibly relaxed and lay back down. "What? You're here to keep watch?" Malfoy asked. His voice was thick with sleep.

It was Harry's turn to be confused. "Sorry?" Did someone tell him something? How else would he know Harry was worried someone might try to kill him again.

Malfoy turned to glare at him. "Give me some credit, Potter. If I wanted to finish him off, I wouldn't do it here where I'd be the only suspect."

Sudden realisation almost made Harry laugh. Tommy. Malfoy thought Harry was here to protect Tommy Wright.

"Er, actually, I'm here to talk to you," Harry said. Though, I'm not sure about what. He did not say that.

"Oh? Have you come to accuse me of trying to murder someone again?" Malfoy's eyes widened

comically. "Oh wait! I don't think that will work this time. Not even you can be that thick. At least, that's what I'm hoping. You're welcome to amaze me, though."

"You know, I've never actually accused you of setting the fire in the dungeons, Malfoy."

"Should I be grateful?"

"No! That's not what I meant. I'm just pointing out..." Damn it all. He did not come here to fight with Malfoy. "I just wanted to ask if you saw something?" Malfoy frowned and Harry added, "Before you fell, I mean. Or earlier that day."

Malfoy stared at him. "Are you...? What's wrong with you? Did I see something? Like, what? The idiot who hexed me was taken away by Aurors. Real Aurors. Case closed, Potter. Or are you unhappy a precious Hufflepuff will rot in Azkaban for doing the world a service? Maybe it was all me. Maybe I framed him."

I should have kept my mouth shut. He could have reminded Draco that someone might have tried to kill him before, on the stairs, and point out that could not have been Smith, but if he did that, there was even less chance Malfoy would take the D.A. Galleon, recognising that it was for his protection.

Or maybe not. Maybe he would welcome it.

Harry stared at Malfoy's hateful glare. No, Malfoy would not accept any sort of protection from him.

"Did I guess?" Malfoy asked. "Do you really think that? You do, don't you?" Malfoy's glare turned into something that might have been... hurt. Though, it could not have been.

"No. I don't think that," Harry said. "I just want to know who cursed Tommy and burned the dormitory. And I thought you might have seen something."

"That's nice, Potter. I want to know if that scar of yours damaged your brain or if you were just born stupid. But I suppose we just can't have what we wish for."

"Well, actually..." Just ask. "There is something I wish for and you could help me with that."

"If you think I'll ask what, think again. Get the fuck out, Potter. I'm tired."

Would you consider joining Dumbledore's Army? The words refused to come out. Harry tried to guess what Malfoy would say if he truly asked. Would he be surprised? Disgusted? Both? It seemed Malfoy was convinced Harry thought he was the worst sort of person. Perhaps Harry's invitation would appease him. I will ask.

"I wondered," Harry began, "if you'd be interested—"

"MADAM POMFREY!"

Harry jumped. The whole castle must have heard Malfoy's bellowing.

"Honestly, Malfoy," Harry said.

"Get out, Potter," Malfoy spat.

Harry waited a moment. "I don't think Pomfrey heard you. Maybe you should try again."

Malfoy was flushed with anger. "Fine!" he said, but instead of shouting for Pomfrey again, he threw off the covers. "Fine, Potter. Stay here and babble. I don't care. I'm leaving."

Those are the palest feet I have ever seen, Harry thought as Malfoy sat up and tried to push his feet into his slippers.

"There's no need for that, Malfoy. I'll leave. Just calm down." This was all wrong. Malfoy was clearly too upset and emotional to be reasonable. Harry should not have come at all.

"No! Stay! Stay for as long as you like. Fuck if I care."

Apparently Malfoy was so busy not caring, he had trouble putting on his slippers. He had either given up on them, or hadn't noticed his right foot never slipped inside properly, and when he shot up, he only managed to push the slipper forward on the polished floor.

Harry knew what the result would be before it happened. Malfoy's foot ran away from him and he lost his balance. He would have fallen if Harry had not leapt forward to catch him. Though, the only way he could catch Malfoy was to wrap his arms around Malfoy's waist and pull him up and against him.

Malfoy's hands gripped Harry's shoulders, probably in an instinctive search for support, and Harry's leg found itself trapped between Malfoy's thighs.

Now he'll punch me. Harry braced himself. Malfoy would be upset he had nearly fallen and he would blame Harry. He would shove him away and stay cross with Harry forever for daring to catch him again.

A heartbeat passed, then two, then three. Malfoy was not pushing Harry away. He did not move at all. He just stood there, gripping Harry's shoulders, his breath hot against Harry's ear.

Maybe he's ill, dizzy, disoriented. Harry could feel Malfoy's heartbeat against his chest. Or was that his own?

They stood like that, hugging; Harry was too confused to move. Push me. Why won't you push me?

Malfoy's breathing slowed and deepened, and he finally moved, imperceptibly. His head turned to the side a little, his leg pressed harder against Harry's. A sound tore out of Malfoy's throat. A desperate needy gasp that tugged at Harry's heart.

Then Malfoy's cheek was pressed against Harry's, skin against skin. And then Harry's heart stopped beating altogether: the pressure against his cheek turned soft, hot, wet...

The push Harry had been waiting for was so sudden Harry yelped. He was shoved backward, into the bedside table. The vial he had shattered earlier fell to the floor and broke again as Harry struggled to stay on his feet.

The hot pressure against his thigh was gone; Harry hadn’t even noticed it before, but now that he had lost it, there was no mistaking it. Harry's thigh had been pushed between Malfoy's legs; the skin there still burned, remembering the solid press of something hard.

Harry fixed his glasses and squinted at Malfoy to see his surprise reflected in Malfoy's expression.

He didn't push me, Harry realised.

"Mr Harry Potter, sir, must stop suffocating Mr Draco Malfoy, sir!" a voice squeaked.

Harry winced and Malfoy whirled around. A small house-elf stood a little away, wearing a fancy little red dress and pointing her fingers at Harry.

"Winky?" Harry asked.

"Winky is being very sorry, Mr Harry Potter, sir. Winky doesn’t want to hurt a friend of Dobby, but Mr Draco Malfoy, sir, must not be suffocated."

"Right. Er, I didn't—"

"Who sent you?" Malfoy asked sharply.

"Winky is being here. Winky keeps watch. Mistress' orders."

"McGonagall's?" Harry asked.

Winky nodded. "Please, Mr Harry Potter, sir, must leave. Bad things mustn't happen in hospital—"

"Yes," Harry said quickly. "I'm leaving." If Winky was here, then Draco was as protected as he could be. Which meant Harry could leave. Run. Bolt as fast as he could.

Harry hurried past Malfoy. His cheeks were on fire.

Malfoy was still frozen on the spot, not looking at Harry, not saying a word.

Harry mumbled a goodbye to Winky and left.

*

It was half past ten when Harry finished his patrol and dragged his feet back to the Gryffindor Tower. The common room was mostly empty, but Ron and Hermione were both there. Ron was scribbling furiously with his quill, sitting behind one of the tables near the south window, and Hermione was in one of the

armchairs by the fire, tapping her wand against a piece of parchment with an exasperated expression on her face.

She smiled at Harry when he sat on the armchair beside her. "Any trouble?"

Harry shook his head. Luna and he had found no missing students, though Harry had heard the rest of the D.A. had had a busy evening. Apparently, half of the Slytherin house was roaming the corridors.

Harry was too distracted to remember all the possible hiding places and Luna was as distracted as she normally was. They made a wretched team.

Hermione sighed. "The Slytherins are cross about Malfoy. A band of them tried to hex Ernie and Justin."

"Mmm." Harry wished Hermione had not mentioned Malfoy. He was trying so hard not to think about him.

"Oh!" Hermione said. "Before I forget..." She lowered her voice. "George sent another letter to Ginny. And he confirmed my theory about Lucius Malfoy. He really had summoned Lestrange and the Carrows and sent them to the Department of Mysteries on Ministry's request." Hermione beamed, clearly proud of herself. "And it turns out the Carrows had been in Hogsmeade before that. They were there all along, hiding in Honeydukes cellar. They had old Ambrosius Flume Imperiused."

Harry blinked. "What?"

"They were trying to get into the castle. They were after you. Greyback was with them, too, apparently, but he abandoned them at some point. No one knows where he is."

Harry stared at her. He had convinced himself that no Death Eater had even been close to the castle; it was shocking to hear that they were. "But then... did they curse, er, Stun Tommy? If they were here..."

Perhaps they were after Malfoy, as well. Perhaps it was all over.

"Oh no! I said they were trying to get into the castle, but they couldn't get in. Not even as far as the grounds. They tried every hidden passage they knew, but they just couldn’t get past Hogwarts’ protection."

"Oh. Well, that's..."

"Brilliant!" Hermione said. "The castle is better protected than we thought."

"Oh yes," Harry commented. "We're all so incredibly safe here."

Hermione stared at him. "No need to get short with me, Harry. I was only pointing out—"

"I know," Harry said quickly. "I'm sorry." He was. She was not the one he was cross with. He was much angrier with himself. No matter how much he regretted going to the hospital wing earlier to see Malfoy, he could not change the past. If only he had stayed away, he would not be feeling so lost and confused now.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Hermione narrowed her eyes. "Did you write your Transfiguration essay? Ron didn't." She scowled in Ron's general direction, even as she tapped her wand against the parchment on her knees and deleted a few words. Harry recognised Ron's handwriting; Ron must have been still working on the essay and Hermione was correcting what he had already written.

Harry nodded, even though he was not absolutely sure he had written it; it was hard to think about homework now.

"Good. Professor Plunkett won't have a cold forever. He can't," she added somewhat hysterically. "We'd miss too much."

"Hermione, we only missed one lesson so far. I'm sure he'll recover soon."

She nodded, still clearly worried. "Did you talk to Malfoy?" she asked suddenly. "Invite him to join the D.A.? He refused, didn't he?"

"Didn't... get around to it." Harry could not help looking away, feeling guilty, though he had no idea where the guilt was coming from. Except he—irrationally, he knew—feared Hermione would somehow know what had happened in the hospital wing just by looking at him. Although, if she could do that, it might be helpful. Because Harry was not sure he knew what exactly had happened.

Hermione set her wand down on her knees and sighed. "What's wrong?"

Nothing, was on the tip of Harry's tongue. But he couldn’t just brush her off. He had to talk to someone about this. But who?

"Nothing," Harry heard himself say.

"Honestly, Harry, you look like you've seen a poltergeist."

Harry's lips twitched. "Cute."

"Isn't it?" She grinned but then turned serious again. "What is it?" Her brown eyes were kind and worried.

I can't talk to her about this. Can I?

Harry leaned in closer and whispered, "Something did happen in the hospital wing."

"Did someone try to murder Malfoy again?" she whispered back. She might have been mocking him; Harry couldn't tell.

Harry shook his head. "No, nothing like that. It's... Malfoy slipped and almost fell and I caught him."

"Is gravity trying to kill him?"

"Er, maybe, but that's not... See, what happened was..." Stop babbling. "I think he... I think he tried to kiss me."

Hermione's expression did not change. It looked frozen on her face. "Sorry, what?"

Harry's fingers hurt. He realised he had been wringing his hands and crushing his fingers in the process. He forced himself to stop. "I was... well, sort of holding him, and he, er, kissed my cheek." Harry's cheeks burned as though trying to be helpful and provide Hermione with visual evidence.

Hermione's eyes went huge. "He kissed your...?" she whispered but then shook her head violently as though to clear it. "Oh Harry. It's Malfoy. You know how he is. He's always trying to provoke you." She frowned. "Admittedly, this is taking it a bit far, but..."

"That's not all."

Hermione waited for his next statement with all the air of someone expecting a punch in the nose.

"We were standing really close, you see, and he..." Merlin. He couldn't tell her. "He was..." What word should I use? "Aroused."

Hermione's lips formed and O and froze like that.

Harry's cheeks were on fire by now, though he tried to tell himself he had done nothing and should not feel embarrassed. He plunged on, eager to move the conversation along, "I was thinking... Malfoy is behaving so oddly this year. Around me, I mean. He keeps looking at me and then looking away, and now... It wasn't a joke, Hermione. He was so..." Harry remembered Malfoy's gasp when he pressed closer against him. It sounded broken. Sincere. "It wasn't a joke," he repeated firmly.

Hermione was blinking now, then she closed her mouth, as though defrosting gradually. "Well, I suppose it's possible he... I mean, you saved his life back in May. First the fire and then, well, I'm sure he was relieved when Voldemort died. Maybe he's grateful, confused. I don't know... taken with you. He must have been so scared and thanks to you he's alive and..." Hermione's expression turned pensive. "He never had many girlfriends, did he?"

"Er, what's that have to do with anything?"

Hermione's head tilted. "Well, I just meant... if he's... into boys."

"Oh. Right." Boys. Blokes. Malfoy was into blokes. Harry hadn't really thought about it like that. Though, he should have, obviously.

"But who knows?" Hermione added. "Like I said, maybe he's just confused. Because you saved his life so many times. Oh! And then you spoke well of him at his trial. And helped free his parents and..." Hermione trailed off, looking as though she had more to say. She bit her lip and studied him. "So, er, what did you do?"

"What? When?"

"When Malfoy... well."

"Oh. I... Nothing. Winky showed up and hexed me."

"Winky?"

"The house-elf."

"Right."

"She said McGonagall sent her to the hospital wing. To protect it, I suppose. She must have been there all along, but I didn't notice her." A mark of a good house-elf was not to be seen, after all.

"Why did she hex you? Are you hurt?"

"No, she just pushed me. I think... Malfoy and I were standing really close." Hugging. "For a bit." How long was it? "And it must have confused her." Too.

"Right," Hermione said again.

"You know," Harry said, "maybe I was wrong all this time. Maybe Malfoy would like to join the D.A. and maybe he'd even accept he needs to be protected. Maybe my approach was wrong. Maybe, if I had been... If I had used a different approach, Malfoy would have told me by now what happened to him on the day Tommy was cursed."

Hermione looked wary. "A different approach?"

"Well, yeah. You know, a softer one." Harry bit his lip, thinking. "All I did was yell at him, or demanded he

tell me everything he knows. It just made him defensive. And spiteful."

"So, you're saying," Hermione said slowly, "you should exploit the fact Malfoy seems to... have a bit of a crush on you." Harry's stomach twisted at the thought, but he had no time to ponder anything because Hermione went on, "To make him do what you want."

"Exploiting isn't the best word," Harry said, affronted. "I just thought if I act, you know, friendly, he might actually listen to reason."

"Um." Hermione's forehead furrowed. "Friendly. But, Harry, if you do that, you might just make him think you... reciprocate his feelings." Harry opened his mouth in an indignant protest and Hermione quickly added, "Even if you don't."

"I don't!"

"Even so. You might make him think you do. And that seems a bit unfair. Even cruel, don't you think?"

"But all I want is to make sure he stays alive! How is that cruel? How is being friendly cruel?"

"Shh," Hermione said.

Harry realised he had been shouting and he looked around to make sure no one had heard him. Ron looked their way, frowning, and Harry shook his head at him and smiled a little. He was relieved when Ron returned to his essay.

"Harry," Hermione said, clearly frustrated, "if Malfoy is really... Wouldn't it be better if you just left him alone? Maybe Winky could protect him. You could ask McGonagall."

Harry narrowed his eyes at her. "I can't believe you just said that. If someone is truly after Malfoy,

someone powerful, that would only put Winky in danger, too."

"But maybe she could just alert us if someone tries to—"

"A D.A. Galleon would help with that, too. A house-elf could keep an eye on him in his dormitory, perhaps, but it can't follow him around everywhere, all the time. House-elves aren't bodyguards. And we talked about all this before, Hermione. It would be good for the school if we get a Slytherin..."

"A Slytherin, yes. It doesn't have to be Malfoy."

"But he'd be the best—"

"But it doesn’t have to be Malfoy," Hermione insisted. "I mean, he just suffered through something horrible, and now you want to give him false hope..."

"Hope? No, no. I just thought I'd be—"

"Friendly, yes," Hermione hissed. "Harry, I know you mean well. I do. But I'm afraid you'll just complicate things..."

"Why are you so concerned about Malfoy, anyway?"

Hermione's eyes studied his face. "Oh Harry, it's not him I'm concerned about."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Done!" Ron cried, suddenly standing right beside them. He held out a long sheet of parchment for

Hermione to take. "Er, is something wrong?" he added when both Hermione and Harry stared at him in confusion.

"No," Harry said quickly and Hermione snatched Ron's essay, scowling at Harry.

"Er, okay." Ron looked to Harry.

"I'm tired, that's all." Harry forced a smile. "In fact, I should probably..." He stood up and yawned exaggeratedly. "Don't stay up too late, you two," he said and walked away, trying hard not to run.

Don't think, don't think, don't think, was Harry's mantra as he was getting ready for bed. Thinking about Malfoy was making his head hurt. And Hermione did not make him feel any better. He had it all planned out. He had already decided to talk to Malfoy again, be kind and friendly, and convince him to accept the Galleon and the D.A. membership.

But apparently that would have been cruel.

How is that cruel? Harry raged, lying in his bed. By that logic, Harry had been cruel in the hospital wing, too, when, instead of shoving Malfoy and telling him off, Harry had held him and waited for Malfoy to push him away first. Malfoy had spent last night alone and in agony; Harry knew what that was like and he knew how much a simple hug could help. He had never forgotten the hug Molly Weasley had given him years ago, when Harry had witnessed Voldemort's return and Cedric's murder. In that moment, her hug had meant everything.

And, sure, in the hospital wing today, Harry had not been aware of Malfoy's... feelings, but if he had been, he would have done the same. Even if that meant he was giving Malfoy false hope, as Hermione put it. And trying to save Malfoy's life was the same thing. Or should he just give up and ignore him out of fear he might give Malfoy the wrong idea?

"You're awake?" Ron's voice broke through Harry's thoughts.

Harry hurriedly closed his eyes. The dormitory was quiet. It must have been late.

Ron gripped Harry's shoulder and shook him.

"Mmm," Harry groaned and tried to turn away.

"Wanker," Ron said. "I saw your eyes were open."

Damn. Harry squinted at Ron, who had gone back to his bed and was taking off his shirt, getting ready for bed. The clock on Harry's bedside table told him it was well past midnight. Ron and Hermione must have been talking for quite a while.

"I'm trying to sleep," Harry said.

Ron made a noncommittal sound and attacked his trainers, to pull them off. He was not looking at Harry. "I was just wondering... Did you talk to Malfoy? Ask him to join the D.A.?"

Bloody hell. "Hermione told you everything, didn't she?" He should have told her not to spread the tale. Ron and Hermione were not just talking for the last two hours, they were talking about him. Harry wished he had remembered to take out his Invisibility Cloak and listen in.

Ron shrugged. "Yeah. She does that," he said with a half-smile.

Harry studied Ron's face, trying to guess his thoughts. "Are you... upset?" he asked.

"Why would I be upset?" The way Ron said it, it sounded like he was definitely upset.

"Dunno." Harry really did not know why Ron would get angry about this but, somehow, he thought he would. He also feared Ron might... ruin everything. He might be tempted to tease Malfoy. Make fun of him. The thought gave Harry a queasy feeling. What if Harry had heard Malfoy was crushing on... Neville, for example. Would Harry tease him about it, too? He might. If he were angry with Malfoy about something, if he wanted to hurt him... But I don't want to hurt him.

But Ron might want to. Ron had nearly died once because of Malfoy. The memory of Ron choking to death in Slughorn's office smacked Harry right in the face. He felt ill all of a sudden. Malfoy, you idiot.

"I just thought..." Harry began. "I know you think I'm crazy for thinking someone's trying to kill Malfoy, and that I'm trying too hard to work out how to keep him safe. And I suppose, you think, if he's really... well, then, staying away would be wiser."

"It would," Ron said, finally looking at Harry. "And I don't think you're crazy. I know you're just... It's your thing, isn't it? Saving people. But Malfoy is just so fucked up, Harry. I realise he's been through a lot, you keep saying, but with the way you've been acting lately, and it's all because of him... I just don't like it. I just think you should let McGonagall protect him. And you know what? Tomorrow, I'll ask Zabini to join the D.A. And maybe Harper, too. He does nothing but skulk around all the time. He might as well be useful."

Harry stared at Ron. "And how have I been acting lately, exactly?" he asked, not without anger.

Ron studied him. Harry could not remember the last time Ron looked so serious. "Like you don't know what you're doing, or what you want."

Harry blinked. Tell me, Harry Potter, tell me your last wish, Voldemort's question echoed in Harry's mind. What do I wish for? he remembered asking himself in his dream, desperate to find the answer.

Harry shook his head to clear it, unsure where that thought had come from. "I know what I want," he said. "I want to stop whoever cursed Tommy and set the fire in the dungeons. I want to make sure no one else gets hurt. And no, I don't know how to do that, but that doesn't mean I should do nothing."

"That's not what I—" Ron blew out a breath suddenly. "I just think, you should work out what you want first, and then do something about it." He grimaced. "Not rush without thinking—"

"Are you quoting Hermione?"

"No! Well, maybe." Ron looked sheepish. "But I agree with her."

"But I just told you what I want—"

"Argh!" Ron groaned and then, with a wave of his hand, lay down on his bed, violently pulling the covers over himself. "Fine. Forget it. Do what you want."

"Ron, you're not making any sense."

Ron laughed, though it sounded more frustrated than amused. "Yeah. This is senseless, isn't it?" He rose up on his elbow then and added, all serious again, "Malfoy's a git. Don't forget that. I just don't want to see you forget that, and then remember it when it's too late."

Harry struggled to understand Ron, but could not make any sense of his words. Who knew what Hermione and he were discussing? It might have left Ron confused. "I know he's a git," Harry said. "But he's a git in danger. And I don't plan on forgetting either of those things."

Ron nodded, though he did not look pleased at all. "Okay. Fine. Okay." He lay down again. "I'll be happier when we save him, finish our lessons and get out of here, believe me. We probably shouldn't have gone back to Hogwarts in the first place."

"Maybe," Harry said, no longer so sure that was true. Maybe it was, but it was too late to regret it now. Now there were things they ought to do, that Harry ought to do. And he planned to do them. Ron and

Hermione could complain and huff all they want, Harry might listen to them when they started making sense.

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Fresh air and the light of the new day had a way of putting things into perspective, Harry reflected, as he walked toward the castle after a long flight around the grounds. He even found it in him to forgive Ron and Hermione their odd behaviour yesterday. Though, he had realised, there had been nothing odd about it. Harry's behaviour on the other hand...

What was he thinking? He could not understand how he had managed to walk out of the hospital wing, thinking Malfoy had feelings for him, feelings other than hatred and annoyance. He blamed the letters. Those letters that came every so often, sent by young girls as well as older ones, containing words sweeter than chocolate, which was often included in the packages, too. Some of those letters had made Harry laugh and shake his head in disbelief, others had made him blush, and they all ended up in a bin, together with, often love potion filled, chocolate.

There had been many of those, at first, at least. Harry did not spend time thinking about them, but it must have convinced him, without him even noticing, that concluding someone had a crush on him, just because they looked at him funny, was reasonable.

Well, it was not. And Harry knew that. Clearly, all he needed was a good night's sleep to remember what he already knew. To think Malfoy, who had always hated Harry, could possibly, ever... Harry ought to laugh at himself.

Malfoy had had a terrible day; he had still been weak and probably dizzy, disoriented. He probably did not even know what he was doing yesterday. He probably did not even realise it was Harry he had been clutching. And who knew? Perhaps right before Harry had shown up, Malfoy had been fantasising about the Holyhead Harpies and Harry had interrupted him in an inopportune moment.

There were more plausible explanations Harry should have thought of yesterday. He should not have discussed it with Ron and Hermione at all. His poor friends. Things they must listen to thanks to his occasional madness.

"Harry!"

Harry squinted ahead to see Ginny descending Hogwarts stone steps, running to meet him.

If Malfoy was crushing on anyone, it would be Ginny. She was the one who had found him yesterday. She had saved him this time. And she was beautiful and kind.

And a girl.

Harry's stomach twisted. Which was not odd since Harry had gone flying right after lunch. That had not been one of his brightest ideas.

Ginny reached him in no time. If not for her flaming hair, Harry would not have recognised her. She was wrapped into a thick cloak and a colourful scarf, and wore one of Hermione's knit hats, similar to the one Harry had on his head. Harry could not help admire Hermione's knit work. Her knitting had improved so much, they were all wearing her hats and scarves now, not because they felt obligated, but because they were rather nice and warm. She had even knitted a Weasley jumper for Mrs Weasley, with the names of all her children on the front, which had made poor Molly cry for three days straight and she stubbornly wore it in the middle of summer.

"Here," Ginny said, "I have something for you." She took out a Galleon from her pocket and offered it to Harry. She was grinning at him.

"Er." Harry stared at the Galleon in confusion. "I haven't even asked Malfoy anything. I couldn't have won the wager."

Ginny laughed. "Of course you didn't win, Harry. This is a fake one. I gave Hermione the signed list of names—eleven signed, not counting you and me, so I not only won, I wiped the floor with you. Almost got Ernie and Justin to sign, too, but then they got hexed yesterday by a bunch of Slytherins, so they weren't inclined. Anthony Goldstein refused, too; Parvati's not happy with him. Didn't ask Seamus and

Padma, yet. But she promised Parvati she'd sign."

"That's brilliant," Harry said.

She squinted up at him. "Then why do you look like I just told you a kneazle peed in your porridge?" Her eyes widened. "Oh Merlin! Tell me you didn't change your mind. Not after I whinged at Dean and Michael both. Do you know how embarrassing it is to whinge at your ex?"

"I know," Harry said dryly, and she snorted. "And I didn't change my mind," he assured her. I'll ask, he'll refuse, Ginny will hex me. It could have been worse.

"Good." She stuffed the fake Galleon into one of Harry's pocket. "He's in the library. Guess Madam Pomfrey released him. Go give him the Galleon. Just tell him McGonagall sent you and leave it there. It's unlikely he'd refuse, then."

Harry blinked. That was not a bad idea.

Ginny worried her bottom lip. "Although... You know, I asked Astoria to join us, too, and she refused, but then Parvati told Daphne that Astoria agreed, and I went back to Astoria and told her Daphne agreed, and now they'll both do it. But Astoria told me something else, too. I mentioned we would ask Malfoy and Zabini, and she didn't look too happy about that. She said inviting Malfoy might be a bad idea."

"Really? Why?"

"Well, apparently she has trouble sleeping and wakes up early or stays up late in the common room. And she has seen Malfoy go outside in the middle of the night more than once. He walks out and doesn't return for hours. According to her, he's been doing that since the school year began, but more often ever since Tommy Wright was cursed."

"But no one ever saw him," Harry argued, though he was shocked to hear someone else suggested

Malfoy might be up to something. Sneaking out in the middle of the night... Doing what? Going where?

"Well, she says she had always thought Malfoy was the Hufflepuff Vampire. Er, I mean, the hooded person skulking around. She doesn't actually think he's a vampire."

But the Hufflepuff Vampire was often seen near the kitchens. What was that about, then? Was Malfoy sneaking out at night to have a snack?

"Maybe he just has a girlfriend in Hufflepuff." Ginny laughed suddenly, punching Harry's chest in her amusement. "Can you imagine? Draco Malfoy seeing a Hufflepuff? He'd be so embarrassed. That might explain everything. Perhaps Tommy Wright and some poor Slytherin first-year saw him with her, and he tried to get rid of the witnesses."

"That makes no sense. He wouldn't—"

Ginny stopped laughing. "Harry, I was joking."

"Oh. Of course. I know that."

She shook her head, staring up at him. "Honestly. When did you lose your sense of humour?"

Around the same time I went mad.

"The thought of Malfoy having a Hufflepuff girlfriend is very funny," Harry said. Though not as funny as thinking Malfoy wanted Harry, instead.

"Yeah, I'm sure you're laughing on the inside." Ginny sighed. "I should go. Some of us have lessons," she said grudgingly. She turned and went back to the castle, but not before she added, "Don't forget you owe

me a Galleon."

Harry should have had lessons, too, but their Transfiguration professor was still sick. Which meant Harry did not have better things to do at the moment. And he knew where Malfoy was. And he had the Galleon. There was no reason not to go up to the library and ask Malfoy to join Dumbledore's Army. He could just say it was on McGonagall's orders, like Ginny had suggested.

All he had to do was remember not to ask Malfoy why he was going out at night. They would just end up fighting again.

After successfully convincing himself he should go and go now, Harry went to the Gryffindor Tower to put away his broom, then he went to the bathroom, then talked to Neville and Hannah in the corridor, then talked to Seamus, then Nearly Headless Nick, and only after that, he found himself in front of the library.

He's probably gone by now. Well, if he was, Harry would just have to talk to him some other day.

The library was quiet and for the most part deserted. Malfoy was there, though, all the way down in the corner, diligently scratching with his quill. Probably catching up on homework and lessons he had missed yesterday.

At least he can't yell at me in the library. Or try to kiss me, he added wryly, tempted to laugh at himself.

Harry walked up to Malfoy's desk, determined to do this as quickly as possible. He fingered the Galleon in his pocket.

Malfoy's scribbling slowed, but he did not look up.

"Can I talk to you?" Harry asked and then wished he could smack himself. Why did he phrase it as a question? Malfoy would just say no and Harry would have to start from the beginning, but with Malfoy already irritated because Harry had ignored his rejection. He should have said, "I have a message from

McGonagall," or something.

Malfoy's quill still scratched against the parchment. He did not even grace Harry with a reply. Harry almost turned away and left. Someone else could give the Galleon to Malfoy. It did not have to be Harry.

I'll just leave, Harry thought as he sat down on the chair next to Malfoy's.

Malfoy's fingers clutched the quill so hard, Harry expected it to break. He's cross with me already. Malfoy did not acknowledge Harry's presence in any way, though.

With a mental sigh, Harry took out the Galleon and placed it on the table. He pushed it slowly toward Malfoy with his index finger.

Malfoy stopped writing.

I just gave him gold. He must comment. He'll never be able to resist.

Malfoy pursed his lips and did not disappoint. "Whatever it is you want, Potter, it will cost you more than that."

Harry let out a breath he had been holding. "It's fake, anyway."

Malfoy gave him a sideways look. "A piece of advice, free of charge, if you're giving someone fake gold, don't tell them it's fake in advance."

"I'll try to remember that one." Harry nodded. "Would like you to keep the Galleon, though. There's a Protean Charm on it. We use them in the Dumbledore's Army to communicate." As you well know, Harry wanted to add but thought better of it. Malfoy had used enchanted Galleons in their sixth-year to

communicate with Imperiused Madam Rosmerta.

"I see." Malfoy cocked his head. "Aspiring to be the new Dark Lord, are you? You summon your little minions and they come crawling."

"We're moderately low on crawling, actually. It's just a charm, Malfoy. A useful one. Voldemort didn't think of it."

Malfoy winced, but hid it well. His tone was patronising when he said, "Why, I'm so incredibly impressed now. Did you make them yourself?"

"Hermione did."

"Ah, of course. Nonetheless, I'm so glad we shared this moment. Now, if you're done bragging..." Malfoy returned to his homework, in clear dismissal.

"You don't want it, then? Join us, help us patrol?"

"Patrol? I know you lot like to call yourself an army, but you're not an army—you do realise that? You're just a bunch of gits who have nothing better to do than pretend you're important."

You'd fit in nicely, then, Harry thought, but said, "Oh, I don't know. Armies fight battles. I seem to recall us fighting one."

"Past tense," Malfoy scoffed. "War's over. Time to move on. Now you're just playing games."

"Is that what you'd tell Tommy Wright? Or the Slytherin first-years? Or yourself? If it's over, how come you almost died on the pitch yesterday?"

Malfoy turned to glare at him. "If you have an army, where was it when I almost died on the pitch yesterday?"

The words were a knife in Harry stomach. You should have stayed in your dormitory, Harry wanted to say, then nothing would have happened to you. But was that even true? Zacharias Smith went against all odds when he broke out of the hospital, found Malfoy and hexed him in midair. Who was to say he would not have succeeded even if Malfoy had been in his dormitory? The dormitories were not safe either. And if Smith had help or had merely been someone's puppet, it would not have mattered.

If you want something, give something, Harry reasoned. "That's a good point," he said. "That's why I'm giving you the Galleon. We have no one in Slytherin house. At least, no one who cares. The prefects are no help. The lot of you care more about sabotaging us."

"Right. Because the lot of you don't care more about ducking points from Slytherins. Oh no, your goals are so much more noble."

"Some do care more about ducking points, some don't," Harry conceded. "But what I want to know is: what if there's another fire in the Slytherin dungeons? Are there smoke-detector charms in every dormitory? Do you have alarms on your doors to tell you if someone exited or entered? Has someone taken initiative and even attempted to make sure all students are accounted for?"

Malfoy stared at him. "Don't you think you're taking this a bit too seriously? Smith's locked up, the fire was probably an accident—"

"Have you seen your broom, Malfoy? Because I have. It has a clean cut in the exact middle. A simple Severing Charm did this according to Smith's wand. You think Smith is capable of something like that? To sever a Nimbus broom so precisely? Many skilled wizards would find it challenging. And I'm not defending Smith; I'm saying he had help. Winky the house-elf was assigned to protect you in the hospital wing by McGonagall. You think she'd do that if she thought it was unnecessary?"

"My father must have threatened her—"

"Your father knows better than to threaten the Hogwarts Headmistress. He proved that when he surrendered his brother-in-law to the Ministry."

Malfoy's eyes widened. Whether he was surprised to hear Harry knew or he didn't know anything about it, Harry couldn't tell.

"Malfoy, the threat is real. And you nearly died twice. It's not a game."

For a moment, it looked like Malfoy was hesitating; he even glanced at the Galleon as though tempted, but the moment passed and Malfoy sneered. "Well, in that case... looks like I have my own personal protector—Winky, the house-elf. Perhaps you should talk to someone who gives a fuck about others."

More than anything, Harry wanted to grab Malfoy and shake him. You do give a fuck. Lavender had told him Malfoy had been the first to react when she was screaming for help in the dungeons on the night of the fire. He had rushed to her side and helped her put it out. Granted, since Malfoy was taking so many midnight strolls, it was likely he was one of the rare Slytherins who had been awake, and his swift reaction was the result. But nonetheless, he reacted, he came, he helped. And fire must have terrified him.

Harry remembered how Ginny and Parvati convinced the Greengrass sisters to join them, and decided to give the idea a shot. "We already invited Daphne and Astoria Greengrass. And Zabini." Harry bit his lip. "They all agreed." Harry made a mental note to find Zabini as soon as possible.

Malfoy scribbled something on his parchment. "Sounds like you're all set, then."

You have to do it; McGonagall's orders, Harry thought ruefully. Why didn't he stick to that plan? It was too late now, obviously. He wasn't planning on telling Malfoy his life might be in danger, either, but had ended up babbling about it, anyway. Why can't I keep my tongue in check around Malfoy?

Malfoy was ignoring him again; however, Harry noticed his neat handwriting no longer looked so neat.

And his last written sentence made no sense. To be fair, though, it was a Potions essay: lack of sense was practically a requirement.

Was it time for desperate measures? Last night Harry had thought he should be more friendly. Today, he was no longer sure that would make any difference and he didn't even know how to be friendlier than he already was. Hadn't he been friendly? It required more than not hexing or punching someone. When it came to Malfoy, Harry would deem that friendly enough, but maybe it was not.

Maybe...

Harry gripped the back of Malfoy's chair and leaned in closer. He all but whispered in Malfoy's ear when he said, "Please do it?"

Malfoy turned so sharply, his hair smacked Harry's nose. Harry forced himself to stay put and not flinch away, even though Malfoy's face was so close Harry could feel his breath against his mouth.

It happened so fast Harry would have missed if he had not been studying Malfoy's face so intently: Malfoy's eyes looked at his and then, for a fraction of a second, Malfoy's gaze slid lower, straight to Harry's lips. Ridiculously, Harry found himself wishing his lips weren't so dry and chapped from the cold air and wind they had to endure when he was flying earlier. He pushed the thought away together with the giddy feeling that assaulted him when he allowed himself to decide his yesterday's conclusion wasn't as crazy as he believed. The possibility that Malfoy really did have those sorts of feelings for him shouldn't have made Harry so happy, but it did mean he might actually convince Malfoy to join the D.A., and it was only reasonable to be happy about it.

Malfoy wasn't pulling away, either. His grey eyes—such a pale shade of grey, Harry reflected, could they ever look warm?—were staring at Harry's. Harry almost spoke and asked Malfoy if his green eyes offended him since he apparently fucking hated green. He resisted, but then almost spoke again, tempted to say Please one more time, just to see if he could shock Malfoy even more.

Silence stretched and Harry could no longer resist the urge. "Please?" he repeated. Malfoy's lips parted and his pupils turned darker. This is the most fascinating sight I have ever seen. Surely, it wasn't, but

saying please again and again was much too tempting.

Malfoy was speechless and Harry was at a loss. He would have to say something, other than please, or they would just stay here staring at each other forever. But say what? Malfoy would snap out of it sooner or later and then get angry. He would not change his mind just because Harry said please.

"You were a prefect before, you can be one again," Harry said. Malfoy's gaze slid to Harry's lips again and Harry had to make a conscious effort to make them move. "All you have to do is count a few students, cast a few charms, have a stroll. You'd have prefect privileges. Authority, a different curfew, teachers' respect, the bathroom—those are lovely." Technically, they weren't allowed to use the Prefects' bathroom, but it made the dubious list of privileges sound more impressive. If Malfoy took the Galleon, surely he wouldn't toss it back at Harry when he found out that no bathrooms were included in the deal.

"Sounds dull." Malfoy had found his voice, but he seemed to have found it at the bottom of a barrel for it was that low. "Two hours with, what? Zabini? Running around, catching students? I think I had more fun last night."

"Actually..." Harry's mind was on overdrive. Perhaps... "You'd be patrolling with me. Which is even worse, I'm sure, in many ways. But surely not dull." Did I just smile? Am I flirting? No, no, he was being friendly. Encouraging. Did it even matter? It seemed to be working.

But then Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "I see. Planning to keep an eye on me?"

Harry was thinking fast. "New members are getting paired up with old members. At least at first." That sounded plausible. Harry hoped the rest of the D.A. would agree. "And believe it or not, not many are eager to be partnered with you. But you know me. Always willing to sacrifice myself."

"Of course." It sounded almost sad. Was it the wrong thing to say? It had been a joke.

"We can start tonight. I'll stop by the dungeons and pick you up at nine." Just act like he already said yes. "You can contact the Head Girl or Boy and they'll explain what exactly is expected of you."

Malfoy was wavering. It was clear on his face. But then his gaze turned calculating. "Oh, I don't know, Potter. I think I'll need you to beg some more."

Harry did not hesitate. "Please?"

Malfoy gave him the oddest look and then flinched away suddenly, huffed, "Fine," and his hand moved toward the Galleon.

Harry snatched the Galleon away. "There's just one little thing, though."

Malfoy shook his head and laughed. He looked almost relieved, though his laugh sounded bitter. "Of course there is."

Harry knew he was probably ruining everything, but he had an idea and it was important. "We have this whole initiation process. We're very religious about it."

Malfoy laughed again. "Oh Potter. For a minute there, I actually thought you were serious. Good one. You almost had—"

"I was serious," Harry said. "You just have to say something and the Galleon is yours."

Malfoy's smile looked frozen on his face; his eyes were colder than ever. "Potter, I swear it, if you ask me to say Thank you, I will hex you."

"No, no thanks necessary. All you have to say is..." Harry thought on it for a split second. "Voldemort has smelly underpants."

Malfoy's eyebrows rose very high indeed. Harry thought his mouth twitched. He had even forgotten to flinch at the name in his surprise. It looked like he did not know what to say to that. "Right," he said at last. "So, what? You've cast a Recording Charm and plan on going around the school playing it for everyone?"

Harry pretended he knew what a Recording Charm was. "No," he said but was aware Malfoy would not be appeased by that. If you want something, give something, he reminded himself.

Harry reached into his pocket and took out his wand. Malfoy studied his every move carefully. Stomach twisting, Harry held out his wand for Malfoy to take. "If it makes you feel better, you can hold it when you say it. Make sure there are no Charms being cast."

Malfoy looked fascinated. He reached out immediately and his fingers gripped the wand, sliding down to where Harry's fingers were wrapped around it. His skin is so cold, Harry thought, as he shivered at the touch. With a heavy heart, Harry let go of the wand.

Malfoy could hex him now. Or he could break his wand. Or run away and throw it out the window.

All Malfoy did was stare at it and stroke it with his thumb. It made Harry feel oddly uncomfortable. One did not just give their wand to another wizard. What was he thinking? Malfoy must have been gloating now and planning to—

"Voldemort has smelly underpants."

A sudden burst of happiness made Harry think he would have loved to kiss Malfoy in that moment. But the moment passed soon enough and Harry contented himself with a smile.

"May they rot with him," Harry said solemnly and handed Malfoy the Galleon.

Malfoy snorted. He took the Galleon and returned Harry's wand. Harry took it, carefully, not wanting to

touch Malfoy's skin again. It had made him feel oddly uncomfortable before.

"Just so you know, though," Malfoy said, with a smile that looked so honest Harry had to smile back, "I'll never forgive you for making me think about... Voldemort's underpants."

Stop smiling like an idiot, Harry told himself and then promptly disobeyed his order. He tucked his wand back into his robes and stood up. "There's nothing scarier than the truth," Harry said wisely, then added, "See you at nine."

Malfoy shrugged and Harry took it as acceptance. He hurried outside, afraid that if he lingered too long, Malfoy would change his mind.

As he opened the library door, he glanced back to see Malfoy staring at the Galleon as though he had never seen anything like it before.

Hours later, Harry could not stop smiling.

Chapter Six

The Wanderer

"Augustus Derrick's missing."

"He's right there, Harry." Hermione pointed toward the fireplace, where the sixth-year in question was sitting in Harry's favourite armchair.

"Oh." Harry cleared his throat. He should have seen him. "No one's missing, then."

"Good." Hermione smiled, though it looked strained. "Good luck."

"I'll probably need it." He probably would. Malfoy might not even show up. Or he would be more troublesome than helpful.

"Hex him if you must," Ron advised, with a hopeful lilt to his tone.

Harry made a noncommittal sound. He hoped it would not come to that.

After saying goodbye to Ron and Hermione, purposely ignoring their oddly intent looks, Harry walked out of the common room and headed toward the dungeons. Ron and Hermione were not happy with him, he knew. They disapproved of Harry's suggestion to mix the new members with the old ones. Or, more precisely, to pair up Slytherins with the members of other houses. Or, even more precisely, to pair up Malfoy with Harry.

"It makes more sense to have two people from the same house patrol together," Ron had insisted, but Harry had pointed out that was not how it worked so far, anyway. Harry had been paired up with Luna because Parvati wanted to patrol with her Ravenclaw boyfriend. Neville, on the other hand, wanted to patrol with his Hufflepuff girlfriend and had wreaked havoc in their ranks, trading places left and right to make it happen.

Harry's argument had made Ron very grumpy, indeed. "Yes, well, their reasons were at least understandable," Ron had said. He had also mumbled something about Harry picking interesting examples.

"But I just want to keep an eye on—"

Ron had thrown up his hands and yelled, "Fine! Whatever, Harry. I reckon we'll have to pair up Luna with Zabini, then." That thought seemed to have cheered Ron up. "Ah, to be a fly on the wall when those to get together."

Harry could not help agreeing with that sentiment. He had asked Blaise Zabini to join them not long after

he had spoken with Malfoy. Zabini had shrugged, said, "All right," and stuffed the Galleon into his pocket. Harry had to wonder how Zabini would react to Luna and her tendency to make little sense; Luna never failed to provoke a reaction.

They might fare better than Malfoy and he, though. Whatever happened, Harry hoped it would not come to blows. Every other minute, Harry was convinced Malfoy had no feelings for him except absolute hatred, but then he would reflect on Malfoy's behaviour in the hospital wing and today in the library, and he would change his mind all over again. Either way, it was likely they would do nothing more than fight the whole time.

You have no choice, Harry told himself, standing in front of the entrance to the Slytherin common room. You have to keep him alive and find out what he knows.

Draco Malfoy stepped out of the common room at precisely nine o'clock. He was already scowling. "Daphne and Astoria are all set to go, too," he said promptly. "They're patrolling together. Isn't that curious? I was told that the new members will be paired up—"

"They insisted," Harry said quickly.

"Oh. I see." Malfoy pursed his lips. He does that a lot, Harry thought. "So can I insist on being paired up with someone else?"

Harry shrugged. "Do you plan to? You can, if you like."

"That's good to know," Malfoy said, but then fell silent.

"We're in charge of the fourth floor," Harry said and Malfoy nodded. "Anyone missing from Slytherin?"

"Only Harper."

Harry stopped walking to glare. "Honestly, Malfoy, if you're not even going to bother—"

"I'm not lying. Only Harper's missing!" If Malfoy was faking his indignation, he was putting on a good show.

"That's what your prefects always say, and then we find dozens of students all over the place."

Malfoy's indignation turned to anger in a flash. "I don't give a fuck what the prefects say. I counted all the students twice, and I've threatened them, too; the common room is locked, I cast smoke-detector charms and alarms and if anyone gets out or gets hurt, it will happen only because all your fabulous suggestions and precautions are worth shit. And I'm sure they are. But I've done everything you said I should."

"Er, did Zabini and the Greengrass sisters get to do anything, then?"

"What do I know?" Malfoy spat, but then frowned, patches of pink smudging his cheeks. "I mean, of course they did. We've split the load. Obviously. Why the fuck would I do everything myself?"

Harry studied him, unsure what to think. Malfoy was either lying or bragging, or he had really taken it up on himself to do everything that needed to be done. I counted all the students twice, he had said. That would have taken awhile. But if he was lying, then why take it back a second later? Perhaps he really did it all, just because he liked to boss everyone around.

Or perhaps he did it all because you begged? Harry squashed that thought with a huff.

"You know," Harry said, "last I heard, you didn't give a fuck about any of this. You turned out to be quite an overachiever."

The patches of pink on Malfoy's skin blended and turned redder. Now he'll raise his chin and purse his lips, Harry thought and a second later Malfoy did just that. Harry had to smile.

"And do you know what else I turned out to be?" Malfoy said imperiously. "Quite annoyed. Enough to insist I get a different partner. Right now."

That won't do. "I'm sorry. I truly am," Harry said as demurely as he could. "I'm just pleasantly surprised you're taking it seriously."

Malfoy still looked affronted. "Don't confuse a sense of responsibility with lack of sense, Potter. I still think you're delusional and I'm not taking your 'someone's out to get us all' theory at all seriously."

"Really? At all?" Harry asked. Malfoy's nightly wanderings came to his mind. "Haven't you heard? There's a vampire in Hogwarts."

Malfoy laughed. "If you find a vampire in Hogwarts, Potter, I'll find a hat and eat it."

Malfoy looked genuinely amused. Either because he did not believe the rumour, just like Harry, or he knew for a fact there were no vampires since it was he who the students had been seeing skulking around at night.

"Well, in that case, I'm feeling quite inspired to go vampire-hunting now."

Malfoy rolled his eyes and said no more on the subject, nor did he insist again that he wanted a different partner. They made their way to the fourth floor in silence.

Awkward silence, Harry decided. I should say something. But what? It seemed they could either fight or not talk at all.

If Malfoy was bothered by the lack of conversation, he did not show it. They checked a few hidden passages and rooms along the way, but found no students lurking about. If they had, they would at least have something to talk about, but luck was not on Harry's side tonight.

He's probably bored and will give up by tomorrow. Maybe they should fight. Harry had promised Malfoy he would not be bored. Perhaps he should deliver. Maybe they could fight about the Slytherin and Gryffindor chances to win the Quidditch Cup.

"You are such an idiot!"

Sudden shouts made both of them look around.

"The staircases," Malfoy said, frowning in that direction.

"That's Parvati." Harry was quite sure he recognised her voice. "Come on, let's see what's wrong."

They sprinted down the corridor and reached the staircases in no time. Harry wished they hadn't. Parvati was there with her boyfriend, Anthony Goldstein. They were both red-faced and glaring at each other.

"You know what I'm not, though?" Anthony's voice was low. "BLIND!" he shouted suddenly. "No matter where you are, HE'S THERE, TOO!"

"Er," Harry said and tugged on Malfoy's sleeve. "Maybe we should go..."

Malfoy shook him off. "Oh no! This is fun."

"Oh yeah?" Parvati yelled. "And you know what I'm not? Your girlfriend! It's over, Tony." She spun around but then must have noticed Harry because she turned to yell at him. "You better find me a new partner,

Harry. I'm done with this dickhead!"

Harry nodded mutely and she stomped off.

"And I'm done with you!" Anthony screamed after her.

"Oh, you certainly showed her! Smashing comeback!" Malfoy said enthusiastically. Harry wanted to punch him.

Anthony whirled around, eyes narrowing in Malfoy's direction. "You little shit—" Suddenly, a wand was in his hand.

Harry pulled out his own wand and stepped in front of Malfoy, but not before he grabbed Malfoy's wrist to stop him going for his wand as well. "I think you're done for today, Anthony," he said. "You should go back to your common room and cool off."

"And I think you should go fuck yourself, Harry. Or better still, go fuck Malfoy. Fucking Slytherins is so popular these days."

Malfoy shoved Harry aside. His wand was out, his face an ugly grimace. "Oh, I think I'd like to fuck you, Goldstein. I think I'd like to fuck you with something sharp."

Harry wished everyone would stop saying fuck. Malfoy and Anthony both raised their wands and Harry shot forward and cried, "Expelliarmus!" Malfoy growled and Anthony cursed as their wands flew out of their hands and toward Harry. He caught them and glared.

"Anthony, go back to your common room," Harry said, keeping his voice low and as calm as he could. "You'll get your wand back tomorrow."

For a second, Harry was sure Anthony would charge forward and try to strangle him. He certainly looked capable of it. Instead, Anthony reached into his robes, took out something golden and tossed it at Harry's feet. The Galleon clinked heavily as it fell. Harry's stomach turned at the sight of it.

"I won't have any part of your army, Harry," Anthony said. "What's the point?" His gaze flickered to Malfoy. "You've soiled it." With that, he turned and left. Malfoy stared after him, his face completely red.

Harry bent down and picked up the Galleon. "Well," he said, aiming for a light-hearted tone. "You think Nott would take it?"

The question obviously surprised Malfoy. It must have forced him to forget he was supposed to be angry and embarrassed, because he blinked and said, "Er, no?"

"Parkinson?"

"You're joking."

Harry was joking. "Bulstrode?"

Malfoy opened his mouth, then closed it. "Maybe," he said after a few seconds.

"Well..." Harry tossed the Galleon at him and Malfoy caught it. "Good luck with that."

Harry could not tell if Malfoy looked pleased or displeased. But then Malfoy put the Galleon away and looked at Harry pointedly. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Oh, right." Harry stepped closer to give Malfoy his wand back.

Malfoy's lips pursed as he took it. Harry could not help smiling again. Was that the natural state of Malfoy's lips and they kept trying to return to it?

"You're not its master now, are you?" Malfoy studied his wand.

"Er, no, I don't think so. It wasn't my intent, at least. I didn't plan to keep it."

Malfoy waved his wand and Conjured a yellow canary. It shot up toward the ceiling, flapping its wings madly and looking far too cheerful. Malfoy must have been satisfied with the wand's obedience and he tucked it back into his robes with a nod. Then he gave Harry a sideways look. "Aren't you upset? About that dickhead leaving?"

Harry was upset, but he shrugged. "Never knew Anthony well." If Anthony had not left, Harry reasoned, Parvati might, just to avoid him, and Harry would choose Parvati over Anthony Goldstein anytime. Besides, both Hermione and Ginny thought Anthony was a git, so perhaps it was all for the best. Harry smiled at Malfoy. "See? Never a dull moment. Hadn't I promised?"

Malfoy smiled back, truly smiled, not sneered or smirked. He said nothing, though, just shook his head. Harry felt instantly better and oddly proud of himself.

Harry's pride did not last very long. They ended up discussing Parvati and Anthony, and what at first looked like reasonable commentary on what had transpired, quickly turned into something akin to gossip.

"But she's clearly seeing a Slytherin, haven't you heard?" Malfoy said.

"But Anthony is just a jealous git. He's probably imagining things," Harry argued.

"Or you just don't want to believe your precious Parvati could ever set her eyes on a Slytherin."

"My precious Parvati?"

"She was your Yule Ball date, wasn't she?"

"That was four years ago! And it was a disaster."

"Indeed. We've all seen you dance, Potter."

"Says the person who dressed like a vicar."

"A what? What was wrong with my dress robes? I'll have you know—aren't we checking here?"

Harry blinked. Malfoy stopped walking and pointed at the empty corridor to their left.

"Er, that's a dead end," Harry said. "Nothing here but two fake doors."

The corridor was fairly long and poorly lit and always empty. Even the walls were barren, no tapestries or portraits in sight.

Malfoy mock-gasped. "I thought Harry Potter knew every hideout in the castle. Could it be? Could a Slytherin succeed where a Gryffindor has failed?"

"Never said I knew them all," Harry said curtly. "If you concluded I did, it says more about you than it does about me."

"Clearly, I put too much faith in our Saviour." Malfoy moved toward the empty wall.

Harry paused to study him. There had been no nastiness in Malfoy's statement. He was merely teasing. It sounded good-natured. You saved his life back in May... Maybe he's grateful, confused, Hermione had said. Maybe he expects me to always save him. And I have already failed him once.

"Tap this wall four times," Malfoy was saying, reaching out, "and it will—"

"Malfoy!" Harry sprung forward and grabbed Malfoy's hand. He let out a breath of relief when his fingers wrapped around Malfoy's.

"That wall's been hexed," Harry said. "Look." It was barely perceptible, but if one looked at the right angle, they could see steam rising from the smooth surface.

"Flagrante Curse?" Malfoy asked.

"Maybe." Harry took out his wand and pointed at the wall. Finite Incantatem Vanished the smoke. "Looks like a simple hex. We had a few of those before. A Slytherin specialty, actually. They put those on the doors, so that we get burned if—what?" Malfoy had the most peculiar look on his face. He was staring at Harry, his expression unguarded. He had looked liked that in the library, too, when Harry had said please for the first time. It was an unusual look for Malfoy. His face was soft where once it was hard; expression warm where once it was cold.

Smooth and warm. Warm like the thing I'm holding in my hand, Harry realised, with growing horror. His cheeks flamed harder than the wall had; Harry would not have been surprised if smoke was rising from them, too.

Malfoy's hand, which Harry had snatched and saved from burns, was still firmly in Harry's grip; worse even, it was pressed against Harry's chest, where Harry held it as though heat still threatened to burn it.

Just let go. "Sorry," Harry said, eased his grip, pushed a little, moved his fingers; his fingertips slid against Malfoy's skin. Smooth, so smooth.

Malfoy snatched his hand back and turned toward the door. "We should check if..." Malfoy's voice broke. He tapped the door four times, pushed, and it opened to reveal a dark room. "Empty," he said, staring ahead, not looking at Harry.

"Yeah." I was holding his hand. "They're probably gone." Cradling it.

"Who knows when they cast the hex. I mean, if you weren't checking here before..."

"Yes. I mean, no, I wasn't." Harry cleared his throat but was still unable to swallow properly. "We should..." He pointed vaguely toward the opposite corridor. "There's another hidden room there."

"Oh. Okay." Malfoy closed the door and it turned back into a wall.

Harry attempted to clear his throat yet again. "There's a place further down where we found two couples snogging once. Four people in a tiny little room! Well, the blokes were twins, but still. Mad, isn't it?" Stop babbling. "Come on, I'll show you." Show him what? a voice in Harry's head asked. A convenient place for snogging?

Harry turned away and contemplated taking his wand out to stick his tongue to the roof of his mouth. "It's down there," Harry said, wishing Malfoy would react and move already. They could continue their patrol and talk and pretend nothing had happened. Because nothing had happened, really. Harry was just...

Harry glanced back and frowned. Malfoy had turned away from the wall, but he was staring at the dark,

dead-end corridor ahead and not at Harry.

"Malfoy?" Even as he said that, Harry pulled out his wand.

"There's something there," Malfoy whispered. "I saw something move."

Harry took a careful step forward. "Maybe it's just a shadow." The candlelight did not reach as far as the end of the corridor. The left corner was pitch-dark. Faint shadows danced around it. Harry strained to see if there was something moving in the darkness. He took another step closer, then two. Malfoy stood still.

Get your wand out, Harry wanted to say, but he did not get a chance.

A white flash of skin was their only warning: a bright red beam of light flew straight at Malfoy.

"PROTEGO!" Harry cried. His Shield clashed with the red spell in midair. A few sparks hit Draco right in the chest. Harry saw Malfoy go down. He lost precious time because of it. More spells flew at Harry, one after the other; he had to struggle to keep his Shield up, but at least the spells bounced off it harmlessly.

They're Stunners; they're just Stunners. The force of his relief was overwhelming. Malfoy was fine.

Except Tommy Wright had been Stunned, too, and he was still asleep. But the spells hitting Harry's Shield could not have been very powerful. If they were, his Shield would not have stopped them.

The spells stopped coming abruptly, but they had blinded him with their bright light. The darkness moved and sprang forward.

"STUPEFY!" Harry yelled, but it was too late. The thing was fast. It charged at him like a bull, hitting against his chest. It knocked the air out of his lungs and Harry nearly dropped his wand. He stumbled

back and went down. He landed on his elbow and cried out in pain.

"Stupefy!"

Harry's heart skipped a beat at Malfoy's shout. The red spell chased down the figure as it ran. Harry thought Malfoy's Stunner hit it, but the figure swerved toward the staircase and disappeared in a whirl of black robes.

"Ugh," Malfoy groaned and Harry leapt to his feet, the pain in his elbow forgotten.

Malfoy was leaning against the wall, clutching his head as though dizzy. The Stunner must have disoriented him.

"Are you all ri—" Harry began but Malfoy cut him off. "I'm fine! Go, you bloody Saviour. Get it!"

Harry hesitated a moment longer but then whirled around and bounded down the stairs.

The cloaked figure had a head start, but Harry glanced over the banister and saw it speed down the marble staircases, round and round, its black cloak billowing. It turned left on the second floor and disappeared.

Harry was thinking fast. There was a passage on the second floor that led all the way to the ground floor; the figure rushed straight in that direction. But there was another passage on the third floor that led to the almost exact same place, except it was faster.

Harry sprinted forward, turned right and found himself in a narrow corridor in front of the tapestry of singing giants. He poked the grumpy silent giant with his wand and commanded, "Sing!" The giant burst into song and the tapestry squeaked and collapsed backward into the wall, creating a steep slide.

Harry gritted his teeth and jumped into the dark tunnel. He landed on his arse and lurched forward, down the winding slippery slide, lit only by an occasional twinkle of some stray fairy-bug.

The slide tossed him left and right, then bucked and spat him out into a brightly lit corridor.

Harry landed on his feet, but his head was spinning and he had to lean against the nearest wall to stop himself from falling.

When his vision cleared, a cloaked figure emerged from the wall to his left.

There was another hidden passageway right on the opposite wall, a tricky one that led to the kitchens. It only ever admitted one person at a time, because there was a step inside the passageway one could stand on and it would fly fast toward the other side. One had to wait for it to return before they could use it again.

If it goes in there, I've lost it. By the time the step returned or Harry reached the kitchens the long way round, the figure could be on the other side of the castle.

"Stop!" Harry shouted, standing straight and pointing his wand right at the figure's chest. It froze as though shocked to see Harry here.

It's shorter than me, Harry realised, but the thick, black cloak made it impossible to conclude anything else about the figure's build.

"Don't move," Harry said, trying to sound as threatening as he could. His glasses were askew; he could feel it. The sight of him was probably more ridiculous than impressive.

Harry took a step closer; the figure was still frozen, not reaching for its wand or trying to escape. The hood was pulled very low over its face, but Harry could see a narrow chin and full lips, both smeared

with blood.

It's an injury, surely.

"Could we..." Harry too another step forward. "Could we talk about this skulking around business like two reasonable people or, er, beings?"

The figure remained silent. Harry could hear it breathe now, with ragged, deep breaths. Was that a growl?

"Harry?" The voice came from behind him. Ginny, Harry thought.

It was a mistake, a stupid terrible mistake, but Harry's head turned ever-so-slightly on instinct. It was all that it took. A split-second later, the figure jumped to the right and disappeared behind the tapestry.

"No!" Harry sent a Stunner after it, but it only hit air. He ran at the tapestry and kicked it with his foot. "Damn it! Open!" It was of no use; the passage was closed.

Ginny ran up to him, breathless. Her wand was out. "Who was that?"

Harry kicked the tapestry again. "It was the bloody vampire!" he yelled. "And now it's gone, thanks to you!"

Ginny's expression went blank. "You're joking." She stared at the tapestry with wide eyes. "It can't have been."

"Yeah, well, now we'll never know." He huffed.

Ginny's eyes flashed. "Well, excuse me. How was I supposed to know you were chatting up a vampire?"

Harry snorted. He felt quite ridiculous suddenly. "It couldn't have been a vampire. It's just... I mean, really."

"Well, did it have fangs?"

"No. It had bloody lips. Blood dripped down to its chin. And it was... rather strong."

Ginny glanced at the tapestry again and then back at Harry. "Are you pulling my leg?"

"Wish I was."

"Blimey!" Ginny breathed. "So there really is someone in Hogwarts, after us all?"

Harry narrowed his eyes at her. "What, you didn't believe me before?"

"Well, I..." Ginny coughed.

Harry shook his head at her and sighed. "Though, you know, I'm not so sure this person is dangerous. It just kept shooting Stunners at us." The word us echoed in Harry's mind. "Damn. Malfoy. I left him alone!"

Harry sprang forward, fully intending to run back to the fourth floor, but Ginny grabbed his sleeve and pulled him back.

"Harry," she said exasperatedly. "Honestly, Hermione's Galleons are completely wasted on you."

Harry blinked. "Oh. Of course." He fished out the Galleon from his pocket and tapped it with his wand, concentrating on Malfoy. The embossed word, "Okay?" appeared on the Galleon and, a few heartbeats later, it burned with Malfoy's reply: Superb.

Harry sagged in relief. He felt his mouth twitch. "He's fine," he informed Ginny.

She was staring at him. "I gathered as much."

Ginny's stare was beginning to make Harry feel uncomfortable. He stuffed the Galleon back into his pocket, even though he had been tempted to send another message, saying "Be right there." He kept his hand in his pocket, too, though, fingers wrapped around the piece of gold, so he could feel the heat in case Malfoy messaged again.

Ginny sighed suddenly. "Come on, then. Let's find Malfoy before someone eats him," she turned and set toward the staircases. "And before you combust."

"I'm not combusting," Harry said, but quickly followed her. If the cloaked person wanted to harm Malfoy, it would have done it already, Harry comforted himself. "Wait," he said, realising something. "Why are you alone?"

"Er..." Ginny looked sheepish. "We found Harper earlier and Lavender escorted him back to his common room."

"But you were supposed to go with her. That's the whole point."

Ginny bristled. "Could the person who just chased down a vampire on his own not lecture me, please?" She glared. "Besides, a threesome is really not my thing."

"Um, sorry?"

Ginny grinned and lowered her voice as though Lavender could hear her otherwise. "Oh, she always insists on taking him back alone. And then she's gone for a good long while." She gave him a pointed look. "Who am I to tell her off? If you want to tell a scarred, traumatised girl she should stop stealing some alone time with her boyfriend, go right ahead."

Harry grumbled. He wanted to do no such thing. But neither Ginny nor Lavender were supposed to wander around alone.

"Although, you know what?" Ginny's eyes widened innocently. "Since you, unlike us, are allowed to go off on your own, maybe we could switch? I could patrol with Malfoy and you with Lavender."

Harry froze on the spot. "Er, I... well, I don't think that—"

One of Ginny's eyebrows rose as though to urge him to continue.

Harry bit his lip. "Sorry. I shouldn't have lectured you. I'm sure you can handle things on your own, if need be."

"Glad we settled that, then," Ginny said dryly.

"I just think Malfoy is in danger." Harry felt the need to point that out. "If not for that, I'd be happy to—" The Galleon burned in Harry's hand. Harry took it out at once. He saw Ginny pull out her own, as well.

Outside. Below AT. Now, the embossed golden letters proclaimed.

"Astronomy Tower?" Ginny whispered. "But..."

Harry's stomach lurched. "Come on," he said, already turning. They sprinted toward the Entrance Hall as one. A student went out to the grounds, that's all, Harry told himself. But both Ginny and he got the same message and the urgency was clear.

"Harry!" Dean came running from the opposite side of the Entrance Hall; Seamus was close behind. "Someone fell! We saw it through a window!"

Heart in his throat, Harry shot a spell at the main door and it flew open; the cold night air hit his face. And then Ron and Hermione were there, too, coming up from behind.

"What happened?" Hermione cried.

"Someone fell," Dean said again. "Someone fell from the Astronomy Tower!"

"Lumos!" Harry yelled and his wand lit the dark night. More lights joined his as they sprinted alongside the castle walls, their feet crushing the frozen snow. Harry's throat and lungs protested against the cold air. Calm down, he thought, but then his eyes spotted a dark figure lying in the snow. It was not far from the place Dumbledore's body once lay broken.

Not Draco, Harry thought, running even faster, please don't let it be Draco.

It was not Draco Malfoy. When Harry reached the body, he saw a pair of brown eyes staring blankly at the sky. A pool of blood soaked the snow beneath Harper's head.

"No!" Ginny cried. "It can't be! Where is—"

A desperate, "NO!" pierced the sky as Lavender rushed forward. "No, no, no!" she screamed, falling to

her knees, next to Harper. "I just left him! I just left him in the dungeons. It can't be. It can't."

It can't, but it is. A student died, and I failed. Harry felt nauseous.

Someone brushed against Harry's shoulder. A glint of fair hair caught Harry's attention. Malfoy stood beside him, eyes fixed on Harper. His face was white as the snow.

Accio Firebolt, Harry thought, raising his wand. A window crashed in the distance and the Firebolt came zooming, flying straight at Harry. Someone yelped in shock, but Harry ignored them, jumped and mounted the broom, pulling the handle upward. It shot toward the sky and, seconds later, Harry's feet touched the stone floor of the Astronomy Tower. There was nothing else there, only memories.

Someone else whooshed above the tower and dropped down. Harry knew whom to expect. Hermione leapt from the broom, closely followed by Ron.

"Harry," Hermione whispered, rushing to Harry's side. She looked like she had no idea what to say beyond that.

"What are you thinking?" Ron asked, standing behind Hermione. "Who did this?"

"I don't know," Harry said, desperate. "But I know what we should do."

Chapter Seven

The Slytherin Bully

It was nearing midnight when Harry made his way to McGonagall's office. He skulked in front of the hospital wing until then, waiting for Madam Pomfrey to declare Harper was merely Stunned or cursed, and there was still hope for him. No such thing happened; Harper was declared dead upon arrival.

The entrance to the Headmistress's tower opened when Harry reached it. Lavender Brown burst outside,

her eyes puffy and red. She looked quite angry.

"Are you all—?" Harry began but Lavender pushed past him and hurried down the corridor. Harry almost followed her, but thought better of it and climbed the winding steps instead.

McGonagall did not look surprised to see him, but she was clearly displeased.

"You should go back to your tower, Harry. It is very late." She did not even offer to draw him a chair, clearly eager to dismiss him as soon as possible.

Harry paused next to her desk. "Professor, I think we should close down the school."

She looked up at him sharply, eyebrows raised. Harry suspected his suggestion did not particularly impress her. "We should?" There was a slight emphasise on we that made Harry bite his lip, but he did not back down.

"You said it yourself, Professor, the students are in danger. And now one of them is finally dead. Nothing we did made any difference. I realise that if we... I mean, if the school is closed we might never find out what's going on, but it's just not worth the risk. How many more have to die? How many more accidents—"

"According to Miss Brown, this was no accident," McGonagall interrupted. "And for once it seems this event, at least, is unrelated to whatever may have happened before." Harry must have looked dubious, because McGonagall sighed and added, "Apparently, there is a student who has expressed a desire to see Harper dead several times in the past. Miss Brown told me she had heard him threaten Mr Harper's life herself. Tell me, what do you know of Anthony Goldstein? He is a member of Dumbledore's Army, is he not? Do you believe him capable of something like this?"

Harry blinked. Fucking Slytherins is so popular these days. That was what Anthony had screamed at Malfoy and Harry on the stairs earlier. Anthony was jealous of some Slytherin Parvati was supposedly seeing. It could have been Harper. But Harry had thought Lavender and Harper were an item... But then it came to him: it had been Parvati, not Lavender, who had cried that Monday after the

Slytherin-Gryffindor match and Harper's terrible injury.

None of it mattered, though. Harry reached into his robe pocket, took out a wand and placed it on McGonagall's desk. "Well, there's one thing I know about Anthony Goldstein: he was quite wandless tonight. That's his wand right here; I Disarmed him earlier."

McGonagall frowned at the wand. "Disarmed him why?"

"Well... he'd been fighting with Parvati, and then he threatened Malfoy, so I—"

"He threatened Draco Malfoy, as well?"

"Yes, but—"

"But then it seems he's a rather volatile individual. And Miss Patil is his girlfriend, as I understand it?"

"Yes. Actually, no, they just broke up."

"Tonight? Right before Harper died?" She made an impatient sort of sound. "Harry, Miss Brown presented her theory rather passionately, but to be perfectly honest, I was not convinced, but it seems to me you have just confirmed it."

"But I had his wand."

"One does not need a wand to push someone off a tower. And Mr Harper's unfortunate condition would have made it hard for him to defend himself."

"But why would Goldstein go looking for Harper without a wand? How did he end up on the Astronomy Tower at the exact time Harper did? And Lavender supposedly escorted Harper back to his common room minutes before he died. How did Harper get there so soon, anyway?"

"I think you, more than anyone, Harry, know one can move very fast through the castle if they know the right hidden passageways. And I assume you are aware the Astronomy Tower is a rather popular place for midnight meetings."

That was true. Harry had been surprised to learn that students were still meeting there for late night snogging sessions even after Dumbledore's death. The place seemed more popular than ever. Which, after Harry had thought about it, almost made sense; students were always drawn to eerie places with terrible pasts.

Theoretically, it was possible Anthony had concluded Parvati might meet Harper there. Perhaps he was right. And Harper could often be found lurking all over the castle; they had never worked out how he was doing it. He could have been using hidden passageways.

"I will speak to Mr Goldstein and Miss Patil," McGonagall said. "In the meantime, let us not insist on trying to link every incident together."

Harry almost asked her whether she'd been talking to Hermione. But he understood McGonagall's worries; they were his worries as well. You're trying too hard to connect everything and blame a single powerful Dark Wizard who's behind it all. One you could catch and destroy and make it all better. Harry could not forget that. And the more he thought about it, the more he realised all these incidents could not have been caused by a single person. Out of all his senseless theories, this one made the least sense.

McGonagall dismissed him and Harry left, more troubled than ever. He slept poorly that night. He regretted not mentioning his encounter with the Hufflepuff Vampire to McGonagall, but reasoned she would merely dismiss him even sooner if he had dared to mention it. Besides, the cloaked person did not try to harm either Malfoy or Harry, not really. All it did was shoot a few Stunners their way.

It was early morning when Harry finally fell asleep. He dreamt he was clutching something tightly to his chest. Malfoy's hand, he realised, horrified. But when he looked down, he saw the hand was charred and

black as coal.

"No!" he cried in his sleep. "No! I saved you! You didn't burn!"

The hand slipped from Harry's grasp and Harry searched for it in the darkness. It's dead, he thought. It's gone. And then the dream changed suddenly; it was bright and sunny and Malfoy was there, smiling at Harry, unburned and alive. They were standing somewhere high and cold. The Astronomy Tower, Harry realised. And Malfoy stood on the edge. He laughed as he leaned backward, spread his arms and fell.

Harry woke with a cry.

It was morning and Ron was sitting on his bed, already dressed. He was tying his shoelaces, glancing at Harry, who was still catching his breath.

"What?" Harry asked when Ron glanced at him again.

Ron shrugged and fumbled with the ties on his shoes. "Nothing. You talk in your sleep."

Harry swallowed thickly. His throat felt dry. Had he called for Malfoy in his sleep? Harry said nothing and Ron dropped the subject.

Harry got dressed in record speed and hurried down to the common room. He was hoping to talk to Parvati and Lavender before he went down to breakfast, but neither was there. He had not found them in the Great Hall, either. Anthony Goldstein was also missing.

Malfoy was there, though. He looks sad, Harry thought as he watched Malfoy stare at his porridge. Was Harper his friend? Harry had no idea.

"I just can't believe Anthony would murder Harper," Hermione was saying. "He was a bad-tempered sort

of person, yes, but a murderer?"

"But, you know, I've been thinking," Ron said. "Remember the match? And how Harper was hit by a Bludger? What if that was Anthony's doing, too?"

"But the Bludgers weren't cursed, remember?" Hermione pointed out.

"Well, he could have Banished them, or something."

"From the stands? Without anyone noticing?"

"Yeah, well, all I'm saying this might not have been the first time someone tried to do in Harper."

Hermione sighed. "Now you sound like Harry."

"Hey!" Harry turned sharply toward Hermione.

"Nice of you to join the conversation. Is Slytherin table no longer interesting?" Ron asked, then yelped. Harry had a sneaking suspicion Hermione stabbed him with her fork.

Harry stood up. "I'm not really hungry," he declared and hurried out of the Great Hall. He decided to ambush Parvati before Potions. It turned out to be a simple undertaking, since she was alone, walking so slowly it looked like she was barely moving at all. She was not crying, but Harry suspected that was only because she had no more tears to shed. Her eyes were very puffy.

I should leave her alone, Harry thought as he did the opposite.

"No!" she said the moment she saw him. "Please, Harry, I just spoke to McGonagall, I can't... I don't know anything, all right."

Harry did not budge. "Nothing at all?"

She sighed. It sounded so tired Harry almost stepped aside. Almost. He couldn't, though.

"I can tell you that, yes, Tony thought I was seeing Harper, but I wasn't. I mean, I liked Harper. We studied together a few times, but... that was it. He was... His parents were Voldemort sympathisers, did you know?" She sniffed. "And sometimes he'd say the most horrible things about Muggle-borns. And about you. I could never... Not with someone like that. Never!" Her dark eyes filled with tears, but she brushed them away angrily. "And I was with Tony! But then, after Harper's accident, I felt so sorry for him. He seemed so lost. And he kept following me. Do you know I found him..." Parvati lowered her voice. "In my dormitory once? My dormitory! I have no idea how he got there. Through a window, maybe. Mental. And then when we asked the Slytherins to join the D.A., Tony went mad. He said I was hoping we'd invite Harper and I'd get to patrol with him. Honestly." She looked away. "I just... I was actually hoping that if we got some Slytherins in D.A. they'd manage to restrain Harper. That worked out well, didn't it?" she said bitterly.

"And you think Anthony may have—"

"No!" she said sharply. "Tony's... he can be such a git. But he's not a murderer, Harry. He's not. You know, last year, when the Carrows wanted all of us to learn the Cruciatus Curse, he'd always get sick and throw up. He's all talk, but he wouldn't hurt a fly, he wouldn't."

Harry was not sure what to think. Sometimes people could seem harmless when they were not.

"And why would he go up to the Astronomy Tower?" Parvati asked. "He hates that place. And so do I. That's where Dumbledore died. He just... He couldn’t, Harry. He couldn't. Not him."

She's not trying to convince me that's true, Harry realised. She's trying to convince herself.

"What did McGonagall say?" Harry asked.

Parvati sniffed again. "Tony said he went straight back to his common room, but no one knows exactly when he returned. He has no alibi. McGonagall suspended him. He'll have to be questioned by the Aurors... They called his parents. They'll have to take him home." Parvati fell silent, staring at the floor. "I miss Lavender," she said suddenly, then shook her head, said, "Sorry," and ran past him.

Harry wished he felt any wiser after the conversation with Parvati, but he still had no idea what to believe. Irrationally, he wanted to talk to Malfoy, though that wish made no sense since this time Malfoy had not been involved. Except Harper fell from the Astronomy Tower just like Dumbledore. Harry frowned at his thoughts. If he tried hard enough, he could link everything back to Malfoy. But that could not be right. Maybe that was his problem. Maybe he never should have focused on Malfoy at all. Maybe it was only blinding him. Maybe Malfoy knew nothing. Not even about Tommy Wright.

"Sandwich?"

Harry turned at the sound of Ron's voice. Ron stood behind him, with a sandwich in his hand.

"You didn't eat much," Ron said. "So I thought..." He offered the sandwich to Harry. "I brought you two, but I ate one."

Harry smiled, bemused, and accepted the sandwich. "Did Hermione send you? She worries too much."

Ron grimaced. "She didn't. I just... I just didn't want you to think I'm angry with you or something."

"Er, why would I think that?"

Strangely, Ron did look a bit annoyed, then. "Dunno," he said and kicked the floor with his shoe. "But I'm

not. Just thought you should know."

"But why would you—"

"Oh, just eat the bloody sandwich, Harry!" Ron snapped. "Come on, we'll be late for Potions."

Harry followed him, utterly confused. Ron changed the subject and complained about Potions and bemoaned the fact that their lessons were not cancelled.

"Dumbledore would have cancelled lessons if a student died," he said. "Give everyone a chance to mourn, you know?"

Dumbledore might close the school, too, Harry thought. Or maybe he would not. Harry wished he could talk to his portrait at least. But it would be very rude indeed to address Dumbledore and ask for his opinion with McGonagall in the room. The portraits were there to advise the Headmistress; Dumbledore must have given her his input already. What he knew, she knew. It was only a portrait, anyway. A little more than a memory. It was not truly Dumbledore.

The day was spent discussing Harper's demise and ignoring schoolwork. Even the teachers seemed distracted. Most people seemed sure Harper's death was an accident; after all, everyone knew Harper was not in the right state of mind and was fond of wandering about. But then the news that Anthony Goldstein was suspended and sent home spread through the castle like wildfire. No one knew the particulars but many had quickly connected the dots and declared Goldstein was the murderer. That had, unfortunately, resulted in many students looking at the D.A. members suspiciously. Dumbledore's Army was supposed to protect the students and now one of their own had turned out to be quite dangerous. Zacharias Smith had been one of their own, too, once, but fortunately, others did not know anything about that.

The thought did trouble Harry, though. Two members of Dumbledore's Army had tried, or in Goldstein's case, succeeded, to murder two Slytherins students. Stop linking everything together, Harry reminded himself every so often, but his brain refused to listen.

His brain refused to listen to other reasonable suggestions, too. Such as: Stop staring at Malfoy. That one was even harder to obey. Malfoy was not staring back and Harry was beginning to worry. You'll se him tonight, he would tell himself and then quickly squashed the puzzling joy that thought gave him.

Eight o'clock found Harry in the Gryffindor common room with Ron, Hermione, Seamus, Dean and Neville, discussing the likelihood of the Hufflepuff Vampire being behind everything.

Harry only half-heartedly participated. First, because he simply could not believe there was a powerful creature living secretly in Hogwarts, trying to kill them all. It had to have been a student, Harry reasoned. It was shorter than him, it seemed young and agile, and it knew the castle well. Why they skulked around in secret, he had no idea. The more Harry thought about it, the more he believed the blood on its lips was an injury and its strength was just something Harry had imagined. The person had surprised him when it jumped and Harry had stumbled and fell. It need not have had supernatural strength to accomplish that, he had to admit. And it had only ever aimed to Stun, never seriously injure Harry or Malfoy. It was likely that this person had Stunned Demelza Robins, who had first reported the hooded figure, but not Tommy Wright. The Stunners were not that powerful.

And second, because he was too busy checking his watch, waiting for nine o'clock. Malfoy had refused to look at Harry once today and that was as irritating as it was troubling. Normally, Harry would catch Malfoy staring at him at least thrice a day.

Ginny walked into the common room and looked around, spotting Harry immediately. She gave him an uncertain sort of smile.

"Something wrong?" Harry asked loudly and everyone looked at her; Harry thought he saw Neville go for his wand. There, I'm not the only crazy person here, Harry thought. Everyone's on edge, waiting for more bad news.

She started. "No! Sorry, no."

"Good," Ron said. "I just had dinner. Don't feel like going around chasing vampires or murderous students."

"And how many have you chased down so far?" Hermione asked.

Ron said something snappish in return, but Harry had stopped listening. Ginny was staring at him, hesitating, before she inclined her head to the left, as if to say, "Come here."

Harry got up immediately and walked to her side. "What's wrong?"

Ginny was looking past him, however. "Oi! Private conversation, you lot! Do you mind?"

Harry turned to see all his friends hastily look away. He looked back to Ginny, even more curious now. "Did something happen?"

Ginny shook her head. "No, it's just that I did a lap around the grounds just now and I saw Malfoy at the pitch." Harry's heart skipped a beat and Ginny added, "He's fine. He was sitting on a bench, alone. I mean, it's not past curfew yet, but it's odd he went there. Thought you'd want to know."

"That is odd," Harry said. Wouldn't that be the last place Malfoy would want to visit alone?

Ginny was looking at him expectantly, as though she knew more than she was saying.

"Anything else?" Harry asked.

"No, no," she said quickly.

"Right. Okay." She was still staring. "Er," Harry said, "maybe I should go to see... I mean, he shouldn't be alone."

"Of course."

"Especially not there."

"Obviously."

Harry glanced back to the fireplace. Everyone would wonder where he was going and he had no idea what to say to them. Perhaps sneaking out would be the wisest course of action.

"I'll go, then," Harry said and tried to get past Ginny, but she sighed and pulled at his sleeve. She keeps doing that, Harry thought, annoyed.

"Harry," she said. "It's freezing outside."

"Oh." He was wearing a shirt, trousers, and not much else. "I'll get a cloak," he said sheepishly and hurried up to the dormitory. He armed himself with a cloak and gloves, scarf and a knit hat and picked up his Firebolt as an afterthought, vaguely planning to use it as an excuse.

Ginny must have retreated to her dormitory, but everyone else looked at him curiously when he descended the stairs.

"Brilliant idea, Harry!" Ron stood up the moment he saw him. "We have a little time before nine."

"But it's still too late to go out flying," Hermione said.

"Nah," Dean argued. "Wouldn't mind doing a few laps myself." He stood up, too, and it looked like

Seamus was about to follow him.

Harry was horrified. Though, he should not have been. The most important thing was to make sure Malfoy was safe; he should not be out alone so late. No one should. If they all went outside, then the problem was solved.

Nonetheless, Harry still felt like punching every single one of them.

"I'm not going out flying," he said and was treated to several odd looks; after all, he was holding his Firebolt. "I just..." What could he possibly say? Except the truth. "Ginny saw Malfoy at the pitch. I was just going to get him."

Ron plopped down on the armchair immediately, with an exasperated sort of expression. Dean and Seamus looked confused, however, and Neville asked, "He didn't fall down again, did he?"

"No," Harry said. "But he shouldn't be alone out there so late."

"It's eight o'clock!" Dean sounded indignant.

"Well, yes, but it's the pitch and someone tried to kill Malfoy before. And another student died yesterday."

"You know, you're right, Harry," Neville said. "Maybe we should all go." He stood up. "And we could sweep the grounds, see if anyone else is out there."

"Good idea, Neville," Seamus said and sprang to his feet.

Despairing, Harry admitted defeat.

"It's not good idea," Ron said suddenly. "If we all go outside now, Malfoy will realise we're there to chase him back inside. He'll just get spiteful and contrary."

"So what?" Dean huffed.

Hermione intervened. "But didn't we invite the Slytherins to join the D.A. so we could show them we don't exist just to keep them in check? But if all of you go outside now, that's exactly what it will look like. If one of you goes, then you could pretend you just went out flying."

"But..." Dean looked even more confused. "Won't he conclude that when he sees Harry, anyway? Besides, we can just ask him to do a sweep of the grounds with us. No need to shove him back into the castle."

My side has the worst arguments, Harry thought sadly. "Fine, fine," he said, "let's all go."

Dean sat down with a huff. "Well, now I don't want to."

Seamus sat, too. "You lot..." He eyed Ron, Hermione and Harry. "You're mental."

Neville hesitated. "Need me to go with you, Harry?"

Harry shook his head, daring to hope. "No. I'll just try to get him back inside and come back."

Neville sat down reluctantly and Harry breathed a little easier.

"Come back before nine," Ron said, glancing at Harry. "Or else."

"Yes, mother." Harry smiled, mouthed, "Thank you," and hurried outside.

Now they'll discuss my general weirdness, Harry thought. He could not blame them, exactly, but they did not understand. Harry wanted to talk to Malfoy. You could have done that after nine, an obnoxiously logical voice in his head reminded him. But Malfoy was at the pitch, a place that held terrible memories for him. He must have been feeling wretched. The last thing he needed was five Gryffindors zooming above his head.

The moment Harry stepped into the chill, he mounted his broom. He hoped he would reach Malfoy before the cold air froze his nose. His scarf and hat did little to protect his face from the freezing wind. There were charms he could cast, but by the time he took out his wand and remembered which one to use, he could reach the pitch thrice.

It was easy to spot Malfoy. He was sitting on one of the low benches in the south corner of the stands. The pitch was lit by several tall lamps. Their light was soft, but they were bright enough to illuminate a portion of the stands and Malfoy's white-blond head.

The sight gave Harry a pause. He had never fully appreciated how difficult it would have been for Smith to hit Malfoy from the stands during night time. If the lamps were lit, the light would have been blinding for anyone standing below. Malfoy could see Smith, but Smith could not see Malfoy.

Harry angled his broom and shot downward. He landed softly a few feet away from Malfoy.

"Hey," he said, dismissing his earlier plan to say, "Malfoy, is that you? Fancy meeting you here," which, he concluded, would have been a bit too obvious.

It probably would not have mattered, however. He doubted Malfoy had even heard what Harry had said. Malfoy jumped a little, eyes going wide.

"Potter?" he whispered.

A curious sense of déjà vu washed over Harry. The last time Malfoy spoke his name, looking so shocked, they were on the seventh floor and Draco was breathless and flushed. He had looked lost then; he looked lost now. He had nearly died in the Room of Requirement; he had nearly died on the pitch. Sometimes I go there, Malfoy had told him that Sunday before they found Tommy Wright. Why was he drawn to the places where he had nearly lost his life?

Harry took a careful step forward, then another and another, and he sat down next to Malfoy. "What are you doing here?"

Malfoy blinked, took a breath and composed himself. "What are you doing here?"

Here we go again, moving backward.

"Stalking you, obviously," Harry said.

That earned him a small smile. "You should stop. It's unhealthy."

"Yeah, well, I'm a bit touched in the head, or so I'm told."

Another smile. "Do you really have nothing better to do?"

"Better? Probably. Nothing half as fun, though."

"I'm always pleased to amuse." Malfoy's tone was flat, as though he was bored by the conversation. Harry wished he could say something fun and make him smile again. Malfoy looked past him, toward the

castle. "It's very high, you know."

"What is?" Harry looked around in confusion.

"The Astronomy Tower."

It was high; Harry could not see the top. The numerous Hogwarts windows shone yellow, but the tips of the towers that rose in the air were dark.

"So very high," Malfoy said, "but, that night, I was flying even higher, looking down at the castle."

Harry turned to study Malfoy's pale face.

Malfoy was staring at him. "Why didn't I die?"

Your head's too thick, was on the tip of Harry's tongue, but perhaps it was not the time for jokes. "I don't know. You had your wand with you. Maybe you've managed a spell, even if it wasn't in your hand."

"Harper had a wand, too."

"Harper was... unwell."

"I don't remember trying to cast any spells. It all happened so fast." Malfoy looked up at the dark sky above the pitch.

Harry could not resist. "Were the lamps lit?"

Malfoy looked back at him. "What?"

"The lamps." Harry pointed at them helpfully. "Were they lit? Could you see the pitch and the stands from above?"

"I don't know. I don't remember. What does it matter?"

"I was just wondering how Smith could have hit you all the way from here. It would have been hard to hit a fast-moving target during the daylight, more so during night time, and if all these lamps were lit, it would be almost impossible..." Harry trailed off when he caught the look on Malfoy's face.

He's cross with me again.

"What's wrong with you, Potter?"

"Er, what? Why?"

"Is that all you want to talk about? About how Smith is innocent? How I know something, I'm just refusing to tell you? Clearly I know so much, being evil and all." He sprang to his feet, but so did Harry.

"Malfoy, we've been through this! I don't think any of it is your fault. I'm just worried because I think someone's trying—"

"So am I!" Malfoy shouted. "But can't you just... Can you stop playing Auror for five fucking minutes? I'm not your case. I refuse to be your case. If that's all you want, go stalk someone else." With that, Malfoy shoved past him, nearly sending him flying over one of the benches, and strode briskly away.

Harry would have followed him if he had not been so confused. If that's all you want. That was what Harry wanted. He wanted to make sure Malfoy stayed alive. Was that so terrible? It is. Unfair and cruel,

Hermione's voice echoed in his mind. You'll make him think you reciprocate his feelings. Was that what Harry had done?

If that's all you want.

Malfoy's expression had changed so abruptly when Harry had begun to question him. Before that he had looked so vulnerable. He wanted comfort, not questions, Harry realised. Malfoy had wanted comfort back at the hospital wing, too, but Harry had only offered questions.

If that's all you want.

But it wasn't. He did want to comfort him, too. Harry had wanted it before, as well, when Malfoy had slipped on his slippers and fell into Harry's arms; Harry would have been ready to stay like that, with his arms around Malfoy, for as long as it took. For as long as Malfoy needed it.

But Malfoy did not know that; he thought all Harry wanted was to ask questions. Perhaps I should tell him. It's not too late.

Harry spun around and ran after Malfoy. He caught him near the exit, by the massive, tall archway that led to the pitch.

"Wait!" Harry grabbed Malfoy's arm and pulled him back, trying to make him turn.

Malfoy jumped backward as though burned. "I told you to stop touching me, Potter!" he spat, face contorted.

If all you want to do is question me, Harry heard, though it was not spoken aloud. What do I want? Save him, comfort him, Harry replied readily. Was that all?

Malfoy was frozen still, frowning. Harry must have been staring at him for a bit too long.

"What?" Malfoy asked, looking unsure. His cheeks and nose were pink from the cold, and so were his lips. They must have felt cold, too. They had been warm in the hospital wing, pressed against Harry's cheek. If Winky had not showed up, Malfoy would have kissed him. Would I let him or would I push him away?

You should work out what you want first, Ron had told him, and then do something about it.

"Potter?" Malfoy's voice was even lower this time, almost fearful. I must look mad.

I am mad, Harry realised. That was the only explanation for his sudden surge of annoyance directed at poor Winky. If she had not interrupted them, Harry would know whether or not he would have pushed Malfoy away.

Malfoy took a careful step closer. "Did someone Petrify you?" He frowned. "Did I?" Malfoy's hand was in front of Harry's face suddenly, waving. Harry caught it, tugged a little. Malfoy let himself be pulled closer, probably too surprised to fight.

"That's not all I want," Harry said. Or at least he thought he said it. He could not recognise his own voice. It was scratchy and low.

Malfoy's hand was cold in Harry's grasp, even through Harry's gloves. Malfoy wore no hat, no scarf, no gloves; he looked cold, frozen, only his eyes were warm, which was odd; that had always been the coldest part of Malfoy.

Harry's gaze fell to Malfoy's lips, was drawn there. I can't kiss him. I can't kiss Malfoy.

He couldn’t, he shouldn't, but he did. He must have leaned closer, he must have inclined his head, he wasn't sure, but, somehow, his lips were pressed against Malfoy's. The world lurched, tilted, spun, then

righted itself abruptly and Malfoy's bottom lip still rested against Harry's. A sound escaped Malfoy's throat, that needy, desperate moan Harry had heard once before, but this time Harry could feel it; this time Malfoy moaned into Harry's mouth and the heat of it pulled him closer; as though magnetised, Harry's body pressed flush against Malfoy's, arms circling and closing around Malfoy's body.

Nothing had ever felt better, but then Harry changed his mind. His heart lurched into his throat when he realised there was more: Malfoy's tongue slid past Harry's lips, warm and real, pushing firmly as though it meant to stay. Harry would not have minded, even as his stomach clenched as though in fear, as though the reality of it was too much to bear; Harry's lips parted and another moan rang in his ears. Mine, he thought.

And then he felt fingers threading through his hair, caressing, tugging, making his head tilt to the side. The kiss deepened, Harry's tongue following Malfoy's movements, imitating, experimenting, as though it had forgotten what to do. It never really knew; kissing had never felt like this, like it was more important than breathing, like it did not matter what he did and how he did it, just as long he never stopped.

But then Malfoy stopped, pulled back, breathing so heavily, it seemed as though he was drowning.

"Don't," Harry whispered, panicking, terrified Malfoy would stop kissing him altogether and run away. He pressed his lips against Malfoy's lips again, catching only the corner of his mouth, and pushed him backward, pushed and walked until Malfoy's back hit the stone archway, where Harry could trap him and make sure he did not run away. But Malfoy's hands had never left Harry's hair—and where was Harry's knit hat, anyway?—and Harry thought maybe Malfoy wasn't planning to run away at all. Harry pressed closer against him, just in case.

"Potter..." Malfoy murmured, but Harry only seized the moment to kiss Malfoy again, to push his tongue past Malfoy's warmed, parted lips.

And then the most amazing thing happened. Malfoy's thigh slid upward, between Harry's legs, pressing, and Harry moved his hips ever-so-slightly, the resulting pleasure so intense he had to tear his mouth away from Malfoy's, suck in a deep breath and press his palm against the wall behind to keep himself upright.

"Potter," Malfoy said again, but this time it sounded like a wondrous moan.

He's staring at me, Harry thought, distracted, but Malfoy stopped staring just then, and instead his fingers attacked Harry's cloak, parting the folds and slipping inside, over Harry's stomach and hips. Then Malfoy's hands gripped Harry's buttocks, so roughly and suddenly, Harry cried out and thrust forward, the pressure against his crotch making him see stars.

It was impossible to stop moving. Malfoy's hands gripped and squeezed, massaging Harry's arse through his trousers, pulling him closer, forcing Harry to rub against Malfoy's thigh, then push back into Malfoy's grip, over and over.

Malfoy's mouth found Harry's neck, kissing and sucking the sensitive skin there, as much as Harry’s scarf allowed. Harry felt Malfoy's teeth graze the skin just below his ear; the threat of it made him buck, the pinch of teeth that followed drew a low moan out of his throat.

Malfoy's fingers slipped lower, squeezing the lower part of Harry's buttocks, where they met his thighs, then burrowed between them; Harry could feel their firm pressure against his anus; the obscenity of it set his cheeks on fire even as his balls tightened and his body convulsed.

It was much too short; even as waves of pleasure washed over him, Harry was desperate to stop them, saddened it was over. We can't stop. We have to do it again.

Malfoy was shivering against him, panting against Harry's neck. The sight of his blond head buried there drew a smile to Harry's lips, though that was not the most logical reaction. Harry moved to touch Malfoy's hair, but then stopped and first pulled away his glove with his teeth, which was harder than he imagined it would be. When his hand was finally free, he buried his fingers into Malfoy's hair. It was cold and damp, but the skin beneath felt warm.

An unexpected surge of protectiveness left him reeling. Malfoy had nearly died how many times by now? Making sure he stayed alive had never been more important. He's afraid, worried, he had said as much; he expects me to save him. I must.

Harry's fingers found one cold earlobe and Harry bent down to bite it lightly before whispering, "You know, Malfoy, your ears will fall off if you don't wear—"

Malfoy's head rose so suddenly, it smacked Harry's nose. "What are you—?" Harry said, but his mouth fell shut when he saw Malfoy's face. He had that wild look about him again, as though he was shocked to see Harry. But he could not have been; surely he hadn't forgotten who was here with him.

Malfoy's shock turned to anger and he growled as he shoved Harry violently away. Shocked, Harry stumbled, slipped and fell backward on the ground.

"What are you doing?" Harry shouted, even as his earlier euphoria evaporated and the reality set in; he was lying on the cold ground, his trousers a sticky mess and his neck throbbing, and Malfoy looked down at him as though Harry was a particularly nasty bug. What did you expect? It's Malfoy.

The sense of loss consumed him, but it did not stop him from getting up and glaring. "So was it as good for you as it was for me?" he asked, more resentful than sneering.

Malfoy looked toward the pitch, at Harry, down at himself, as though he was not sure where he was, or even who he was. Harry's anger eased somewhat. "Malfoy?"

Malfoy shook his head. "Shut up. Just shut up. You're not even—"

Harry did not get to hear what he wasn't; Malfoy turned on his heels and bolted. Harry stared after him, at a complete loss. He considered following him, but squashed that thought quickly. Malfoy had clearly regretted what had happened. Who knew what he wanted to say? You're not even a pure-blood. You're not even a girl. Harry knew what a was: an idiot. A complete idiot. What was he thinking? Kissing Malfoy, bloody humping his leg?

Harry's cheeks burned as he bent down to pick up his woollen hat and then went back to the pitch to get his Firebolt. His pants were sticky; he would have spelled the mess away, but he was reluctant to point his wand at his crotch. Especially now that his hands were shaking from anger.

"I regret it, too," Harry informed the empty Quidditch pitch. Except he didn't, he couldn't, no matter how much he tried he could not regret a single second, a single kiss. If he closed his eyes, he could still feel it: Malfoy's lips, his fingers in Harry's hair, his hot breath against Harry's neck, his palms kneading Harry's arse.

How long have I wanted this?

He could not say, but it had not begun tonight, that much he knew.

Harry walked back to the castle, not trusting himself to fly. His sadness made him angry, his anger made him sad. He was stuck in that loop, unable to break free.

When he reached the Fat Lady, he paused and made a conscious effort to compose himself. People will not guess you've been snogging (and humping) Draco Malfoy on the Quidditch Pitch. Just don't look guilty.

"My, my, now there's a love bite."

Harry looked up at the smiling Fat Lady in shock, then quickly pulled his scarf up to his chin.

"Ah! Secret love affairs! Now those were the days," she cried, eyes going misty. "But do be careful, dear. Love makes fools of us all, and last night..." She leaned down. "It cost a young man his life."

"Applesauce," Harry grumbled and the Fat Lady said, "You've been warned," before the portrait swung open.

The common room was packed with students, but it was almost nine and most of the D.A. members must have been checking the dormitories. Ginny was sitting by the window, however, and Harry went

straight to her table.

"Ginny," he said and she jumped, snapped the book she had been reading shut and placed her hand over it protectively. "Er, sorry. Didn't mean to startle you." She was clearly reading something private; he could have waited, or maybe gone upstairs to his dormitory and changed his underpants.

"It's fine." She forced a smile, then frowned. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." Harry nodded. "I just wanted to ask if... could we switch? I'd like to patrol with Lavender tonight."

She did no look pleased. "What? Why?"

"I want to talk to her, that's all." That was true, at least. He also wanted very much to avoid Malfoy.

"Well, then talk to her and... go pick up Malfoy later."

"Please, Ginny." Harry made an effort to look as pathetic as he could.

Ginny narrowed her eyes. "Honestly, Harry."

"It's a huge favour, I know. Patrolling with Malfoy won't be easy. But please, just tonight. I'll owe you. Name your terms, whatever you want."

Ginny snorted. "Do you know you still owe me that Galleon?"

Damn. "Sorry. I forgot. I can go get it right now."

"Oh, never mind the stupid Galleon, Harry. I was just pointing out..." She sighed. "All right. But I do want something."

Harry was so relieved he felt like dancing, wet pants and all. "Anything."

"Anything? Good. What I want is for you to stop asking me favours. And stop... whinging at me so I end up offering favours. Just stop. For a year, at least."

Harry winced. "I... Done."

"I mean it."

"Done. I swear."

She studied him suspiciously. "And I want your Firebolt."

Harry froze, utterly shocked, and Ginny burst out laughing.

"Your face!" she wheezed. It took a while for her to calm down. "I'm only half-joking, though."

Harry recovered from his shock and grumbled, "You want only half of it, then?"

"No, I just want to borrow it sometimes."

Harry forced himself to nod and say, "Sure." It sounded a bit strained to his own ears.

Ginny sighed. "Not often and I'll be very careful, I promise."

"Yeah, okay. Just don't... crash, anywhere. Deliberately."

She rolled her eyes. "I won't. Nor will I use it to hunt vampires late at night."

"Er, sorry?"

Ginny's gaze slipped to Harry's neck and then back up to his eyes.

Harry quickly shoved the Firebolt toward her. "Here, you can have it now. So you can go out flying tomorrow morning."

She took it, her eyebrows raised, and Harry nodded at her and fled to his dormitory.

The first thing he did was Conjure a mirror and examine his neck. It was no wonder both the Fat Lady and Ginny had noticed: Malfoy had mangled it. Several dark bruises covered his skin all the way up to his ear. He vividly remembered Malfoy sucking on his neck, but he did not think it would leave so many bruises.

I should Vanish them, he thought, caressing them instead. He snapped out of it soon enough, and pressed the tip of his wand to his neck. "Episkey," he said and the bruises were no more. Then he ran to the bathroom for a quick shower, changed into a fresh set of clothes and hurried to do his rounds around the dormitories before he descended to the common room.

Lavender was already there, waiting for him, looking sulky. She scowled at him when he reached her.

Harry forced a smile and said lightly, "I'm not the worst possible partner, am I?"

"Among bottom five, at least." She had said it like she meant it and then turned to climb out of the portrait hole.

This will be fun, Harry thought, but quickly reminded himself it was his idea in the first place. I do need to talk to her. What he needed even more was to avoid Malfoy. He could not help feeling saddened by the thought. This could have been a fun, if unproductive, patrol night. Anger reared its ugly head, then, and Harry's thoughts fell into by now familiar loop. Bloody snogging, bloody relationships. It's just not meant for me. Give me a nice girl, who likes me, and I'll fuck it up. Give me a git, who hates me, and I'll fuck it up. Though, Malfoy was the one who had fucked it up earlier. Except Malfoy was a git and that was what gits did, so really, it was still Harry's fault; he should have predicted the result.

"Down, not up."

Harry blinked at Lavender. "What?"

"We're on the ground floor. Ginny and Malfoy are on the fourth floor."

"Oh. Of course." Harry had attempted to abandon the staircases and turn left on the fourth floor. He hastily followed Lavender but not before he looked left and right, hoping to see a glimpse of blond or red hair in one of the corridors. You're avoiding Malfoy, he reminded himself, as he craned his neck.

Lavender gave him a calculating sort of look when he caught up with her. "You know, I heard an interesting conversation earlier," she said.

"Oh?" This was good. If she started gossiping, then it would be easier to ask her questions, without it looking like he was prying or accusing of her of anything. "About what?"

She quirked an eyebrow. "You."

Harry tensed. "Hmm," he said noncommittally, tempted to demand she told him everything at once, but then she might not. He had a sneaking suspicion he knew which conversation she had heard. "Was it really that interesting?"

"Well, no. But it was amusing." She looked at him sideways. "Apparently, your friends think you're a bit unhinged."

"Well, I am." She must have heard Ron, Hermione, Dean, Seamus and Neville discuss him after he went to get Malfoy. Harry could not blame any of them for thinking his behaviour had been odd. I didn't plan to snog him even then, did I? He had not planned it, but he must have wanted it.

"Probably. But it seems they've all concluded you're a bit obsessed with keeping Draco Malfoy alive because you saved him once and now you want to redeem him. And if you fail at both, it would mean everything you did in the past meant nothing."

Harry had to smile. Hermione must have said that and everyone else was forced to agree. There was truth in Hermione's conclusion, Harry supposed, though he saw no reason to analyze why someone wanted to save a person's life.

"Poor things," Lavender added sweetly. "They were all forced to listen Hermione Granger's philosophical explanations and the truth is all you wanted was to go outside to snog him."

Harry almost choked on his tongue in his hurry to say, "What?" He forced a laugh. "That's ridiculous! Who on earth told you that?" Was it the Fat Lady? Ginny? They saw the bruises on his neck, but would they assume they were left there by Malfoy?

"Oh, please," Lavender scoffed. "No one told me. I have eyes, you know."

Harry was in shock. "You saw us?" Lavender laughed and Harry realised his mistake at once. "I mean," he added, "you couldn't have, obviously, since there was nothing to see."

She snorted. "Obviously."

Harry stopped to glare at her. "I did not snog Malfoy, nor would I want to." He had to convince her before she ran around the school to tell everyone. It was no one's business and it was unlikely to happen ever again. "He's a git. And he was a Death Eater. And he hates me. And I'm not crazy about him, either." Not even a little. "And he's... a bloke," he remembered to add. That was an important argument to put forth, as well.

"Ugh. Merlin." Lavender sounded disgusted. "You're just like her."

Harry was temporarily distracted. "Er, like who?"

"Parvati." She huffed before adding in a falsetto voice, "Oh Lav! I could never. Not Harper. He's evil. And his parents are evil. And he's a Slytherin. How dare you suggest it? Not me. Not ever."

Harry was quite affronted. On his behalf as well as Parvati's, who had been so distressed since Harper had died. "Sounds like she was in a complicated situation. There's no need to scoff at it."

"Complicated?" She had nearly hissed the question; her eyes flashed. "Oh yes! Poor her! Two guys fighting for her, wanting her, and she didn't know who to choose. And poor you! All those girls pining for you and now Malfoy, too. How will you ever survive? You know what's complicated, Harry?" She pushed her blond hair away suddenly, revealing her ugly scars. They stretched over her cheek, down to her neck. "This is complicated," she spat and turned away, muttering about whingers.

Harry ran after her and caught her arm. She stopped and glared at him.

"I know a thing or two about scars, Lavender," Harry said. "Mine may be small, but it cost me my

parents."

That struck a chord. Lavender's eyes turned bright, and Harry was immediately sorry for what he said. Had he not almost thrown a tantrum earlier because Malfoy had left a few bruises on his neck and it had immediately complicated his life? Bruises made by kisses, which Harry had Vanished with a wave of his wand. Lavender's scars were made by a monster and she was stuck with them forever. She had every right to scoff at his complications.

"I'm sorry." She sniffed. "I know nothing was ever easy for you and you had a lunatic trying to murder you, but I just get so tired of hearing everyone go on and on about their love problems like they're the worst things that could happen to them. And they're not."

"No, no, I'm sorry," Harry said quickly. "You're right. Things were complicated for me before, but now I'm just creating complications." And there's someone in the castle trying to kill us all, and that sounds complicated, too, Harry thought, but perhaps that was better left unmentioned. He was also reluctant to point out that Harper's love problem really was the worst thing that could have happened to him. Perhaps she was already feeling guilty about that; there was no need to add to it. "Is that why..." Harry hesitated. He was pretty sure he knew the answer to the question he wanted to ask, but he still had to ask. Stop playing Auror for five minutes, Potter, Malfoy's voice rang in Harry's head. Lavender, like Malfoy, could probably use comfort more than questioning. But no, I can't stop playing Auror for five minutes, Harry told the Malfoy in his head, this is important. "So, were you just using Harper as an excuse to go off patrolling on your own? To avoid hearing people go on and on about their problems?"

The question seemed to surprise her, but she said, "Can you blame me? First I had to listen to Neville talk about Hannah and his bloody plants, and then I got stuck with Ginny Weasley, who never shuts up and only ever talks about Quidditch. Oh no, my plant looks sick. Oh dear, will I ever be a professional Quidditch player? Boo-hoo."

"Right. So, you would find Harper, take him to his common room and then patrol alone?" She narrowed her eyes at him and Harry added, "I mean, I'm just trying to work out how much time Harper had to get to the Astronomy Tower and you were the last person to see him alive..."

"Are you questioning me?"

"No, no." Harry shook his head. "I was just thinking out loud, that's all."

"Well, good." She crossed her arms on her chest. "Because Anthony Goldstein murdered Harper. There's no doubt about that. Do you know, once, I heard him say, 'One day, Harper will wander off, end up on a tower and fall off,' and the thought clearly cheered him up."

"A bit silly of him to say that and then go do it."

"He's an idiot! I'm glad we agree."

"He did manage to find Harper. On a tower. That's a bit convenient, isn't it?"

"Maybe he dragged him there."

"But that's the thing. He didn't have much time. I saw him before and it all happened soon afterward. And you say you just left Harper in the dungeons..."

Lavender shifted her weight. "Well, I left Harper there maybe half an hour before. So, I suppose, technically, he, at least, had enough time to reach the Astronomy Tower. Though, I don't know how he managed it. I checked the charms cast on the Slytherin common room door and it would be difficult for anyone to go through unnoticed."

Malfoy's charms, Harry thought, and then: I should stop thinking about him.

"And you didn't see anyone—" Harry broke off when something scorched his thigh. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the burning Galleon.

"Did something happen?" Lavender asked. "What does it say?"

Harry stared at the embossed, golden letters in confusion. "It just says, The Dead Room."

"The what?"

Harry grumbled. "I don't know why no one ever signs these messages— " Harry froze. "The Room of Requirement! It has to be." But who would call it The Dead Room? And why did they want him to go there? Malfoy was Harry's first thought, but it could not have been him. He was on the fourth floor and he knew what the Room was called. Harry whirled around, to go back up the staircases, nonetheless.

"Harry, wait!" Lavender called. "Do you think it's an emergency? Maybe I should stay here. Patrol." She looked a little too shifty for Harry's liking.

"No, come on. Maybe it is an emergency. Maybe I'll need backup."

She looked displeased but she followed him. Harry quickened his pace, climbing as fast as he could up the stairs. No matter how many times he told himself it could not have been Malfoy's message, all he could think was, I shouldn't have switched with Ginny. Had he not been obsessed with getting Malfoy to join the D.A. so he could keep an eye on him more easily? So he could protect him? One little unfortunate snog and Harry had abandoned him. He should have just sucked it up, straightened his priorities. Their joint patrol would have been awkward, but so what? Some things were more important than snogging dramas, as Lavender had pointed out earlier.

Don't you dare die on me, Malfoy. Don't you dare get hurt.

Harry was breathless when he reached the seventh floor. Lavender was not, even though she had overtaken him at one point. Harry planned to reflect on his fitness, or lack thereof, later, when he was not busy trying to catch up with Lavender.

"Ginny!" Lavender cried and shot toward the end of the corridor.

Harry's heart stopped beating. Ahead, Ginny lay on the floor, a mass of slumped black robes and ever-recognizable Weasley red hair. Harry all but flew toward her.

Lavender had already turned her around, revealing Ginny's pale face. Her eyes were closed.

"Ginny, no," Lavender moaned.

"She's fine!" Harry shouted, though he had no reason to know it for certain, but the alternative was too horrible to contemplate. Harry took out his wand. "Rennervate!" he cried. When Ginny gasped, her brown eyes opening, Harry thought he might just faint from relief. He knelt down beside her.

"Ginny?" he whispered, helping her sit up. "What happened? Are you all right? Hexed? Cursed?"

She looked around groggily. "I... I don't know. Where am I?"

"The seventh floor," Lavender said. "How did you get here? You were supposed to—"

Ginny's eyes widened suddenly and she struggled to get up, but she was dizzy and disoriented and both Lavender and Harry had to help her stand. Ginny clutched her head. "Where's Malfoy? Did you find him?" She looked up at Harry.

The worry in her eyes seemed to seep into Harry and explode there, stealing his breath and making his heart lurch in his chest. "Why? Is he missing? What happened? Is he all right?" He looked down the corridor, hoping this was a joke and Malfoy would jump out from behind a corner and laugh at him.

"I don't know," Ginny said, looking around as though she, too, was expecting Malfoy to just appear there. "Someone must have Stunned me. I think I heard them yell Stupefy. And then... We must have been

ambushed. Did you find Peterson?"

Harry, who was still holding the Galleon in his hand and was busy sending Malfoy a message, looked up from the words, Where are you? to stare at Ginny in confusion.

"Peterson? Jamie Peterson?" Harry clutched the Galleon, willing it to burn. Please answer, please.

"Yes. He was missing," Ginny said, still clutching her head. "Malfoy was worried when I picked him up. He said there were four students missing and he knew what they were up to. He kept saying it was his fault. Honestly, I had no idea what he was on about, but he said we had to find Jamie Peterson. We sent the kid a message, but he didn't reply, so we ran up here because Malfoy thought Peterson could be in the Room of Requirement."

The moment Ginny mentioned the room, Lavender and Harry turned around and rushed to open the massive oak door. Lavender got there first and pulled it open. Harry stepped into the dark only to jump back as something slammed against his legs. He spun around and bent down to catch Jaime Peterson by the shoulders before the kid ran away.

Those are the largest eyes I have ever seen, Harry thought as he stared at Peterson's terrified face.

"It's all right," Harry said, even though Malfoy was still missing and nothing was all right.

"Harry Potter!" Peterson breathed, reminding Harry strongly of Dobby.

"One and only," Harry said wryly and knelt down on one knee.

"Don't mind us, though," Ginny added, stepping closer, "we're just chopped liver."

Lavender made an odd little sound at that proclamation, but said nothing. Peterson gave Ginny a weak

smile but his brown eyes quickly focused back on Harry. "You have to stop them," he whispered.

"Stop who?" Harry asked. "What are you doing here?" Where is Draco Malfoy? he wanted to ask. The Galleon was still in Harry's hand. Burn. Burn, damn you.

"Pritchard and the others. They locked me up in there." Peterson looked past Harry to gaze fearfully at the blackness of the Room of Requirement.

"What? Why?" Harry asked even as he looked up at Ginny and Lavender. "Do we know someone called Pritchard?"

"He's a prefect, I think?" Ginny looked to Lavender.

Lavender nodded. "Fifth-year. Snotty little thing."

Harry remembered him; he was in Peterson's dormitory on the night it burned, telling everyone how Peterson was afraid of the dark. He's scared of everything, he had said. He had reminded Harry of Malfoy.

"Yes, that's him. And he always has two friends with him. As rotten as he is," Peterson said. "They stuffed me in there a few times before. Because they know I'm af— I... I don't like the dark." Peterson flushed.

"Nasty thing, dark," Ginny said. "Don't fancy it myself."

"I loathe it," Lavender agreed and gave an exaggerated shudder.

"It's one scary room," Harry said, quite truthfully. Once the door was closed, the dark must have been absolute.

"And it can't be open from the inside," Peterson whispered. "There's no door."

It really is dead, then. All one could wish for when locked inside was a door. The Room could no longer provide. The more curious thing for Harry was the fact that Peterson had so willingly told them who had been harassing him. The last time both Hermione and McGonagall had tried to extract that information from him, he had refused to speak. Either because of fear of house loyalty. Something had changed.

"Don't worry," Harry said. "We'll report him to the Headmistress. He won't do this again."

Harry's promise did not appease the boy. "But first you have to stop them!" he said. "I tried. I tried to warn him, but they caught me."

"Warn who?" A sick feeling settled in the pit of Harry's stomach.

"Draco Malfoy," Peterson said, confirming Harry's fears. "I heard them talking; they said they'd get him for what he did last night. I snuck out before curfew to warn him, but they found me before I found him."

The Galleon in Harry's hand dug into his palm painfully. "And what did Draco do last night?"

"He's gone mental!" The way Peterson said it, it sounded like a fearful sort of compliment. "We were all in the common room when we heard about Harper. I was really, er, worried." Harry strongly suspected Peterson meant to say scared, originally. "And then Pritchard saw me and he laughed, saying, 'Don't worry, whoever got Harper won't go after filthy little Mudbloods like you. We'll deal with you ourselves.' And a few people laughed, too, but then Draco lost it. He backhanded Pritchard so hard he went flying half across the room. And then he yelled at him, at everyone. He pulled up his sleeve and showed us that horrid tattoo and told everyone that the next person who ignores the curfew will find out what it means to piss off a Death Eater. And he told Pritchard that if he ever threatens or tries to hurt me again, he'll tattoo the Dark Mark on his forehead and shove his head up, uh," Peterson lowered his voice, "Voldemort's rotten arse. I don't remember most of the things he said after that. But at one point he demanded Pritchard to thank him for hitting him. He took out his wand and everything, screaming at him, 'Thank me, you idiot, because I'm doing you a favour.' He kept shooting Stinging Hexes at him and

Pritchard kept screaming for help, but no one dared to do anything. Not with Draco looking like he'd murder the first person who dared to speak. And Pritchard finally started crying and screaming, 'Thank you, thank you, thank you,' and then Draco left him alone."

The tale stunned Harry into silence. He never wanted anything as much as he wanted to be a Legilimens in that moment, so he could see what went on in Malfoy's head.

Peterson sniffed. "And now I ignored the curfew," he wailed. "But I had to! I heard Pritchard and the others scheming, saying they'll make Draco cry blood for what he did."

"We'll find him." Harry winced at the roughness of his own voice. Draco will not be crying blood. The Galleon in Harry's hand stung, but only because Harry's grip drove it into his skin. Where do I look? Harry stood up. He would have to alert the D.A., teachers, everyone.

"Jamie," Ginny said, "why didn’t you use the Galleon to warn Malfoy?"

Peterson looked at her. "I don't have it. Pritchard took it. He always takes my gold. He thought it was real."

"What do you mean you don't have it?" Harry asked. "You sent me a message; that's why I got here."

Peterson shook his head, eyes wide. "No, I didn't."

Harry looked at Ginny sharply. "Did you send it, then?"

"Er, I was a bit busy lying unconscious, Harry."

But of course it couldn't have been her. Who would send a message with the words The Dead Room?

There was no time to think about that now. First, he had to find Draco. "Ginny, go with Lavender and tell McGonagall that Draco is missing. We have to find him. The castle's too big; we can't search alone."

Ginny nodded, but then looked past Harry, frowning. "Lavender? What's wrong?"

Harry whirled around to see Lavender standing at the top of the stairs. Her head was tilted backward, her face set in a curious expression of deep concentration. It looked like she was sniffing the air.

"Can you smell that?" she asked.

Ginny sniffed the air in confusion. "Smell what?"

Harry could not smell anything out of the ordinary, either.

"It smells like..." Lavender hesitated. "Smoke. It's coming from down there." She pointed down the stairs.

Harry's heart skipped so violently it hurt. Not fire, not fire. Don't you dare, you idiots. He shot forward, feet slipping when he reached the stairs, but he caught the banister in the last second and landed neatly on the first step. He dashed down the stairs, yelling, "Lavender! Where?" He still couldn't smell anything. Maybe Lavender was imagining things. But she had smelled the smoke in the Slytherin common room, even though none of the Slytherins had, Harry reminded himself.

Ginny, Lavender and Jaime Peterson ran after him. "Down, down, down!" Lavender was shouting as she ran. "It's not the sixth floor!"

"Harry, is that you?" someone yelled from bellow. "I think something's burning!"

Harry glanced over the banister to see Neville and Hannah running toward the main fifth floor corridor. "Over here!" Neville pointed ahead.

Harry could finally smell the smoke. It stung his eyes and dimmed his vision. He jumped over the final three steps and swerved to the left, nearly running over Neville in his haste to reach the Transfiguration classroom. It had to be the source; there was not much else here and Professor Plunkett was still in bed with a nasty cold, which cost him his voice, and that classroom was sure to be empty. A good place to hide if you did not want to be found.

Smoke was thicker here; Harry saw it escape from the gap between the door and the threshold. He charged forward, pointing his wand and yelling, "Alohomora!" as he went. The door remained closed and Harry tried again. "Reducto! Depulso! Deprimo! Defodio! Confringo!" The spells ricocheted, one after the other.

"We should try casting the Blasting Curse together!" Neville yelled, catching up with Harry. The others were on his tail, their wands raised.

"Yes," Harry said, breathless, desperate. He can't be in there. "On three. One—" Harry saw little Jaime Peterson raise his wand; it was unlikely he even knew what a Blasting Curse was.

"Two!" Harry yelled, but then Lavender burst forward with a huff of "Oh, for heaven's sake!" and slammed her foot against the door.

Harry had no time to be surprised. The door swung open and the corridor filled with hot smoke. The classroom was on fire; chairs and desk crackled as they burned. Without another thought, Harry ran inside. The heat overwhelmed him, scorching his skin, blinding him.

"Harry!" Ginny screamed and then: "GLACIUS!"

Her spell spread though the air, whooshing as it filled the room with white glow. The fire licked Harry's hands and face, tingling, but never burning.

"Evanesco!" Harry yelled at the black smoke and it dissipated, revealing the centre of the room, where Draco Malfoy lay on the floor, unconscious, his wrists bound by wispy black ropes.

Harry leapt to his side, falling to his knees next to Malfoy's head. "Rennervate!"

The spell hit Malfoy in the chest, but he only stirred a little, a frown forming on his face.

"Draco, wake up!" Harry grabbed Malfoy's shoulders, scooting backward so he could pull Malfoy up and force him to sit.

The others were in the room too, Vanishing fire and dousing it with Conjured water. The bright lights of their spells and their cries of "Aguamenti!" and "Evanesco!" only added to the chaos.

Harry pulled Malfoy up to press him against his chest, supporting Malfoy's back with his arm; Malfoy's head fell forward onto Harry's neck. "Wake up, Malfoy!" Harry yelled in his ear. Miraculously, it worked. Malfoy lifted his head, his eyes cracking open.

"Déjà vu," Malfoy managed to say before he lapsed into a coughing fit.

"Come on, up!" Harry wrapped one arm around Draco's waist and hauled him to his feet. "You can cough later. As much as you want. But the smoke's not helping you."

Malfoy coughed nonetheless and almost slipped from Harry's grasp. Neville jumped to his side and reached toward Malfoy as though to help keep him upright.

"No, no need." Harry pulled Malfoy closer. "I got him."

Neville gave him an odd look, and Harry knew he deserved it, but he could not help himself. He had his arms around Malfoy and he was unwilling to let go. He could have used Neville's help, though.

"Malfoy, come on, walk. You can do it," Harry said.

Malfoy could indeed do it. He finally regained his balance and his coughing subsided. He leaned heavily on Harry as they walked out of the room.

They did not get very far from the classroom and the smoke when Draco pushed at Harry and leaned against the wall, his head falling backward, hitting the stone.

Harry seized the opportunity to attack the thin bonds round Malfoy's wrists. He tried every charm he knew and that could logically help free Malfoy's hands, but nothing worked.

"It's a curse, Potter," Malfoy said after Harry growled in frustration. "The bonds can be broken only by a special, enchanted blade."

Harry scowled, lowering his wand. "You could have told me that sooner."

"And ruin my fun?" Malfoy's grey eyes were half-closed, but they were studying Harry closely.

Harry pocketed his wand. "All right. Where do I find this special blade?"

"You don't." Malfoy's eyes closed and opened again slowly. "I'm sure Pomfrey will know what to do."

Harry nodded reluctantly. He tugged at Draco's tied up hands. I'm cradling them again, he realised, but didn't even try to push them away; he only pulled them even tighter against his chest. "We should go to the hospital wing."

"If I refuse, will you Petrify me?"

"Don't have to this time." Harry tugged at Draco's wrists again to better make his point.

Malfoy's eyes narrowed even more, but then he coughed, winced and grimaced as though trying to suppress a shudder that raked through him.

Harry did not know how to help, he only knew he desperately wanted it. He reached up to brush a stray lock of white-blond hair from Malfoy's damp forehead. Malfoy stared at him through half-open eyes. Defiant, Harry did it again, brushing only imaginary strands of hair this time. Yes, I'm stroking your hair, you ponce. I dare you to stop me.

Malfoy did not stop him; he didn't move at all and Harry's defiance abandoned him, leaving him feeling like an idiot. He returned his hand to Draco's wrists.

"What happened?" he asked. "Was it Pritchard?"

"How do you know about—" His eyes widened. "Peterson! Have you found him? He was missing. And Weasley! I saw her get hit and go down."

"They're fine," Harry said quickly. "They're both..." He turned and saw little Peterson standing a few feet away, looking as though he was trying hard not to stare at them. "Here," Harry finished. He could hear the others casting spells in the classroom, Vanishing smoke and fire.

Malfoy relaxed against the wall again. "You should stop fondling me, Potter. I think you've traumatised the kid."

"He'll survive," Harry said, deciding to make no comments about Malfoy's accusation of fondling. "Tell

me what happened," he said and Malfoy opened his mouth. Harry hurriedly added, "No smartarse Auror jokes, please."

Malfoy's lips twitched; Harry wanted to kiss them.

"They Stunned me," Malfoy said, tone flat, "dragged me here, tied me up and wanted to make me apologise with their shoddy little curses."

Except for the ugly welts forming beneath the black bonds, there was not a mark on Draco, and the way he had shuddered earlier... Harry thought he knew which “shoddy little curse” the idiots had used. Harry's thumbs caressed the soft skin of Malfoy's wrists—a compulsion he could not control.

"And then," Harry said, "they set the classroom on fire and ran?"

Malfoy shrugged. "I don't know, I suppose. I lost consciousness a few times..."

Cruciatus Curse, then, it had to be. If I kiss his wrists, would that be strange?

"One moment they were there," Malfoy continued, "in the next, I opened my eyes and they were gone and the classroom was on fire." Malfoy's voice lowered as he said that, but then he added more loudly, "And then I opened my eyes again and a specky git was manhandling me."

"And he refuses to stop," Harry said and tugged on Malfoy's wrist again, harder this time, forcing Malfoy to step away from the wall. "Hospital wing. We really should go."

Malfoy's gaze turned calculating. "Oh, you quite like this, don't you?"

Harry frowned in confusion and Malfoy's gaze slipped to his bound hands. "Does it do something for

you?"

It didn't. Until now, after Malfoy had mentioned it. Harry's cheeks flushed at the implication, vague visions assaulting his mind.

I can play this game, too, Harry thought.

"Actually..." Harry lowered his voice, eyes fixed on Malfoy's. "I much prefer to have your hands somewhere else. Didn't you notice that at the pitch?"

If Harry had not been flushed already, he would flush all over again at his own words, but it was worth seeing Malfoy's eyes going wide, his smirk wiped from his face.

Someone cleared their throat.

Harry turned his head so fast he thought he heard something crack in his neck. Ginny was standing a little further away, staring. Worse, Neville and Hannah were behind her, looking everywhere except at Malfoy and Harry.

"There was a fire in that classroom over there, did you know?" Ginny pointed at the Transfiguration classroom helpfully.

Harry cleared his throat. "Yes, I noticed. I knew you lot would handle it brilliantly. You didn't need me."

"Ah! But have you noticed two of our number are missing?"

Harry blinked, realising Lavender and Peterson were gone. Hannah Abbot snickered and Neville pointed behind Harry, saying, "They went to get McGonagall. They passed right over there."

"In Harry's defence," Ginny said, "Lavender did insist on tiptoeing."

Malfoy looked behind Harry with a frown.

"Don't listen to them," Harry said. "There's a hidden passageway a little further down the corridor leading straight to McGonagall's office; they must have went there."

"Oh." Malfoy tugged at his hands and Harry loosened his grip, letting him go.

"We alerted the rest of the D.A., too," Ginny added, more seriously. "Pritchard and the others are gone; we should find them." Harry nodded and Ginny sighed. "In other words..." She waved with her hand, as though shooing him. "We have it sorted. You're dismissed."

"Thanks," Harry said, awkward. Ginny was making jokes, but she always made jokes. It did not necessarily mean that seeing him with Malfoy hadn't upset her. Harry could think of several other people who might be upset if they saw him clutching Malfoy's hands. I just didn't want you to think I'm angry with you or something, Harry remembered Ron saying yesterday as he offered Harry a sandwich. You talk in your sleep, he had said earlier that day after Harry had woken up, gasping and thinking about Malfoy. Harry winced. Perhaps it was too late to wonder whom he might have upset.

I'm upset, too, he reasoned. And so is Malfoy. But there were more important things to worry about now. If someone wanted to engage in a shouting match, they would have to wait. They were all aware of that, at least.

Harry looked to Malfoy, inclining his head toward the staircases. Malfoy nodded, lips pursed, and they made their way to the hospital wing. Malfoy was slow, unsteady on his feet and would stumble occasionally, but Harry did not offer him a hand. He feared it would only lead to an outburst. If it were Harry, he would want to reach the hospital on his own, too.

Harry regretted not taking the chance to cling to Malfoy while he had it as soon as they entered the

hospital wing and explained what had happened. Madam Pomfrey had promptly thrown Harry out while she took care of Draco, and had warned him he ought not return before tomorrow as it was late and Draco would need to rest.

Harry had no intention of leaving. He slipped to the floor next to the hospital wing's entrance and sat down with his knees pulled to his chin. If anyone tried to murder Draco again, they would have to go through him.

That was where Ron and Hermione found him almost two hours later. They looked exhausted and they all but collapsed on the floor on either side of him without saying a word.

"Did you find Pritchard?" Harry asked.

Ron shook his head. "No sign of him or his cronies."

Harry stared at him. "What, they ran? They're not in the castle?"

Hermione yawned before replying. "We searched everywhere. The D.A., the teachers, even house-elves, all of us. They're just not here. All their stuff is still in the dungeons. Even their brooms."

"The teachers went to search the Forest and Hogsmeade," Ron added. "They wouldn't let us join them. McGonagall called the Aurors."

Harry was somewhat stunned. He could not help wondering what had gone through Pritchard's head. He and his cronies were angry and vengeful, Harry understood that. They had found Peterson and stuffed him in the Room of Requirement, as they had apparently done in the past. They had got away with it before, they must have thought they would get away with it again. Then they had grabbed Malfoy, got him where they wanted to, and tried to intimidate him. It was a bold plan. The D.A. members and the teachers were patrolling the castle. But they had achieved everything they had planned and there was a good chance they would get away with it. They could have Obliviated Malfoy, or tried to, at least. Even if they had not done that, it would be Malfoy's word against theirs. At worst, they would get suspended or

maybe even expelled from school.

But then they had decided to set the classroom on fire, to leave Malfoy there alive and run. Were they truly so upset, so stupid? The smoke would have attracted attention, they must have realised that, and the truth would come out, they must have realised that, too, or they would not have run. Were they so eager to go to Azkaban? Did they imagine themselves to be the new generation of Death Eaters? Fifteen-year-old idiots. Draco was doing you a favour. Why didn't you listen?

"If I planned to run," Harry said, "I'd Summon my broom. They can't even Apparate."

Hermione's head fell to Harry's shoulder. "Is this the part where you tell us someone else is behind this, pulling the strings?"

"No," Harry said honestly. He did think that, but he did not intend to say it aloud.

Ron snorted. "Pity. Because I think I'm ready to believe you."

Harry stared at him. "You are?"

"This is simply getting ridiculous," Hermione said. "Maybe the school should be closed." She sounded tearful, distressed that their education would suffer, or maybe she was just tired. "Your shoulders are so bony, Harry," she added, head shifting as though looking for a better spot to lie on.

"All shoulders are bony," Harry pointed out, then added, "Go on, you two. You should get some rest."

"Doesn't really matter," Ron said. "Lessons are cancelled for tomorrow, anyway. Besides, this is comfy." The back of Ron's head hit the stone wall. "Better than Harry's shoulder, I'm sure."

Harry simultaneously wanted to hug them and yell at them. "Fine, I'll go with you. We could all use some

sleep."

"Right. We'll all go back to the tower," Hermione said. "Hear that, Ron? Harry will come with us. He will not stay here to keep watch."

"That's right," Harry said.

"Mmm-hmm," Ron murmured, unimpressed. "Sure, he'll go. And then he'll grab his Invisibility Cloak and run back here the moment I fall asleep."

"Of course not!" Harry spluttered, indignant, mostly because they had guessed his plan so well.

"We'll stay here," Hermione said firmly.

Harry slumped against the wall, making Hermione grumble as his shoulder rose and fell. "It's okay, really. You don't have to stay," he said. "I was going to..." Harry fell silent. His tone sounded whiny to his own ears. He had planned to sneak inside and keep an eye on Draco, but that was no longer possible. It probably wasn't possible before, he had to admit. Pomfrey had left, but Harry saw her cast several charms on the door and he doubted he would be able to get inside.

Hermione huffed. "Honestly!" she said and sprang to her feet. She mumbled to herself as she moved to the door, taking out her wand. "Draco Malfoy, of all people," she ranted under her breath, though Harry heard her. "Bloody blond git. Can't he go through a day without trying to die? That's what this is all about." She shot several spells at the door, lighting up the corridors with cheerful, twinkling colours. "It's a bloody fetish you have there, Harry."

She sounded so grumpy, Harry kept his mouth shut and did not even attempt to argue. His cheeks were on fire, he could feel it.

The lock on the door clicked open and Harry scrambled to get up.

"Wait here!" Hermione ordered and went inside, closing the door behind her.

Harry obeyed, too surprised to do anything else. He avoided looking at Ron, even though Ron's eyes were closed and he was still sitting down, leaning against the wall as though asleep.

"The Shield Charm," Ron said suddenly, his eyes still closed. "One charm, multiple applications. Intent is all that matters."

Harry stared at him. "Er, sorry?"

Ron did not say anything else and Harry's confusion only grew. Did Ron mean to say there was Shield Charm on the door? That he should cast a Shield Charm on the door? That Ron would cast the Shield Charm?

Perhaps Ron was half-asleep, Harry reasoned.

"Ron?" Harry said tentatively. "I don't know what you mean. What about the Shield Charm?"

Ron sighed, yawning a little, as though he truly was on the verge of sleep. "It will come to you," he said in a resigned sort of tone.

Harry had no time to question him further because Hermione stepped out of the hospital wing, tiptoeing. "Malfoy's asleep," she said. "And I persuaded Winky to let you stay inside."

"She's in there?"

"Not anymore. McGonagall mentioned she's keeping watch and would not let anyone in. I offered to knit her a pair of socks if she goes away." She looked at Harry crossly. "I'm terrible at knitting socks!"

"Er, thank you," Harry said, tempted to hug her, but she looked much too cross.

She huffed and went to sit beside Ron, promptly lowering her head to his shoulder. She laughed softly; it almost sounded like a giggle. "Ron, did you cast a Cushioning Charm on your shoulder?"

"They're just naturally free of boniness," he assured her, then squinted up at Harry. "Go away. I'm about to snog her."

Harry did not need to be told twice. He grinned and hurried inside just as Hermione laughed and said, "Oh, will you now?"

The hospital wing was dark; the candles were snuffed out, but faint moonlight peeked through the tall windows, illuminating the narrow beds. Most of them were empty; it was easy to spot Malfoy's blond hair splayed over a pillow on one of the beds by the windows. The only other occupant was Tommy Wright, though Harry did not see him, only knew he was concealed behind a white screen at the end of the room.

Harry checked Malfoy, staring at his sleeping form for a minute, before he found a spot on the floor, a little farther away, where he could be inconspicuous, but both the door and Malfoy's bed were inside his line of vision.

His thoughts wandered to Ron and Hermione, but quickly shied away from analyzing their behaviour. They were outside, keeping watch and, for now, that was all that mattered. Perhaps one day they would have to talk, but Harry was happy to postpone that. He was also happy not to think about Malfoy and everything that had happened between them today and had not involved Malfoy almost dying in a fire. Malfoy was in danger; that was important. The rest of it... the rest of it was too confusing to even contemplate. Malfoy was too confusing to contemplate, too.

I have nothing to think about, Harry concluded, but then decided to go through everything that had happened in the castle since... since the Gryffindor-Slytherin match. That was when it all began, was it not? Thinking about it did not help him much, except it kept his mind busy and awake, but Harry did have one suspicion and, though he could not see how it could be relevant, he did work out how to prove it. He planned to do just that tomorrow night. It might mean nothing, he was aware, but it was certainly easier to solve the puzzle if you had all the pieces at your disposal.

Malfoy stirred, groaning a little as he turned. Harry hoped that did not mean he was in pain.

Harry bit his lip and kept quiet as Malfoy sat up a little and searched for something on the bedside table. Harry was sitting in the dark side of the room, where the moonlight couldn’t reach him; Malfoy could not see him, but Harry could see Malfoy.

A wand appeared in Malfoy's hand. He studied it for a moment and then pointed at his palm.

Harry's thigh burned. He almost yelped in surprise and reached into his pocket to take out his Galleon. It was glowing and Harry tried to conceal the light with his hand as he read the message. Hospital under attack, it proclaimed.

Harry grinned. He meant to stay hidden, but if Malfoy wanted him here...

Quietly, Harry stood up and stepped forward. "Under attack, is it?" he asked. It sounded much too loud in the silent room.

Malfoy sat up quickly, looking around. "Potter?"

Harry stepped into the faint light. "Got it in one."

Malfoy gave him a searching look. "How did you get here so fast?"

"Saviour's secrets," Harry assured him. If Malfoy did not guess Harry was here all along, Harry did not intend to volunteer that information. Harry waited for Draco to make a smartarse comment, but it never came.

"Will you make the poor sick person get up?" Malfoy asked. "Or do you plan to come closer anytime soon?"

Harry walked over warily. "What do you wa—"

Malfoy jumped forward, going on his knees, towering over Harry on the high hospital bed. His hands grabbed Harry's hair and angled his head, before Malfoy's lips descended for a bruising kiss.

It was the Quidditch pitch all over again. Harry's whole body reacted immediately. He could feel the heat of Malfoy's kiss all the way down to his toes. But it was even better this time; Malfoy's body was warm from sleep, not half-frozen from the wind. Harry's hands pushed beneath Malfoy's pyjama top to caress the warm, smooth skin of Malfoy's back.

Harry's cloak hit the floor and Malfoy's fingers tugged at the buttons of Harry's shirt, but Malfoy gave up halfway through, only opening the shirt enough to pull it down a little and revealed one of Harry's bony shoulders.

A trail of harsh bites and soothing licks covered Harry's jaw, the sensitive skin behind his ear and then Malfoy's teeth and lips attacked the tender spot where Harry's neck met his shoulder. Harry could not hold back his moan.

It seemed to encourage Malfoy and he bit down hard; the resulting shudder that passed through Harry's body weakened his knees.

Harry's hand slipped down, sliding beneath Malfoy's pyjama bottoms to rub against the smooth curve of Draco's arse in wonder.

I shouldn't touch him there, Harry thought, fingers exploring nonetheless, slipping lightly between the cheeks. A sudden nervousness stole Harry's breath away, his heart hammering in his chest, throat seizing up as his fingers slipped deeper into the warm crease of Draco's arse.

Draco wrenched free, pulled back so suddenly Harry felt cold and bereft. He quickly pressed his hands to his sides, afraid he had crossed the line.

"I'm—" Sorry, Harry meant to say, but Malfoy was pulling off his pyjama top over his head; it left his hair tousled, blond strands wild around his flushed face. The flush spread over his neck down to the top of his chest.

Harry stood by the bed, frozen as Malfoy struggled with the bedclothes tangled around his legs. He pushed down his pyjama bottoms, too; Harry could not see much, the sheet obscured his view as well as the dark night, but he caught sight of one narrow hip and pale skin of Draco's thigh.

He's naked under there. The nervousness from earlier hit Harry again, stronger this time, slowly morphing into a full blown panic attack. What did Malfoy expect? Harry did not know what to do. Malfoy was naked, sitting down and looking at Harry, expecting something as though Harry could give it to him. He wished he could, but fear did not let him move. Everything that had happened to him in his life, everything he had faced, nothing had ever been as terrifying as the thought of climbing onto the bed with a naked Malfoy.

"Clothes, Potter," Malfoy whispered, staring. "Off. Or do you plan to keep them?"

I'll keep them. That was a good idea. Running away right now was even a better one.

"Malfoy," Harry croaked, "I don't think—"

"Then don't think." Malfoy rose up, eyes fixed on Harry's as his hand reached and cupped Harry's crotch through his trousers, and squeezed. Harry gasped, his fear melting away, his world narrowing, focusing only on the firm pressure of Malfoy's palm.

Malfoy pulled away; the cruelty of it left Harry gasping in indignation.

"Off," Malfoy repeated and scooted to the side of the narrow bed.

Climbing onto the bed lost some of its scariness. There were more terrifying things in the world, Harry reasoned as he pulled off his shirt. The possibility of Malfoy refusing to touch him like that again was one of them.

Harry toed off his shoes, took off his trousers and socks and then, heart thumping madly, slipped down his underpants. There was no time to feel bashful, though. Malfoy's gaze fixed on Harry's cock, his approval, his desire so clear in his expression, Harry felt like he might burst from sheer relief.

Climbing onto the bed wasn't at all scary. Malfoy looked up at him, grabbed a fistful of Harry's hair and pulled him down for a kiss. And just like that, Harry found himself lying down, chest pressed against Malfoy's, skin against skin, Malfoy's thigh pushed between Harry's legs, touching lightly against Harry's balls.

A surge of pure happiness made him smile against Malfoy's lips. More often than not, he had been convinced he would never experience this. There were times he was sure he would die before anyone had a chance to touch him intimately. He had convinced himself he didn't mind, had reasoned he didn't need it. But this, Malfoy's tongue moving against his, his hands everywhere, touching every part of Harry they could reach, it was not something he'd ever willingly give up on again.

I was an idiot. He still was, or else he would not be doing this with Draco Malfoy. That's all right, though, Harry reasoned, his hand escaping downward again, over Malfoy's hip, his thigh, his arse; in that moment, he did not mind being an idiot.

"Wait." Malfoy pulled away again, but he was so close this time Harry only had to bend his neck and his lips found Malfoy's neck. "Wait," Malfoy insisted. "We need..." He squirmed and struggled, and Harry lifted his head reluctantly. Malfoy had found his wand and was holding it in his hand, staring at the thin wood in deep concentration. "I can't remember," Malfoy whispered; he sounded distressed.

"Remember what?" Harry had no idea what could be so important that Malfoy had to stop kissing him. He couldn't think of anything; he couldn't think at all; his palm was sliding against Malfoy's arse, gripping one cheek, squeezing, caressing, moving to do same with the other. He pushed the bedcovers down, looked at his hand, at what it was doing, and stared at it in wonder. He could see Malfoy's cock, too, which was not unlike Harry's, except touching his cock had never been something too terrifying to contemplate. You're a Gryffindor, Harry told himself and boldly slipped his hand forward to wrap it around Malfoy's cock, but Malfoy reached down suddenly and snatched Harry's hand.

"Sorry," Harry said quickly, his cheeks heating up, but Malfoy ignored him. He touched his wand to Harry's palm, muttering something incomprehensible. Now he'll cut off my hand because I've touched him where I shouldn't have, Harry thought sadly. He hoped Madam Pomfrey would be able to re-grow him a new one.

Malfoy did not cut off his hand, though. He only covered it with an oily, translucent substance, which was a very odd punishment, indeed. Harry stared at his hand uncomprehendingly, but then Malfoy cursed and grabbed Harry's fingers, squirming and twisting on the bed until he turned, lying almost on his stomach, his arm twisting behind, shoving Harry's hand to his arse, right between the cheeks. And then Harry's brain started miraculously to work again, even though all his blood seemed to have rushed lower, eager to make his cock pulse so hard it nearly hurt. There were things Harry had seen and heard long ago on the Dursleys' telly, and things his dorm mates would say that made little sense, turns of phrases Harry had used himself, and suddenly it all connected together and unravelled with a giant Oh of understanding. He thought he knew what had to be done, though that did not help him calm down, only served to fill him with fear. It was almost tempting to ask Malfoy if he could do it to Harry instead. If it hurt, then it would hurt; Harry could grit his teeth and take it. The thought of him doing it all wrong and hurting Malfoy, who had been tortured and had nearly burned to death hours before, was ten times worse.

Then don't hurt him, you idiot.

"Potter, for Merlin's sake." Malfoy groaned, voice muffled by the pillow, squirming and rubbing against Harry's hand. Don't hurt him, don't hurt him, Harry thought as he slipped his finger between Malfoy's cheeks, searching and finding the patch of furrowed skin. He lifted up a little, leaning on his elbow, then on his hand, sitting awkwardly on one side, one knee bent, trying not to fall down over the edge of the narrow bed.

The view of Malfoy's arse, his thighs, the curve of his spine was unobstructed and clear, pale skin, illuminated by moonlight, every part of it tempting.

Push, Harry ordered himself and his finger pressed inside. He was shocked but emboldened by the lack of resistance, but froze in the next second when his finger simply could not be pushed any further.

"Go on, go on," Malfoy insisted, pleaded, and Harry obeyed, against his better judgment.

It took forever to work his finger inside. Or maybe it took only a few seconds, Harry couldn't tell; he lost all sense of time. He lost all sense of everything but his finger slipping into the heat, feeling trapped there by the tightness.

Harry twisted around on the bed, struggling for a better position, until he ended up kneeling behind Malfoy, between his spread legs, the sight of his finger disappearing in the puckered entranced, gripped by the reddening rim, so fascinating Harry could not look away. Instead he pried Malfoy's arse cheeks further apart, so he could see better, even though thinking about what he was doing made blood rush to his cheeks and ears, heating them up to the point of boiling.

Malfoy could not stop talking, it seemed. He babbled constantly, encouraging, asking for more, telling Harry it was enough and he should just fuck him already; his every word soothed Harry's fears but he did not stop what he was doing, working another finger inside, then another, chest expanding from relief and wonder when Malfoy took them, clenched around them, pulled them deeper inside.

I know nothing, but neither do you, Harry thought as Malfoy bucked against Harry's fingers, again telling Harry it was enough and Harry should just fucking get on with it. A sheen of sweat covered Malfoy's skin; in the faint light, it looked like even his arse cheeks were blushing. He had risen up a little on his elbows,

his moans becoming longer, deeper, his hips unable to keep still, bucking and twisting and pushing down.

I could come just from this, Harry thought, dazed, then panicked, realising he would indeed come if he did not stop stroking his cock. He wasn't even aware of touching himself.

Harry pulled his fingers away and Malfoy cursed so viciously, Harry feared he'd turn around and punch him. Harry almost hoped he would. He could have used a good punch right then; his slick hand was wrapped around his cock and Harry was sure he'd lose it if Malfoy failed to punch him.

But Malfoy did no such thing; instead, he grabbed the pillow and pushed it bellow his hips. His arse was on display, slicked and open, waiting for Harry.

With a low groan, Harry stopped stroking his cock, and scooted closer, reminding himself he was a Gryffindor.

His hands shook nonetheless as he pressed the head of his cock to Malfoy's hole and gritted his teeth before pushing inside a little, gasping at the feeling. Malfoy's whole body shuddered with the desperate little moan that had seared itself into Harry's mind days ago, right here in the hospital wing.

Harry's hands stroked and squeezed Malfoy's hips, slipping and losing their grip but fighting to retain it. He pushed again and again, Malfoy's moans filling his ears. Harry leaned forward, carefully stretched his legs, desperate to be even closer to Malfoy. He lay down, supporting himself on his elbows above Malfoy's body, pushing his pelvis downward, entering Malfoy inch by inch. You will not thrust, he ordered himself, you will not. He could feel beads of sweat forming on his forehead, his breathing so shallow his lungs burned; the sight, the feel of Malfoy shuddering and moaning beneath him overwhelmed his senses, and the heat that surrounded his cock seemed to burn every inch of his body.

He thrust then, harder, his hips disobeying him. One of them gasped, or maybe both of them did. Harry froze for a second and then found himself kissing Malfoy's back, his shoulder blades, murmuring, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Malfoy's breathless laugh came as a shock. "You will be sorry," he said haltingly, "if this takes all night."

And then he clenched so hard around Harry's cock, Harry's eyes watered. "Potter," Malfoy said, and Harry couldn't tell if that was an order or a plea. It didn't matter. His hips knew what to do. They twitched up, then thrust down and Malfoy hissed, as though in pain, but he hissed yes, and Harry's hips moved again and again, unable to stop.

Harry was desperate to thank whoever had made sure he hadn't died before knowing how this felt, but that thought was pushed from his mind, replaced by Malfoy's voice that urged him to move faster, thrust harder. Harry obeyed, but no matter how hard or fast Harry moved, it was never enough for Malfoy. It didn't stop Harry from trying. It was all he could do: listen and obey. The air filled with moans and pants, the sound of skin slapping against skin, and the alluring scent of sex; Harry's head had fallen to Draco's back, his nose inhaling his scent as Malfoy shuddered violently beneath him. The pressure against Harry's cock was unbearable; it spread down to his balls, up to his heart, squeezing and taking his breath away. He heard himself cry out as he came, a shiver after shiver of pleasure washing over him.

Harry collapsed forward, panting against Malfoy's back, wishing he could stay there forever. He knew he had to move, but he couldn’t for long moments; his limbs were too heavy. Malfoy did not complain; he seemed to be regaining his breath, for once silent, with no insults or snotty remarks to throw at him.

They moved eventually, together as though they had reached a silent agreement. Malfoy winced as Harry pulled out of him and Harry marvelled he did not fall off the bed as they squirmed and twisted together, finding themselves lying close to each other, with Malfoy on his back and Harry on his side.

I should kiss him. Or he could say something, though he had no idea what. He did not dare to kiss Malfoy, either. He waited for the inventible moment when Malfoy would scowl and tell him to get out. Harry's stomach clenched at the thought. The last thing he wanted was to leave, but waiting for Malfoy to chase him out was even worse.

Harry bent his neck and kissed Malfoy's shoulder. One last taste before he sends me away. "Want me to leave?" Harry asked, studying Malfoy's face. I just had sex, he realised suddenly. I just had sex with Draco Malfoy. He could not suppress a giddy feeling that possessed him at the thought. Emboldened, he leaned closer and kissed Malfoy full on the lips. Seconds later, Malfoy responded, kissing Harry back, unhurried, almost gentle; his hands were in Harry's hair again.

"You probably should leave," Malfoy said, pulling away a little, then smiling suddenly and reaching up to

fix Harry's glasses. His hand slipped to Harry's back, pressed him closer, the action at odds with his words. "If Pomfrey finds you here, she's likely to hex us both."

"But then she would just have to heal us," Harry reasoned. As long as Malfoy didn't insist, Harry had no intention of leaving. He did not intend to truly leave, anyway. It was only a matter of staying here, in Malfoy's bed, or staying outside in front of the door. With Ron and Hermione, who were still out there, waiting, keeping watch. Would they have done that if they knew what exactly Harry was doing inside?

It'll come to you.

Harry blinked. That was what Ron had told him before Harry went inside. The Shield Charm. One Charm, multiple applications.

The Shield Charm. For protection. And not from intruders, but... Harry's cheeks flamed. Ron had told him what to do, knowing, knowing before Harry knew that he would end up in Malfoy's bed. And Harry had forgotten, didn't even think of it. And now he remembered clearly, stumbling on Ron and Hermione's conversation over the summer, where she went on about safe sex and how it wasn't just about not getting pregnant. They were both flushed and looked horribly embarrassed and Harry had run away as fast as his feet would carry him.

"What?" Malfoy was frowning at him.

"We forgot..." Harry fell silent and shook his head. Next time. They won't forget next time. The thought made him happy again. Maybe next time could be now. "The pillow," he said. "We forgot the pillow."

Harry found it on the floor; it must have fallen when they had shifted around. Harry stood up, snatched the pillow from the other bed, and quickly returned to the warm spot beside Malfoy.

Malfoy was staring at him. "Nice arse, Potter."

"Was that a compliment? Did you just pay me a compliment?" Harry mock-gasped.

Malfoy scowled. "I said you're an arse, Potter. How is that a compliment?"

There it was again: the happy feeling in Harry's chest, spreading all over, tugging at the corners of his lips. Harry kissed Malfoy again; when he pulled away, Malfoy's scowl was gone. He was staring at Harry; the intensity of his gaze made Harry nervous.

"What?" he asked just as Malfoy said, "Are you even—?" Malfoy broke off, frowned, tugged at Harry's hair. He gave Harry a searching look.

"Am I what?" Harry remembered the Quidditch pitch, the way Malfoy had pushed him away, looking wild and scared. You're not even... he had said.

Malfoy did not reply. "How did you get here?" he asked instead. "I called you and you were here. How did you get here so fast?"

Harry thought that was a curious question. Did Malfoy think Harry had some extraordinary abilities? "I was here all along," Harry confessed, jerking his head toward the spot on the floor he had been sitting on earlier. "They didn't find Pritchard and the others, so I thought... I thought I'd stick around."

Malfoy gaze turned sharp. "What do you mean they didn't find them? Where could they possibly be?"

"I don't know. They're just gone. Ran away, I suppose."

Malfoy was quiet for a while. "Idiots," he concluded in the end. "And you stayed here to protect me," he added. It was not a question. Harry was surprised by the lack of mockery in his tone.

"Auror Potter, at your service." Harry forced a grin. Malfoy did not return it.

Instead, he tugged at Harry's hair again and said, "Yes, you are, aren't you?" The words were teasing, his tone was not.

"Did you think I Apparated here?"

"No. I just..." Another tug at Harry's hair; Harry's head was sore. Malfoy bit his lip, hesitating, and Harry held his breath. "Sometimes I end up somewhere, and I don't know how I got there. I thought it happened to you, too."

Harry remembered what Ginny had told him about Astoria. She had seen Malfoy go outside in the middle of the night more than once. He walks out and doesn't return for hours.

"That Sunday, when we found Tommy," Malfoy continued, voice barely above a whisper, "you asked me why I wasn't at the match. The truth is, I don't know. I was planning to go, and then... and then I was on the Astronomy Tower. I ran. I ran as fast as I could; I meant to go to the pitch, but I ended up there, instead. Outside the Room. I end up there most of the time. Though, not always."

"Malfoy, that's..." Harry's heartbeat sped up. He wanted to say understandable. If Malfoy was feeling lost, the thought of him going back to visit places that held the most horrible memories was not hard to imagine. Was the only thing Malfoy had been running from that day? Memories?

"Don't you see?" Malfoy was no longer whispering; he sounded upset. "You kept saying I cursed that kid, and maybe I did. The fire... it was my old dormitory, Potter. And Harper. Fell off the Astronomy Tower, of all places." Malfoy's breath hitched. "What if you're right? What if I... What if I'm behind everything?"

Harry stared at Malfoy's wild grey eyes. If he tried hard enough, he could link everything back to Malfoy. He remembered thinking that, but he had concluded that was the problem with his thought process; it had never led to a solution; it had only ever misled him. And apparently Malfoy was doing the exact same thing.

"Did you also Imperius Smith to kill you? Arranged your kidnapping today?"

Malfoy's eyes filled with confusion. "What does that have to do with anything? I know what Smith did and why. I know why Pritchard wanted to get back at me. I'm talking about the cursed kid, the fire, Harper."

"Did you Vanish Peeves?" Harry asked. "Did you move the staircases?"

"You're not listening, Potter." Malfoy was almost shouting; his fingers were no longer in Harry's hair. "I'm telling you I'm having blackouts. I don't know what I've done and what I haven't done."

"So... what? You're saying you were possessed? I was there on the staircase with you when they moved and almost killed us both. Did you move them with your mind?"

Malfoy stared at him.

"No," Harry said firmly. "No. It doesn't make sense. Why would someone possess you and make you Stun some random kid? Why would they have you Conjure a bunch of candles and set your old dormitory on fire? Why have you kill Harper?"

"Maybe I'm just ... mad." The look Malfoy gave him then was desperate.

"You didn't do it." He couldn't have. "You didn't. Don't even say that; don't even think that." Harry felt like someone had just handed him everything he had wished for and now tried to take it back.

"But—"

Harry silenced Malfoy with a kiss. A long, desperate kiss that left them both breathless.

"You didn't," Harry whispered and then kissed him again. Malfoy responded only with pants and moans and soon they were clinging to each other, cocks rubbing against one another, until Harry forgot to think again and Malfoy's hands squeezed Harry's arse, urging him to move faster.

Later, Harry buried his face in the crook of Malfoy's neck and breathed in deeply. He didn't do it, he told himself firmly, as Malfoy's fingers found their way to Harry's hair again.

"Real," Harry heard Malfoy murmur. "You're real."

Chapter Eight

The Hufflepuff Vampire

"Harry, wait!"

Hermione's cry only made Harry walk faster.

"Mate, do you mind slowing down?" Ron yelled. "We just spent the whole bloody night on the floor."

That stopped him. Harry turned and grimaced. "Sorry," he said, miserable. Harry's rude awakening did not compare to Ron and Hermione's night, which must have been horrifically uncomfortable. And they had stayed outside the hospital wing for him. Harry had at least slept in a bed. Warm bed, and warm, naked Malfoy wrapped around him.

"What happened?" Hermione asked when they caught up with him. They both looked tired and dishevelled and Harry's guilt intensified.

He winced and forced a shrug. "Pomfrey found me and threw me out. She was a bit upset, that's all." Told like that, it did not sound like the sort of thing that would have made Harry storm out of the hospital

wing, he knew, but Harry was reluctant to share the whole story. Harry had been awakened by the clearing of a throat, and he had opened his eyes to find Madam Pomfrey standing by the foot of the bed, frowning at the scene before her. To say Harry had been embarrassed at being caught in Malfoy's bed, naked, would be quite an understatement. What happened afterward was a bit of a blur. Harry had been in such a hurry to get dressed and avoid Pomfrey's whispered lecturing, he was amazed he had managed to find all of his clothes, or had not ended up wearing his pants on his head. On top of that, Pomfrey had managed to make him feel horribly guilty when she reminded him Draco was in the hospital because he had been struck with the Cruciatus Curse multiple times and was in dire need of a good night's sleep.

Ron and Hermione exchanged a look. If they realised what exactly had happened, they, mercifully, chose not to make any comments.

"We should head back to the tower," Harry said. "It's still early. You two should get some sleep."

"Too late for sleep, too early for breakfast." Ron sighed.

Hermione cleared her throat. "In other words, he wants to go down to the kitchens to have a bite before we go up to the tower for a nap."

"Well," Ron said airily, "if you insist, I suppose we could."

"Yeah, okay." Harry nodded. What he wanted more was to go to his dormitory and bury his head in the pillow. If he got lucky, he might suffocate.

Ron looked pleased and Hermione resigned; though, she added, "I could eat."

They turned and made their way to the ground floor. Ron and Hermione were yawning and clutching their sore backs, and Harry was regretting he had not realised Madam Pomfrey could enter the hospital wing through her office, which must have had another entrance, possibly connected to her chambers. He was also dwelling on the sad fact that the dirty pillow Malfoy had placed under his hips was still on the floor beside the bed. And the fact that Madam Pomfrey had not been inclined to give him some privacy while Harry dressed. He could have woken up Draco, too, and said goodbye; Malfoy had slept

through Pomfrey's whispered tirade, blissfully unaware of their embarrassing situation.

A squirming, giggling pear, which Ron had just tickled, pulled Harry out of his gloomy thoughts. The pear turned to a green knob and the three of them pushed inside.

It was dark in the corridor, but it was darker still in the kitchens. Harry, Ron and Hermione hesitated, then walked in carefully, peeking around at the suspicious quiet.

"Look!" Hermione gasped, pointing near the enormous brick oven that was the only source of light in the room. The faint fire illuminated a hundred small bodies, piled up close to one another into a massive heap; it looked like someone had gathered all the Hogwarts house-elves, tossed them carelessly on the floor, then swept them neatly into a pile.

"Blimey!" Ron yelled. "Do you reckon someone murdered them?"

Ron's loud cry was all it took. The elves jumped as one, some scrambling to grab random pots and pans, other snapping their fingers to light up the room; some Apparated, popping here and there so fast it was impossible to keep track. In seconds, the room was brightly lit, the brick oven roared and flour rose in the air, creating instant mist, as the elves set to making bread and buns with frightening speed and vigour.

Three elves appeared before Harry, Ron and Hermione, and the one with the longest nose bowed regally and said, "How may we be serving you?"

Hermione spoke before Harry could. "We are so very sorry," she said. "We didn't mean to disturb you."

"The house-elves are not disturbed!" the elf said, indignant.

"Yes, well, I just meant, you've been sleeping—"

"The house-elves were not sleeping!" the elf cried. "The house-elves were, er, resting. Briefly."

"Right. Well, good for you." Hermione smiled at him; the elf scowled.

"I thought you lot cleaned the castle every night."

"Ron!" Hermione turned to glare at him. "They have the right to sleep! I mean, rest," she added hurriedly.

"Of course!" Ron agreed. "I just thought—"

"The castle is being very clean!" the elf cried. "The castle is being spotless!"

"Spotless," the two elves beside him echoed, nodding seriously.

"The house-elves had found time to rest. Briefly," the elf stressed.

"Brilliant!" Harry said before this turned into a discussion. "We just thought you might have some sandwiches for us."

"The house-elves always have sandwiches!" the elf assured them, then added. "Er, if you will be waiting—" He looked shiftily at the mass of elves who were making bread.

"Briefly?" Ron suggested.

The elves scowled at them and then quickly retreated.

"We must be too early," Hermione said. "Maybe we should go."

"That would only insult them," Ron argued.

Hermione glared at him, probably thinking Ron cared more about getting the sandwiches than the house-elves' feelings. She was probably right, but so was Ron. If they left now, it would mean the elves had failed to serve them and that would make them miserable. They might even decide to iron their ears.

They did not have to wait long. The long-nosed elf appeared with a platter piled with smoking hot ham sandwiches. The warm bread smelled so lovely, Harry's stomach growled.

They thanked them and hurried outside, attacking the sandwiches with passion as they walked. They scorched their tongues and gums on the bread pulled fresh from the oven, but it was worth the burns.

Ron moaned in delight. "Bless those house-elves."

"I'm lucky Winky didn't see me," Hermione grumbled as she swallowed. "She'll want those socks."

Harry winced. "Sorry."

"Yes, well." Hermione studied him, gaze falling to Harry's neck.

It must have been covered with bruises again. He would have to talk to Malfoy about his persistent attempts to maul his throat. Harry quickly took another bite. Eager to redirect Hermione's attention away from himself, at least a little, Harry told them about Malfoy's blackouts and his belief he was behind everything that had happened. Harry was sure it made no sense, but he was reluctant to trust his

own thoughts when it came to Malfoy.

Ron and Hermione's reaction lifted his spirits.

"But didn’t McGonagall say that whoever had Stunned Tommy and Conjured those candles has some extraordinary magical power?" Hermione pointed out. "If Malfoy was so extraordinarily powerful, I think we would have noticed. It doesn't matter if he'd been Imperiused or possessed; his power is his own."

"But I've been possessed, too," Harry said, "and I did have some of Voldemort's abilities."

Hermione shook her head. "You had a part of his soul in you, Harry. That's different."

"Maybe Malfoy has a part of someone's soul in him," Ron argued. "Maybe Peeves possessed him!" he exclaimed suddenly.

"Poltergeists can't possess people, Ron." Hermione sighed. "And what happened to Harry was rather unique. It happened under very special circumstances. The odds of that happening to Malfoy, as well..." She waved her hand dismissively.

"I was joking," Ron assured her. "I actually thought it's obvious Pritchard and his cronies were behind the fire in the Slytherin dormitories. They clearly have a thing for arson and they hate little Peterson. Maybe they tried to scare him, like they tried to intimidate Malfoy. Maybe Pritchard's extraordinarily powerful and extraordinarily stupid. Maybe he Stunned Tommy, too. It's his O.W.L. year. Maybe he bought fake potions from him just like Goyle had."

Hermione didn't look pleased with that theory, but instead of commenting on it she glared at Harry's neck and took out her wand. "Oh, I just can't look at those anymore; it looks like someone cursed you! Episkey!"

Harry winced when the spell hit him. "It's... I must have..." Fallen and hit my neck? She knew what they

were and how he had got them; there was no point in pretending.

Hermione glared at him and then suddenly looked behind Harry, at Ron. "Did you tell him about the Shield Charm?" she asked sharply.

"Hermione!" Harry spluttered in indignation. "We're not talking about this!"

"Harry," she said, not unkindly, "It's just... I'm aware of your upbringing and I think there are some things you ought to know and perhaps you've never had a chance—"

Harry turned around and hurried down the corridor, away from her. Not only did he not want to discuss sex with her, he was also fearful she would somehow discover he had completely forgotten about the bloody charm.

"I told him. Give it a rest, Hermione," he heard Ron say.

"But he seems so confused..."

Harry was so busy seething, he almost ran over someone when he rounded a corner.

"Oi!" Neville cried as he pulled Hannah out of harm's way. "Don't knock out my girlfriend."

"I think you broke my toes, Harry," Hannah grumbled.

"Sorry. Didn't see you there." Harry smiled at them sheepishly.

"Wait, Harry!" Hermione voice carried across the corridor; it was coming closer. "I'm sorry. I just wanted

to point out that if you're having sex with someone like Malfoy, you ought to be the one with a sense of responsibility, because who knows what he—" She yelped as she ran into Harry's back and spotted Neville and Hannah. "Um," she said and fell silent. Ron caught up with them and stopped, staring.

Neville and Hannah seemed stunned into silence, as well. Even though he was embarrassed, Harry sighed inwardly with a wry sense of resignation. No secret could last forever, he comforted himself.

"So." Harry cleared his throat; he noticed Neville and Hannah both looked ruffled and flushed. Neville's shirt was buttoned up all wrong. "Why are you up so early? Where were you?"

"Er," was all that Neville managed. He was staring at Harry.

"We were running," Hannah said. "From McGonagall. We were, er, having a stroll and she found us in the Great Hall. She was a bit cross." Hannah blushed.

Harry sympathised, though he dearly wished to know what the two of them were doing in the Great Hall. And on which table.

"Yeah, she doesn't like it when people stroll," Ron commented.

Neville coughed a little and seemed to regain his ability to speak. "Yes. Besides, she was tired; the teachers were out in the forest searching all nig— OH!" he exclaimed suddenly, eyes going wide.

"Yes, oh!" Hannah agreed. "We have news! You'll never guess what happened!"

Harry latched onto the change of subject just as hard as Neville and Hannah had. "They've found Pritchard and the others?" he asked.

"No," Neville said, then grinned. "But they found someone else in the forest: Fenrir Greyback." Neville

beamed at them.

Harry blinked. "Pardon?"

"What do you mean they found him?" Hermione asked. "They caught him? Is he here? In the castle?"

"No, no." Neville frowned. "I mean, yes, I suppose he's technically here. I mean, his body is."

"His dead body," Hannah added, grinning.

Harry stared at them. "They found Greyback dead in the forest?"

"What, did they just stumble on him?" Ron asked, sounding as incredulous as Harry felt.

"Apparently." Neville was still grinning. "They didn't exactly share all the details with us. We were eavesdropping and heard McGonagall tell Flitwick they found him near the edge of the forest. By the looks of it, it seems he'd been there for days. His skull was smashed. Can you imagine? And the Aurors and Hit Wizards are out there looking for him all over the country, and all this time he was here. Dead."

"Didn't the Carrows say Greyback was with them and they had planned to infiltrate the castle together?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah," Harry said. "And then he abandoned them. Or, apparently, he didn't. At least, not willingly." He looked to Neville. "Do they know who killed him? Do they have any suspects?"

"Dunno." Neville shrugged. "They deserve a medal, though."

"It must have been someone from the castle," Hermione said.

"Or someone from the forest," Ron pointed out. "Centaurs? Some beast?"

"You don't look happy, Harry." Neville studied him.

"I'm happy," Harry assured him. "Just a bit shocked." Another person was dead; found so near the castle. And Harry was glad Greyback was gone, but he would feel much better if he knew who had done it.

"We should go," Hannah said. "If one of the teachers finds us again, we'll be in so much trouble."

Neville nodded, then looked at Harry again. He opened his mouth to say something, but Hannah pulled at his sleeve and Neville merely grimaced and shook his head. "You should head back to the tower, too," he told them and they rushed past and away.

"Blimey!" Harry turned around. "Greyback's dead! Can you believe it?" Please, please, let us discuss Greyback, not Malfoy again.

Harry wished in vain.

"I'm so sorry, Harry," Hermione said. She looked sorry, too. "I didn't know Neville and—"

"Werewolf! Suddenly dead!" Harry cried. "Can we please focus here?"

"In a minute," Ron said. He looked frighteningly serious. "Hermione's just... we're just worried, Harry, you know? It's not just about whether or not you're using the right charms. It's Malfoy, Harry. We don't want you to get hurt. And I'm not saying he'll curse you and you should be careful—though he might, so do be careful—that's not all. It's Malfoy."

"I know who he is," Harry said quietly.

"Do you?" Hermione worried her lip. "Because it seems like you've forgotten. What happens when you remember?"

"People change."

"Do you think he's changed?"

Damn. "I don't know," Harry confessed. "But it's too late now, anyway. If I stop it now, I'll still get hurt." That was the only truth he was sure of.

Ron blew out a breath so hard it sounded like he was blowing a raspberry.

"Dead werewolf?" Harry said hopefully.

Ron and Hermione were silent for a while longer, but then Hermione sighed and said, "It does sound too good to be true."

"Exactly!" Harry said quickly, relieved, and they spent the rest of the way discussing Greyback and his potential killer, and not Malfoy.

By the time they reached the Gryffindor Tower, they were exhausted and decided to retreat to their dormitories to grab a few hours of sleep. Harry considered sending a message to Malfoy, to make sure he was all right, but Malfoy was probably asleep and Pomfrey was there with him, so Harry quickly talked himself out of it.

Sleep did not come easy. The moment he lay down, Harry could not think about anything except Malfoy's naked body pressed against his. Without that newly discovered feeling, the whole process of sleeping felt like a waste. You're a hopeless idiot, Harry berated himself, but then happily relived the night with Malfoy in his mind. Some parts especially, others, though... Malfoy's blackouts were worrisome. He should talk to someone about that. Someone who's not me. Harry had no idea how to help him with that. Malfoy sounded so troubled and lost at times. You're real, Malfoy had said. Why wouldn't I be?

The day, when it came, moved torturously slowly. They had no lessons and it seemed no one was in the mood to study. Not even Hermione. The most disconcerting thing was, since everyone was discussing Greyback's demise and yesterday's fire, Harry heard students mention Malfoy so many times he was beginning to worry he was going mad and what he was actually hearing was his own thoughts echoing through the castle.

He could not stop thinking about Malfoy. He had sent him a message during breakfast, when Malfoy didn't show up, asking if he was okay. His Galleon burned promptly with the word Fine. Glad though Harry was that Malfoy was fine, the more he stared at it, the more snappish it looked. He had tried again, several times during the day, and Malfoy always replied, but with messages such as, "Fine," "Fine, Potter," and finally, "Leave me the fuck," which Harry suspected meant to say, "Leave me the fuck alone," but it did not fit, thanks to the four word limit.

Harry was ever-so-slightly cross with himself. He had never expected Malfoy to burst into the Great Hall, walk up to Harry and act friendly, but he hadn't expected him to sound so annoyed with him, either. He probably should have. Just because Harry didn’t regret what happened yesterday, it didn't mean Malfoy hadn't. Harry felt a little better when he heard Pomfrey had released Malfoy from the hospital wing—Harry could have gone to the hospital sooner to check, but he did not want to risk meeting Pomfrey. If Malfoy was deemed healthy, then there was a good chance Harry would see him at nine o'clock, when their patrol would start. The sad thing was, Harry had plans for tonight and he would have to abandon Malfoy and leave him to Ron and Hermione's care, but he was determined not to go about his business before he had a chance to talk to Malfoy, however briefly.

Nine o'clock could not come fast enough. When it finally did, Harry all but ran down to the dungeons. The Greengrass sisters stepped out of their common room shortly, and then so did Zabini, but there was no sign of Malfoy for a good long while. Harry's watch claimed Malfoy was only five minutes late, but that couldn't have been right. Surely.

Malfoy finally walked out, scowling even before he saw Harry; when he did see him, his scowl only deepened. Harry was tempted to jump at him and kiss him, but then Malfoy said, "Goyle's missing," and Harry resisted the urge.

"Are you worried?" Harry asked.

"Of course I'm worried!" Malfoy snapped. "He's a complete idiot and there's no telling what he's up to. And I've explicitly told him to stay put after nine. He normally listens."

"Okay," Harry said quickly. "We'll find him." Harry inconspicuously checked his watch; he still had a little time, but he had not meant to spend it on looking for Goyle. It was worrisome news, though. Two days ago, if a student went missing, they would find him snogging someone in a random cupboard. Things were no longer so simple, it seemed.

"We should try the kitchens," Malfoy said. "Though he always punches that pear and it never lets him inside. I don't know why he bothers."

Harry nodded and they set out for the kitchens. It was not far and Harry did not have time to work out how to start a conversation with Malfoy. Silence seemed to suit Malfoy just fine. Harry scowled at his back as Malfoy tickled the pear. The knob appeared promptly and Malfoy tried to push the door open but failed.

"That's odd," he said. "It's locked. It's never locked."

As Malfoy took out his wand and tried to spell the door open, Harry considered the possibility that the door was locked because of what had happened this morning. Perhaps the house-elves did not want any more students to catch them resting. Which was ridiculous, really; they were right—the castle was spotless. They had preformed their duties admirably.

"If it's locked, he's not in there," Harry said as Malfoy grew frustrated. If the house-elves locked the door, it would be hard to open. "Or do you think they've kidnapped him?"

Malfoy turned around; his scowl was back. Harry expected him to yell, but Malfoy sighed in defeat and tucked away his wand.

"We could try the library," Harry suggested.

"The library?" Malfoy scoffed.

"You said he'd been buying Wit-Sharpening Potions. He must be worried about his N.E.W.T.s. Maybe he decided to take advantage of the quiet to study in peace."

Malfoy looked unconvinced, but he grumbled something and headed toward the staircases. Harry took it as acceptance.

They made it as far as the main staircase when Harry just couldn't take it anymore.

"So we're not going to snog at all, then?" he asked.

Malfoy froze, staring. "Excuse me?"

"Are you upset with me?" Harry stepped closer. "Why? Is it because Pomfrey found us? Did she say something?"

Malfoy was still staring, silent, shocked.

You're real. Did Malfoy change his mind?

Harry touched Malfoy's arm lightly. "I'm real, remember?" He felt stupid saying it, but Malfoy's eyes widened, his expression brightening.

"Of course you are," Malfoy said in a clear attempt at nonchalance. "I know that."

In the next second, they were kissing. Malfoy's hands were in Harry's hair again, his lips hard and hot against Harry's, his tongue pushing into Harry's mouth; Harry felt dizzy from sheer relief. He had wanted to do this the entire day; he was beginning to think the moment would never come.

"Ugh," someone said.

"Are we early?" another voice put in.

Harry's mind slowly recognised Ron and Hermione. Why were they here? Because I asked them to come. Harry pulled away with a gasp. Malfoy was reluctant to let him go; his fingers clutched Harry's hair, his neck bending to kiss Harry's throat. "Malfoy! We have company!"

Malfoy jumped back at once. He glanced around and visibly winced.

"Not early, then," Hermione said. "It seems we've saved your neck, Harry."

Harry avoided looking at her; first, he wanted to beat his blush into submission. He glanced at her eventually. "Nice one," he said.

She grinned. "Yes, it's funny, isn't it? Because he's evil and a vampire, apparently." She gave Malfoy a grumpy sideways look; Malfoy pointedly looked away.

"Vampire! Right. I should..." Harry looked at Ron, expecting to see him grimacing in disgust, but Ron was

not looking at him; he was looking up at the marble staircase.

"Is that..." Ron frowned and cocked his head. "Is that a house-elf? Look!" He pointed.

They all turned and looked up. There was a small bundle at the right edge of one of the steps, huddled beside the banister, barely visible on the shadowy staircase. It seemed to be moving. Harry thought he heard a soft sob.

"It can't be!" Malfoy gasped and ran up the stairs. Harry followed him, a nasty suspicion on his mind.

Malfoy reached the bundle and bent down, staring at it. "Goyle?"

The bundled unravelled at once. Harry winced. It was indeed Goyle, if a very tiny version of Goyle. He seemed about a foot high, perhaps even less.

"Draco!" Goyle gasped, struggling to stand. His voice was very high.

Malfoy seemed reluctant to touch him, but Goyle could not stand—he seemed much too upset to do anything constructive—and Malfoy finally reached out, grabbed Goyle's tiny shoulders and lifted him to his feet.

"Who did this?" Malfoy asked, then: "Did you eat something? Did you drink something?"

"Did it say, 'Drink me,' on the label?" Hermione added.

"Hermione!" Harry chastised.

Hermione grimaced apologetically. "I'm sorry; I couldn't help it."

"I don't know," Goyle wailed. "I was coming back from the Owlery and then suddenly everything was big. I tried to go down the stairs and back to the dungeons, but it was so hard. I had to give up."

Harry hoped no one would tell him he was ten steps away from the ground floor.

"And you didn't see anyone?" Malfoy asked "Or hear them?"

Goyle shook his head.

Harry looked to Malfoy. "Can you think of anyone who'd want to attack him?"

"How should I know?" Malfoy snapped. "He keeps punching people." Malfoy gave Goyle a sharp look. "Did you punch anyone today?"

"No!" Goyle said promptly, but then he scrunched up his nose, apparently thinking hard. "Maybe?"

Malfoy sighed and Goyle sniffed, tears rolling down his cheeks.

"I'm sure Madam Pomfrey will fix you right up," Hermione said, sounding extraordinarily kind, either because she was sorry she had teased him earlier or because she felt the need to coo at someone so small and distressed.

Goyle looked up at her, with a soppy, grateful look, but then he must have recognised her. His expression darkened into an ugly grimace. "Granger," he growled or, at least, he tried to growl; it sounded more like a squeal. Goyle's eyes narrowed. "Don't talk to me." He brandished his tiny little fist. "You're just a filthy—" Goyle yelped as Malfoy grabbed the front of his robes and yanked him up to his chest.

"I'll take him to the hospital wing," Malfoy said, cheeks pink. Goyle made a sound as though he meant to complain and Malfoy shook him; Goyle's legs swung back and forth. Malfoy pressed Goyle tighter against his chest, holding him like a child would hold a doll. Goyle was silent, obviously struggling to breathe in Malfoy's tight grip.

"Right, then," Harry said, glancing at Ron and Hermione. "You do that, and I'll, er, I have to go."

Malfoy frowned at him. "You... what?"

Harry forced a smile. "Ron and Hermione will keep you company." And make sure no one tires to murder you again. Harry omitted that part, but he was sure Malfoy would draw the right conclusion.

Malfoy looked at Ron and Hermione then back at Harry, quite obviously horrified. "What?" he repeated. Harry resisted pointing out Malfoy would crush Goyle if he continued to squeeze him so tightly.

"Sorry." Harry grinned, taking out his Invisibility Cloak. Malfoy looked so distressed, Harry could not hold himself back. He leaned forward and pressed a quick kiss to Malfoy's lips. He heard Ron groan, and Goyle kicked Harry in the chest.

Malfoy was stunned into silence and even failed to make a comment when Harry pulled on his Invisibility Cloak, saying, "I have to go vampire-hunting."

Harry bolted, eager to be as far away as possible before Ron, Hermione and Malfoy started fighting. He did not want to witness it. If they started hexing each other, Harry reasoned, at least they would do it on their way to the hospital wing, and then Madam Pomfrey could heal them all.

Harry dashed up the stairs heading toward the fourth floor. He hoped he was not too late. Once he reached the dark corridor where Draco and he were attacked by a hooded figure, Harry tiptoed to the wall that led to the hidden room. It was smoking, ever-so-slightly, and Harry stood a little farther away,

pulling out his wand and making sure his cloak kept him well-hidden.

Minutes tickled by and Harry considered breaking into the room. For all he knew, it could have been empty. He had set the trap carefully, had even asked Ginny for another favour; she had been indignant at first, but calmed down and agreed when Harry explained what he wanted. Perhaps it wasn't enough, though. Perhaps the Hufflepuff Vampire had found another place to haunt, even though Harry had offered this room to it on a silver platter.

The wall glowed red. Harry stood up straighter, holding his breath. The door formed and opened slowly, and a dark, hooded figured stepped outside, wiping its mouth. Harry waited for the door to close and then pulled off his Invisibility Cloak.

"Stop right there!" he ordered, wand in hand.

The figure whirled around, took a step back, then reached for its wand.

"You won't hex me, will you, Lavender?" Harry asked.

The figure froze, staring for a long moment. Then she growled and pulled off her hood so sharply it messed up her long blond hair. Lavender looked wild in the faint light. Her eyes flashed, her expression hardened; even her scars looked angry. But the look she directed at Harry was full of hurt.

"It figures!" she spat. "I should have known you were waiting here. This is why you had Ginny Weasley patrol with Parvati! And here I was thinking you let me patrol alone because you understood. But no!" She scowled. "You sent me to the fourth floor because you wanted to catch the nasty vampire."

"Or werewolf," Harry said.

She growled again. "Hardly! Half a werewolf is right. Are you happy now? Will I get blamed for

everything that happened?"

"Should you be?"

"No! Harry!" she cried, indignant. "How can you even—I Stunned Demelza! There, I confess! Arrest me."

Harry had not actually meant to blame her for everything, or even anything specific; she clearly had some wolfish characteristics, strength, heightened sense of smell, but werewolves were no more powerful than regular wizards; nonetheless, a person who skulked around the castle every night must have known something.

"What are you doing, exactly?" Harry asked. His gaze was drawn to a smudge of blood on her cheek, near her lips.

She must have noticed where he was staring and wiped at it angrily. "Feeding, if you must know."

Harry was slightly alarmed. "Feeding on what?"

She sniffed suddenly. Harry could see her eyes shine in the torchlight. "Meat, Harry. The bloodier, the better." Her voice was shaking. "I eat a plateful of steaks almost every night. I like them rare. Very rare. And during the full moon, I... I like them very, very rare." She looked a little shifty.

"Oh." Harry winced. Then that was her only secret, the only thing she was trying to hide. Harry was sorry he had ever caught her. It must have been embarrassing for her: the need for bloody meat. "You've been stealing them from the kitchens?" That's why the cloaked person was always seen near the Hufflepuff common room; Hermione was right: it was about food. Except that it had stopped when Harry reunited the D.A. The cloaked figure was not seen again, because there was no one to see her except the D.A. members, and Lavender knew where they were and how to avoid them.

"I'm not stealing!" she cried and Harry was just about to point out that it hadn't been an accusation, he

was just thinking out loud, when she added, "The house-elves are giving me steaks. Every night, they leave a platter for me outside."

"They are?" Harry was surprised and not a little suspicious. "What do you mean they leave a platter for you outside? Outside where?" As far as Harry knew, if you wanted to get food from Hogwarts house-elves, you had to walk into the kitchens and request it. Ron had mentioned once he would love room-service, but Hermione had pointed out the house-elves were most likely forbidden to serve food anywhere except the Great Hall and the kitchens. If they were not, the students could easily abuse their servitude.

"Well, everywhere." Lavender shrugged. "A few weeks ago, I went to the kitchens at night; I was so hungry. I planned to ask the elves for some bloody steaks. But I didn't even have to! They left a whole platter for me outside the door. And after that, they always left it there for me. Except..." She narrowed her eyes at him. "When the D.A. started their patrols, it was harder to reach the kitchens, since I always had a partner. And then, on the night of the fire, I went out late, planning to go to the kitchens, but I heard someone; I thought it was Filch—it was just Harper, but I didn't know that—and I hid here. I found the entrance by accident. And guess what I found inside? Steaks, again. Don't you just love house-elves?"

"So..." Harry was confused. "You've never actually talked to them? You've never actually asked the house-elves to give you food?"

"Well, no. But they're house-elves. They live to serve. They know things."

"But they can't read minds."

"I... well, who else would do that for me? It's food. It had to come from somewhere. And in Hogwarts, it has to come from the kitchens."

That was a fair point. The house-elves seemed a bit odd lately. Their sudden urge for resting, the locked kitchen doors. Who knew what other oddities they had in store?

"You don't believe me, do you?" Lavender sniffed. "What does it matter where the food came from? I

needed it. I'm not hurting anyone."

"I believe you," Harry said quickly. Surely she had no reason to lie.

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Like the scars aren't enough," she said bitterly. "I'm half an animal."

"No, you're not," Harry said. He thought of Bill, who had a wife who loved him by his side. "You have nothing to be embarrassed about. What happened to you isn't your fault."

"Oh thanks, Harry. I'll just stop being embarrassed now, because you said I should. Believe me, I'm well aware of whose fault it is."

Fault of a man who had just mysteriously died. Harry hated himself a little for badgering her, but he had to ask. "I assume you heard Greyback's dead?"

Her face transformed instantly. She looked furious. "Are you trying to blame me for that? So, what? Now you think I'm a murderer? Just because I'm half a werewolf?"

"No!" Although, who else could have killed Greyback? Lavender was the one wandering every night. She had a strong motive, she was angry, she was clearly capable. "I'm not blaming you, Lavender. If... Even if you've done something, I mean, maybe it was an accident. Self-defence. Even if it wasn't, I wouldn't blame—"

"I didn't kill anyone!" she screamed. "I'm glad he's dead. I'm so glad I could dance. He dropped dead and died like the rabid dog he was. Don't think I didn't wish for it. I wished for it every second of my life, ever since he did this to me, turned me into a monster. But I didn't kill him, Harry."

Harry stared at her. "You wished for it," he repeated, goose bumps forming on his neck and arms. Wish.

One word, always coming up.

She shook her head in disbelief. "Of course I did."

What do I wish for? Harry had asked himself in his dream. It was an important question, but Harry had not known the answer. But now he did. He had wished for a mystery. He wanted to catch Death Eaters. He wanted to save people, stop them from getting hurt. He wanted to do something important, not waste his time.

And I got my wish. Minutes after he had stood in front of the Room of Requirement, wishing, it had come true.

You suspected Malfoy of something before anything happened?

Oh god. Harry could not breathe.

"Harry?" Lavender asked; she sounded worried.

"You wished for the steaks, too. You were desperate for them."

"Must you keep repeating everything I said?" she snapped.

Harry's ears were buzzing; blood had rushed to his head. "Goldstein wanted Harper dead. Smith wanted to get Malfoy. Little Peterson wanted light."

"Wishing isn't a crime," Lavender said slowly as though speaking to a small child. "And don't you dare compare me to Goldstein. He murdered Harper."

"No more than you killed Greyback. Or I Stunned Tommy."

"What?"

Harry snapped out of his daze and reached into his pocket. "We have to send messages," he said, pointing his wand at the Galleon, concentrating. His hand was shaking.

Lavender yelped as her Galleon burned and then took it out. "McGonagall's office?" She looked alarmed. "Why do you want everyone there? What will you tell her? I didn't kill any—!"

"I know, Lavender!" He grabbed her hand. "Come on!" He pulled her toward the staircases.

She wrenched free far too easily. "No! What will you tell McGonagall?"

"I'll tell her we have to get the hell out of this castle," Harry said and grabbed Lavender's hand again, frowning. "Pritchard!" He remembered suddenly. "Damn, I forgot. We need Jaime Peterson. He can't get out of the common room alone. The Slytherins, where are they? Zabini and the Greengrass sisters? Which floor?" Malfoy was too far, all the way on the first floor.

The question must have surprised Lavender because she answered promptly, forgetting to argue. "Luna and Zabini are on the fifth."

"Good. Come on!" He ran, pulling her along, and this time she went without a struggle. They bumped onto Zabini and Luna on the staircase, even before they reached the fifth floor. Harry asked them to go down to the dungeons, get Peterson and bring him to McGonagall's office.

Zabini studied him. "Anything else you'd like?"

"Will you do it or won't?" Harry snapped.

"We'll do it, Harry," Luna said. "Let's go, Blaise." Luna tugged at his sleeve and he obeyed her without another word of complaint.

Lavender stared after them. "Blimey. Do you think—"

"Oh, who cares, come on!" Harry turned to go up the stairs.

"Harry, wait!" Lavender cried. "There's a passage further down, leading up to the Headmistress—"

"I want to check something first. And I need you. Lavender, please."

She huffed but ran after him. They reached the seventh floor in no time. Harry hurried toward the Room of Requirement and pulled the door open. The Room was as dark and dead as ever.

Lavender peeked inside. "What were you expecting to find?"

Harry did not reply, but instead said, "Lavender, wish for a platter of bloody pig steaks."

She blinked at him. "Wish for—? But I just ate!"

"Just wish. Imagine. Imagine me holding it. Plateful of bloody steaks. Barely cooked at all. Stuck a fork in them and they'll drip blood."

Lavender's eyes darkened and a plateful of steaks appeared in Harry's hands. They looked very bloody

indeed; Harry nearly dropped the plate in surprise. He suspected they were raw.

"It can't be," Lavender said, looking at the steaks, then glancing at the Room. "It's not working anymore; look at it! And even if it did, it can't Conjure food. Neville always said... No, it can't be. We were here this spring, we all wished for food, so much, but it just couldn't give it to us."

"The Room couldn't, but the castle can. Don't you see? The Room has been destroyed, but the magic survived. It's in the castle now, on the grounds. It has access to the kitchens."

"But how is that even possible? How could it just move?"

"I don't know," Harry said, despairing. "We have to talk to McGonagall."

Harry dropped the steaks to the floor, much to Lavender's distress.

"Wait, Harry!" she cried. "I'll just take one."

"Lavender!" Harry said, outraged, but she had already bent down and picked up one of the steaks, ready to take a bite. But then she froze, staring toward the staircases.

Harry turned to see Ginny and Parvati standing there, with twin expressions of shock.

"Lavender?" Parvati whispered. "What are you—?"

Lavender dropped the steak with a cry. "Nothing! It's doesn't matter! Come on! We're having an emergency here!" She ran past Harry in a flash.

"Er, Harry?" Ginny said.

Harry grimaced at them; there was no time to explain. "We have to hurry!" he said and ran after Lavender. Thankfully, Ginny and Parvati followed him without question.

They rushed to the Headmistress' tower. They found Ron, Hermione and Malfoy at the entrance, on their way upstairs.

"Harry!" Hermione said, doubling back. "What's going on?"

Harry's gaze raked over Malfoy, making sure he was all right. He looked all right, if a little grumpy. Harry looked back at Hermione. "Did Pomfrey help Goyle?"

Hermione shook her head. "She's still trying, but nothing seems to be working."

Harry suspected as much.

"What happened to Goyle?" Lavender asked.

"He shrunk," Harry said. "Come on," he said for the umpteenth time that evening. "We have to talk to McGonagall."

Ron frowned and Malfoy asked, "Did someone else get hurt?" He eyed Lavender, Ginny and Parvati suspiciously, possibly wondering what they were doing with Harry.

"No. And no one else will," Harry said. We just have to act fast.

Harry ran up the winding stairs and the rest of them followed quickly.

"It's okay, Harry. It's not like we have to know what's going on," Ron grumbled after him.

They found most of the D.A. members crowding McGonagall's office, as well as McGonagall herself. She looked quite cross.

"I hope you have a good reason for this invasion, Potter." Harry noted he was no longer Harry, apparently.

"Professor," Harry said, well-aware that everyone was listening and he was about to sound like a crazy person, "we have to evacuate the castle."

McGonagall's eyebrows rose.

"Why? What happened?" Hermione ran up to him.

"That's a fair question," McGonagall said, then her expression sharpened. "Has another student been hurt?"

"No," Harry said, "I mean, yes, someone shrank Gregory Goyle and Pomfrey can't fix him." Someone snickered at that, but Harry ignored them. If circumstances were different, a shrunk Goyle would be funny. "But it's only a matter of time before someone else gets hurt. Professor, I think I know what's going on." Harry hesitated; McGonagall looked expectant and Harry did not know how to present his theory in a plausible way. "There was a room in this castle, the Room of Requirement, I'm sure you've heard of it. Dumbledore's Army used to meet there in our fifth-year, and this spring they were hiding there from the Carrows. It had its own special magic; once inside, it gave a person everything they want, with few limitations. But when they left the room, it all Vanished. It only ever had power within the Room itself and nowhere else.

"It was destroyed during the Battle of Hogwarts. It burned down. It no longer works; it's just a dead room. But... I think the magic survived. It wasn't destroyed with the room. I think it somehow bled into the castle. And it's trying to do what it has always done—fulfil wishes."

McGonagall's expression was impossible to read. Harry could not tell if she was thinking about what he said, or thinking about calling Pomfrey to give Harry an Anti-babbling Potion. Harry looked to Hermione for help.

Hermione was biting her lip. "Oh, I don't know, Harry. It would explain so much, but then again... didn't the Room require specific instructions? And it fulfilled every wish. If it was doing that all this time, within the castle, we would notice."

"And though the magic was not destroyed, since it can't be, and, yes, we've discussed this, I remember," McGonagall said, "it doesn't mean it will retain its form. It was bound to the room. When the Room was destroyed, the magic lost its purpose. Yes, I suppose, one could say the magic is still in the castle, it still exists, it is everywhere, but the Room was enchanted and that enchantment has been broken. When you lift the Dancing Charm from your teacup, Potter, the magic does not run off to enchant another cup."

"I know. But this isn't a Dancing Charm. This is an ancient enchantment; ancient magic that came with the castle. Isn't it possible that something so old and powerful could break rules? What if it's impossible to evict it, impossible to destroy it because it's a part of the castle, like Peeves? Oh! Peeves!" Harry exclaimed. "Everyone wants to get rid of Peeves. The students, the house-elves; everyone's always hoping Peeves won't show up. And we got our wish. And if this magic managed to get rid of Peeves, there's no telling what else it can do."

"I'm wishing for my very own Firebolt right now, Harry," Ron said. "But..." He waved with his empty hands.

Hermione looked indecisive. "That's a good point. Although..." She frowned. "It is possible for magic to be Transformed; to be enchanted to transform as a way of protection. Isn't it?" She looked at McGonagall.

"Theoretically," McGonagall allowed. "Destruction of one enchantment could trigger another. However,

what Potter is suggesting here... Do you think the founders would allow such dangerous magic to enchant the castle?"

"Not deliberately, of course," Hermione agreed. "But such an enchantment would require a certain sentience from the magic; in a way, it had been enchanted to protect itself. So, when the Fiendfyre threatened it..."

"It ran?" McGonagall pursed her lips.

"Possibly?" Hermione said. "But it must have been damaged; it lost its purpose, was unable to serve, because it hadn't really done anything before..." Hermione turned pensive. "Didn't it all start on the day of the Gryffindor-Slytherin match?"

"It did," Harry said. "Oh! The match!"

"Oh yes!" Hermione exclaimed. "All those people wishing for the same thing, well, two opposite things—for their team to win. Those Bludgers knocked down so many players, on both sides."

"That's it!" Harry looked back to McGonagall. "Just imagine, Professor. For centuries, the magic knew what it was supposed to do. And then suddenly it found itself in a castle filled with hundreds of voices, all of them wishing for something all the time. It was just noise, it couldn't hear everyone, it couldn't fulfil every wish. If you're in a crowded room and everyone's yelling, all at the same time, you have a better chance of understanding them if there's a group of people yelling the same thing. Or if someone's yelling the same thing over and over again, especially if it's a voice you already know.

"That Sunday everyone was emotional, focused on one thing. That must have been when it understood us for the first time, when it realised it can do what it had already done in the past. It locked the entrance because a bunch of Gryffindors wanted the match not to take place. It turned the match into a massacre, trying to please both sides. After that, it must have listened to desperate wishes of the people it knew because they had been in the Room before. Members of Dumbledore's Army, like Goldstein, who wanted Harper to fall off a tower; Smith, who wanted Malfoy dead. A little kid afraid of the dark: Pritchard and his friends had locked Jamie Peterson in the Room of Requirement before; it knew him, too. It didn't matter how specific the wish was; I think it listened to emotions, despair behind it. It

listened to what it learned to listen to on the day of the match.

"Oh, and the Map! Hermione, the Map! The Room never showed up on it because it was Unplottable. And as the magic of the Room spread throughout the castle, the Map slowly disappeared.

"And Parvati!" Harry turned to face her and she jumped a little. "Harper was Apparating all over the castle, near you, because you wished it."

Parvati shook her head in denial but Harry did not believe her.

"And Tommy Wright?" McGonagall asked. Harry was glad to hear her speak. "Fenrir Greyback?"

"I Stunned Tommy," Harry said, miserable. McGonagall looked shocked. "I mean, I went into the castle that day, thinking Malfoy would curse him." Harry did not dare to look around at Malfoy. Sorry, he thought. "I went up to the Room and stood there, regretting that I came back to Hogwarts. I wanted to be out there, hunting Dark Wizards, doing something worthwhile. I wanted action, mysteries, excitement. I wasn't specific; the Room must have improvised; gave me what it thought I wanted. It even gave me cobwebs."

"Why the hell were you wishing for cobwebs?" Ron asked.

"It was stupid. The room looked so dead and eerie. I remember thinking cobwebs and dust would make it look more natural, less scary. And it Conjured them, too, not in the Room, but around Tommy. I think the Room is still the best place to wish for something. It must have heard me and then gave me a package of everything I wanted; the Room's best guess. And then it must have moved the stairs, made sure I found my mystery.

"And speaking of spiders! Did you notice how clean the castle is? And the house-elves are sleeping. They seem to have more free time than ever; they must have wished the castle clean, together. It's something they think about all the time.

"And Greyback..." Harry hesitated.

"My wish," Lavender said quietly.

"And mine!" Parvati cried. "Don't you dare think it wasn't my wish, too!"

"Greyback was with the Carrows in Hogsmeade," Harry said. "We knew about the Carrows; the D.A. was desperate to make sure they didn't break into the castle. And they couldn't break in. Greyback, though; we didn't even think about him. But Lavender did, she wished him dead. And when he tried to get inside, the magic seized its chance. He was found by the edge of the forest, near the border where Hogwarts' protection ends."

McGonagall was silent for several long moments. "I'm inclined to believe you, Potter," she said at last. "Though, I've not heard of anything like it before. I'm sure the Ministry and the Board of Governors haven't, either. They will want to investigate, prove your theories. It won't be easy to convince them, you've said it yourself, the motives are there; what you want to do, essentially, is to prove everyone's innocent and the true guilty party is an ancient magic with sentient qualities, which escaped from a Room whose existence was not widely known."

"Then forget about them," Harry said urgently. "Don't you see how dangerous it is for anyone to stay here for a minute longer? One more wish and someone else could die. We've been so lucky. People wish for the craziest things all the time. We've been lucky it only listened to desperation. But it's all piling up; not a day goes by without something dreadful happening. It's learning, becoming more powerful. We have to get out of the castle, Professor. Tonight. As fast as we can. This isn't something we can control. If someone wants to investigate, they can do it once we all leave."

"The Board of Governors—"

"Is not here! It's your decision, Professor."

McGonagall did not have a chance to reply. The door opened and Luna and Zabini walked in, leading a sleepy-looking Jamie Peterson inside. Harry rushed to the little kid's side and knelt down on one knee, grabbing his shoulders.

"Jamie, I need you to tell me about the night your dormitory burned down. I need you to tell me the truth."

Peterson looked alarmed. "I don't know anything. I've already said."

"Are you sure? Because I think there's one thing you haven't told us. I think you saw the candles. I think you saw them and you were very happy they were there."

Peterson shook his head, his eyes wide.

McGonagall stood up and approached them. "Mr Peterson, you are in no trouble, but you must answer truthfully."

"The fire wasn't your fault," Harry said gently. "We know that. Even if you think otherwise, but you have to tell us what you've seen."

Peterson hesitated, glancing between Harry and McGonagall. McGonagall smiled at him and that seemed to make him bolder. "It was so dark," he said at last. "Earlier that evening, they locked me inside that horrid room; Draco Malfoy let me out." Harry glanced at Malfoy. He was at the far end of the room, leaning against the wall, expressionless. Harry did not like the look in his eyes; he was staring at Harry. "I was so scared; in my dormitory, too, when it got dark," Peterson continued and Harry looked back at him. "And those creatures were outside the window, staring at me. I just wanted the dormitory to be bright; like the Great Hall." Peterson looked miserable. "And then... then there were hundreds of candles floating near the ceiling. I have no idea how they got there, but I was so relieved. I was just scared the others would notice and make them disappear, but not one of them woke up. And I fell asleep. But when I woke up, there was fire everywhere."

Careful what you wish for, Harry thought. The magic helped him, but when the fire started it could do

nothing; not until Lavender and the others showed up and spelled it and wished it, away. "And last night?" Harry said. "When you were in that room again, what were you thinking?"

Peterson blinked. "What was I thinking? I was scared."

"I know, but there were things you thought about, things you wanted. Did you want to send me a message?"

"Of course I did. But they took my Galleon."

"But you thought about it, right? If you had the Galleon, what would you write? Where were you? What do you call the room? The Horrible Room?"

Peterson shook his head. "The Dead Room. It looks dead."

"Yeah, it does. I did get your message."

"But I never sent—"

"What else did you think about?"

Peterson was growing frustrated. "I don't know!"

"Of course you do. Three boys had just locked you up again. Didn't you think about them, too? You wanted to stop them, remember?"

"Well, yes. I did think about them. About how horrible they are. How much..."

"What?" Harry urged.

"How much I wanted them to just leave me alone. To go away. To disappear."

McGonagall sucked in a breath. "They've been Vanished."

Peterson gulped. "But I just wanted it. I didn't do anything."

"Oh, Jamie, you did," Harry said. "It's a very special room. It gave you what you wanted." Harry looked up at McGonagall. "There's a good chance that Tommy and Goyle will be fine once we get them past the grounds. The magic should have no power there. But Pritchard and the others, if they've been Vanished..."

"We have to retrieve them." She wrung her hands, staring at Peterson. "And you have to help."

Peterson shook his head violently. "I can't do that. That's too advanced. I can't even Conjure a glass of water."

"It was your wish, Mr Peterson, your intent that Vanished them. And you know them and the Room knows you. You have the best chance to retrieve them with minimal damage. And it seems..." McGonagall glanced at Harry. "Intent is all that matters. You just have to wish them back hard enough."

The expression on Peterson's face clearly showed that he did not wish that at all.

"If they are not retrieved, they are as good as dead. It might be too late as it is. Vanishing human beings... It should not be even attempted." McGonagall gave Peterson a sharp look. "Take out your wand, it will help you focus. The incantation is—"

"APARECIUM!"

The spell hit the floor behind McGonagall with a sharp crack; it glowed yellow, dissipating slowly to reveal a heap of boys, three of them stacked one on top of the other. One of them moved and groaned.

Harry whirled around to see Malfoy with his wand out, pointing at the newly-appeared Slytherins. Malfoy slowly tucked his wand away. He glanced at Harry. "The Room knows me, too, remember? And I'm fairly certain I wanted them to go away at some point, as well."

Harry gave him a small, unsure smile. Malfoy looked so distressed, so gloomy. Why did he always have to be so miserable?

Another boy groaned and Harry turned to look at him. They seemed fine; Harry hoped that meant Tommy would be all right, too. He regretted he had never actively wished for Tommy to wake up; he wanted him to live, he wanted to catch whoever had Stunned him, but he had never actually sat down and desperately wished for him to recover. Not as desperately as he had wanted his mystery and excitement. McGonagall was wrong when she said he was trying to prove everyone was innocent; everyone was guilty, the Room's magic was their tool.

McGonagall was staring at the Slytherin boys on the floor, clutching her chest. Harry suspected she had not truly believed him before she had seen the Vanished students appear.

She looked sideways; Harry thought she might have been looking at Dumbledore's portrait, but he was not sure. She turned around, paler and older than Harry had ever seen her. "Alert your classmates," she said. "Have everyone pack. I'll alert the other teachers and summon the carriages." Her lips thinned. "We're leaving the castle. In the meantime... be careful what you wish for."

Chapter Nine

The Last Wish

As the rest of the Gryffindors headed toward the tower, Harry ran down the stairs.

"Malfoy, wait!" he called, catching up with the small group of Slytherins. Malfoy nodded at Zabini and the Greengrass sisters and lingered behind.

Harry caught his arm. "Are you all right?" He did not like the blank expression on Malfoy's face.

"Peachy," Malfoy said.

Harry's fingers wrapped tighter around Malfoy's arm. "Pack fast, will you? You almost died three times."

"The Room's magic must not like me very much. I did have a hand in destroying it."

"No!" Harry said, though it had crossed his mind, too. The possibility that the Room was too eager to fulfil Smith's and Pritchard's wishes. Or mine? The thought horrified him, but he could not stop thinking about it. What if he had some deep secret desire to save Malfoy, again and again? What if that kept throwing Malfoy into danger? But that could not have been true, could it? He had been so desperate to keep Malfoy alive, but what if the magic had misinterpreted his wish? Harry remembered the night Malfoy had spent broken on the pitch; he had been dreaming about Malfoy's dot on the Map. It had vanished and Harry had cried, desperately wanting it to reappear. Was it possible his desperation had helped keep Malfoy alive, despite all odds? That meant he had got his wish, but it was small confront if he had been the one who had helped get Malfoy hurt in the first place. If he hadn't, why was the Room's magic so quick to give Smith what he had wanted? Smith hadn't been wishing it for long; he was supposed to be fast asleep, system full of Dreamless Sleep Potion. He had no thoughts. And why had the Room led him to the pitch? Why not just break Malfoy's broom and let him fall; it did not need Smith's presence. "Crabbe burned down the Room."

"And I led him there. And the Room reads minds, remember?"

Harry squeezed Malfoy's arm even tighter; he was probably hurting him. "You had better be on the first carriage away from here."

Malfoy's lips twitched. "As you wish."

"Smartarse." Harry barely got the word out when Malfoy leaned in and kissed him. The hard, toe-curling kiss left Harry embarrassingly dizzy. "Well," Harry said, breathless when Malfoy pulled away.

Malfoy smiled, though Harry did not like that smile. "Goodbye, Potter," Malfoy said, then turned and left.

"I'll see you soon!" Harry called, frowning. Malfoy did not look back.

Harry was tempted to follow him, grab him, Summon his Firebolt and fly them out of the castle right now, but Ron and Hermione showed up by his side, and the momentary urge passed.

"Don't you think things like that can wait, mate?" Ron asked. "Am I snogging my girlfriend? No, I'm not. We're supposed to be packing. And that was your idea."

Harry forcibly pushed Malfoy out of his mind and studied his friends. "You two do believe me, right?" He glanced at Hermione.

"Sentient magic possessing the castle... what's not to believe?"

Harry narrowed his eyes at her, suspecting sarcasm.

"Of course I believe you, Harry," Hermione said. "I just can't decide if your theory breaks the laws of magic or merely expands on them. Or I have somehow misinterpreted them originally." The possibility she might have misinterpreted something seemed to terrify her.

"I doubt something like this was ever described in some book," Harry said. "Perhaps you can study this

phenomena and write your own book."

"Hmm," she grumbled. "I do wonder, though, if Hogwarts magic turned against us, so to speak, what will happen to the school? It was only recently restored and now..." She looked sad.

"Can't we just... wish the magic away?" Ron asked. "Tell it to go back to the Room? Or wherever?"

"But does it even have a sense of self?" Hermione countered, looking pensive. "Would it even know what we're asking? What if it concludes that by magic we mean our wands, or ourselves? It reacted on instinct when it ran from the Room of Requirement; I'm not sure it could do something like that consciously, without the threat of destruction, which would awaken its instincts."

"Better not risk it," Harry said. He hoped some experts would be called in and they would be able to do something, make the school safe again. I should stop wishing for things, he reminded himself. "Let's worry about the students first."

She nodded and they hurried to the Gryffindor Tower to pack.

By the time they reached the common room, it was already empty. They could hear yelling upstairs. "Pack! Pack! Pack!" someone was ordering with the utmost authority. Harry thought it might be Lavender.

"We shouldn't let people panic," Harry said. "People think odd things when they panic."

"Probably a bit late for that." Hermione grimaced, squeezed Ron's hand and rushed to her dormitory. Ron and Harry did the same.

They found Dean and Seamus packing, and Neville sitting on his bed, holding his Flitterbloom and looking gloomy.

"Pack!" Ron told him.

Neville did not move. "Do you think it's real?" he asked. "Hannah always claimed she never sent it to me."

Ron stared at him. "What, the plant?"

Neville nodded. "With the blue blossom. It's so rare."

"Er," Harry said. "Did you desperately want it? For a long time?"

Neville nodded again.

"What, the plant?" Ron repeated, sounding even more incredulous.

"Sorry, Neville," Harry said and then shrugged at Ron when Ron mouthed, "Mental."

Dean yelped. Harry looked around to see his books and clothes jump into his trunk one after the other. "I'm not doing that!" Dean cried.

"Dean, calm down," Harry said.

"It's helping us pack now?" Ron looked up and down, left and right, as though he might see some mysterious magic appear.

Harry grimaced. "We have to hurry. The students were told they have to leave immediately; they must

be scared and eager to get out. The castle might end up shaking us off like fleas."

"Don't say that!" Ron ordered. "Don't give it ideas."

"Right. I have to stop thinking, too, probably." As he said that, he could not help thinking it would be a miracle if they all got out of here alive.

Groaning, Harry hurried to pack his trunk.

Trouble found them almost two hours later; it was nearing midnight. Harry, Ron, Dean, Seamus and Neville lingered behind, making sure all Gryffindor boys were packed, accounted for and ready to leave. It all took much too long for Harry's liking.

The common room was crowded and everyone was yelling. It took awhile for Harry to push to the front and out of the portrait hole, where he was greeted by thunderous racket.

"Harry, the staircases!" Hermione called, rushing to his side and pulling him toward the main staircases. Harry froze when he saw them. They were wild, bucking left and right, up and down, now they were connected to this corridor, now to the other. They were all moving, all the way down to the ground floor.

"I think... I think they're trying to help," Hermione said. "Get us down fast."

"I said we shouldn't panic," Harry said, panicking.

"EVERYONE! CALM DOWN!" Ron's voice thundered. Harry winced and turned to stare at him. Ron was standing near the portrait hole, grinning. "SONOROUS CHARM," he explained, quite needlessly. "NOW EVERYONE WISH FOR THE STAIRCASES TO STOP MOVING. CONCENTRATE!"

"Why would that help?" someone asked. Several students murmured their agreement and confusion.

Some demanded to know what was going on. Perhaps they should have told everyone their wishes were not safe, but there was no time and it might have induced greater panic.

"NEVER YOU MIND!" Ron boomed. "JUST DO IT!"

Hermione looked worried. "Will that be enough? Even if they stay still, they could start moving again once we're halfway through."

"We have no choice, Hermione. We have to get out and every route is potentially dangerous."

With a mighty roar, the staircases slammed against each other and stayed put. The students looked shocked.

"Come on, Hermione." Harry took her hand.

"Don't move, don't move, don't move," Hermione chanted as they stepped onto the first step.

"KEEP WISHING THEM TO STAY STILL!" Ron instructed.

It worked, though it had taken awhile for the other students to follow Harry and Hermione. The D.A. members grabbed a few arms, pushed a few students forward and down they went.

They made it to the ground floor safely, if slowly, and Hermione directed them down the dim corridor leading to the Entrance Hall. They had barely taken a few steps when the torches that lined the walls burst into wild flames.

Students screamed as several robes caught fire, as well as a little girl's long hair. Hermione whirled around and Vanished the small fires instantly.

"Honestly!" she cried, restoring the little girl's hair with a wave of her wand. "The corridor is bright enough." The moment she said that all the torches went out and left them in the dark. "Oh, for heaven's sake!" She groaned and lit up her wand. Harry followed her example and so did several other students.

They reached the Entrance Hall by wandlight. McGonagall was there, surrounded by several other teachers. She walked briskly to meet them.

"We were just planning to come up and fetch you. Is everything all right? All the other Houses are already out on the grounds."

"Small trouble with the staircases," Harry said. "But everyone's fine."

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN EVERYONE ELSE IS OUTSIDE? THE RAVENCLAWS HAD TO GET PAST THE STAIRCASES, TOO!"

"Mr Weasley!" McGonagall jumped in fright. "What on earth—?"

"SORRY, PROFESSOR!" Ron looked sheepish, and then he yelped when Hermione turned and pointed her wand at his throat. "Quietus!" she hissed.

"Blimey! My throat hurts." Ron grimaced. "But it really is odd that the Ravenclaws got out before we did."

"Well, they're Ravenclaws," Hermione said. "They're organized and pack faster." She stared at the students exiting the castle, her expression sad. "I can't believe we're leaving. What about our N.E.W.T.s?"

"Don't worry," Harry said. "I'm sure you'll pass all your N.E.W.T.s with an Outstanding, Hermione."

She gave him a sardonic sort of look. "Yes, well, if we stayed here, I could have wished for it and it would come true."

"You hardly need such tricks, Miss Granger," McGonagall said. "Come along now. The carriages are waiting. We're the last ones here." She looked around the castle; Harry thought her eyes looked a bit bright.

The D.A. members waited with the teachers for everyone else to leave.

"I'm sure someone will, er, fix the castle," Harry told McGonagall.

She pursed her lips. "Tommy Wright and Gregory Goyle were led outside almost immediately. They're both fine. Mr Wright is awake and Mr Goyle has returned to his original size. And Professor Plunkett had been miraculously cured, as well. It seems the students had wished his voice away." She shook her head. "You were right. Which means... this is something that will not be easily fixed. I'm certain a way to contain this magic will be found, but it might take a good long while."

Harry was happy to hear Tommy was all right, though he tried not to show it; McGonagall seemed too melancholic to appreciate happiness at the moment.

But then McGonagall smiled suddenly, even laughed a little, though it sounded sad. She looked at Harry sideways. "I liked being Headmistress," she confided. Then she shook her head again and sobered. "Should have known you would ruin it for me, Potter."

Harry's jaw dropped in indignation. "Me? I didn't—"

"Oh hush!" She gave him a fond look. "It was rather stressful; that can be my comfort. Come on. We should leave before I regret it and express a wish to stay."

Outside, they found an outrageous number of carriages lined up neatly in long rows. Students were Levitating and lifting their trunks onto the carriages in the first row, though some trunks, Harry noticed, jumped up all on their own. High up above them, floating candles were burning, hundreds, maybe thousands of them. They cast bright light and warmth down on the snowy grounds.

The magic's kind, Harry thought. It was only ever trying to help, trying to serve.

Farther to the left, Harry noticed a small assembly of Hogwarts ghosts; they glowed faintly in the night.

"Are the ghosts leaving, too?" Harry asked McGonagall. "The magic wouldn't fulfil their wishes, surely?"

"That I do not know. I've explained the situation, and the fact that the magic has Vanished Peeves worries them. It seems they're reluctant to take any chances. The house-elves are gone, too. They have Disapparated."

Harry frowned. "Should we try to retrieve Peeves?"

"We should leave, I think." She looked up at the mass of candles. "There will be time to retrieve Peeves. We'll leave it to the experts. The castle is not going anywhere. Now go put away your trunk. There are not enough carriages for everyone. We'll pass through the gates on foot and they will take us to Hogsmeade station in batches."

"Oh." Harry looked around. "I forgot my trunk." He had left it in the common room and gone outside to see what was going on. "I'll Summon—" The trunk appeared before him. "Thanks," he grumbled.

McGonagall shook her head. "A single thought was enough. It seems it is getting more skilful."

Perhaps it was, but everyone was thinking about packing and leaving, so perhaps the magic was simply

attuned to it. Frowning, Harry hurried to load up his trunk; his housemates had gone ahead and were already Levitating their luggage onto the carriages. Harry's gaze scanned the grounds and found a familiar face in the crowd that was moving toward the gates.

"Be right back," he told Ron and ran over to the group of Slytherins. "Zabini!" he called, pushing his way through. "Have you seen Malfoy? Where is he?" Harry could not see a white-blond head anywhere.

Zabini paused and looked at Harry disdainfully, as though to say: "Are we mates, now? Why are you speaking to me?" A little boy stood next to Zabini, clutching his hand. Harry smiled at him and the boy raised an eyebrow in perfect imitation of his brother's disdain.

Harry eyed Zabini expectantly, ready to beg for information if he had to.

Zabini shrugged. "He was here. Must have gone ahead."

"Did you see him go ahead?" Harry looked toward the gates, trying to spot Malfoy again. "Is he wearing a hat?"

"No, I've not seen him. And, curiously, I actually don't remember who was wearing a hat and who was not. I'll try to remember such things in the future, I’m sure." He cocked his head. "Wish him here, why don't you?"

Harry had actually tried that, though not purposely. He did not say that, though, but settled for a scowl. He pushed past Zabini and found the Greengrass sisters, Millicent Bulstrode, and even questioned Nott. He tried the same with Pansy Parkinson, but she ran away from him. None of them knew where Malfoy was, although Astoria Greengrass had assured him they had led the Slytherins out of the dungeons together, but she had not seen him since.

Harry threw caution to the wind and actively wished for Draco to appear. Maybe he's already past the gates. If he was, then Harry could not call him back. Harry had begged him to get out as fast as possible. Maybe Malfoy had listened.

Goodbye, Potter.

Harry's chest hurt; his heart was beating too fast. Why had Malfoy said goodbye? And said it in a way that sounded so final? It's just something you say. It meant nothing. But Harry could not shake away a growing sense of panic. He doubled back, questioning everyone he knew and every Slytherin who crossed his path. No one had seen him and Harry grew desperate. I want Malfoy, I want Malfoy, I want Malfoy. It did not help.

A little ahead, he spotted Parvati and Lavender. Parvati was yelling as Lavender lifted her enormous trunk onto the carriage with ridiculous ease. Harry ran toward them; he had not questioned them yet.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Parvati was saying, nearly screaming. "You have to eat what you have to eat! It's not your fault! There's no shame in that!"

"Oh, easy for you to say," Lavender spat. "You have nothing to be ashamed of. Look at you! You're as pretty as you've always been. And me? I'm a monster." Lavender sniffed. "Sometimes it hurts to look at you. You're everything I used to be."

Harry winced and took a careful step back, intending to flee; they did not need his questions now. And it was unlikely they had seen Malfoy, anyway. They had arrived with Harry.

Harry almost turned, but then he stopped short, staring at Parvati. A bloody steak appeared in her hand. She gave Lavender a wild look and bit out a huge chunk of bloody meat, so angrily Harry feared she would break her teeth.

"There!" she yelled; there were smudges of blood on her cheek. She chewed savagely and swallowed. "Now I'm a monster, too!"

A broken sound tore from Lavender's throat and then they were hugging and crying, clinging to each

other as Parvati chanted, "You are beautiful. You are, you are."

Embarrassed for intruding, Harry tried to disappear as inconspicuously as he could. Lavender noticed him, however.

"Harry!" she called, pulling away from Parvati, but only slightly. "Is everything all right?"

"I... er, sorry," Harry said and Parvati wiped away her tears. "I just can't find Malfoy."

Parvati frowned. "Didn't see him."

"Did you send him a message?" Lavender asked.

Bloody hell. The Galleon. "I forgot. Will do that. Thanks." Harry took another hasty step back.

Lavender shook her head at him.

Harry hesitated for a moment, telling himself to shut up and run away, but he heard himself say, "You know, scars are cool, Lavender. Very warrior-like." He grinned nervously as she raised her eyebrows. "You should be an Auror. You'd fit right in."

For a second, Harry thought Lavender might walk over, punch him and tell him to mind his own business and shut up about what he didn't understand, but she snorted and said, "I might just do that."

Harry smiled. He thought of suggesting she should talk to someone. Perhaps Bill Weasley. He liked his steaks rare, too, but did not appear to crave them so desperately. And so bloody. Perhaps if Lavender allowed herself to eat whatever she wished regularly, her cravings would not be so strong.

This was not the time for that conversation, however. Harry ran away, taking out his Galleon as he went. The Hogwarts grounds were slowly clearing. Most students had already left.

Harry touched the Galleon with his wand and concentrated. His message appeared on the Galleon and Harry stared at it, waiting. He was not sure how long he stood like that, but then someone tugged at his sleeve.

"Did you find him?" Hermione asked when he looked at her. They must have heard he had been searching for Malfoy.

He shook his head. "He won't answer my message."

"But then he must be on his way to the station," Ron said. "And he didn't notice his Galleon went off. What else? You think he stayed behind?" Ron looked up at the castle. "Why?"

Goodbye, Potter. "No. I don't know."

Hermione stared at him. "You think the Room is trying to kill him, don't you?"

"I don't know," Harry repeated, frustrated. "I just want to make sure he's all right with my own eyes." Please, don't be in danger. Please be here. Harry was desperate, but the magic was not listening.

"Maybe we could try wishing him here?" Ron suggested. "You know, together."

Hermione did not look happy with that suggestion. "I don't think this is something we should rely on. It's too easy to misinterpret a wish. What if the magic sends him flying here and he breaks his neck?"

"We could wish him to be here, safe and healthy," Harry said. "It's worth a try. He's not here on the grounds. I looked everywhere. He's either gone or he's in the castle. And if he's in the castle, he could be in danger. It's worth the risk."

"Wait, then." Hermione pointed her wand at the castle's entrance. "Homenum revelio," she whispered. Nothing happened. "The castle's empty," she said.

"Then it can't hurt to try wish him back," Harry insisted. At this point, he was prepared to believe Malfoy was all right, only after he saw him.

"All right," Hermione said at last. They closed their eyes and wished; when they opened them, Malfoy was not there.

"Maybe we need more people," Harry said.

"Harry, everyone's gone."

Harry looked around. Hermione was right. A few teachers were standing by the gates. McGonagall was looking their way, impatient.

"With only a handful of us left," Hermione said, "It must have heard us. If Malfoy was in the castle, we'd wish him back. And as far as your theory goes, Harry, the Room had a chance to kill Malfoy, but it never did. So I don't think you're right about that."

"Yeah, you're right." Harry's teeth bit down on his lip painfully.

Goodbye, Potter.

"Come on," Harry said. "Before McGonagall tries to Summon us."

They hurried toward the gates. The only two people left on Hogwarts grounds were McGonagall and Ginny.

"Is there a problem?" McGonagall asked.

"No," Harry said quickly before Ron and Hermione could mention Malfoy.

"Yes, there is!" Ginny said.

"Miss Weasley," McGonagall scolded. "Off with you."

Ron frowned at his sister. "What's wrong?"

She looked up at him, clearly distressed. "Hagrid's horses disappeared when he led them past the gates. And Neville's plant, too."

"Er, well, that's..." Ron looked at the book she was clutching to her chest. "What do you have there? Oh Ginny, whatever it is, it's not worth staying here."

"Come on." Hermione wrapped her arm around Ginny's shoulders and led her past the gates. The book was still in her hands, but Ginny said, "I can't look! I can't look!" She shoved the book into Hermione's hands and closed her eyes. "You look! Is there a letter inside?"

Bemused, Hermione searched through the book. "Hmm, I don't... Oh, there it is. It's from... Gwenog Jones?"

Ginny's squeal pierced the sky. "It's real! Ron! It's real!"

Ron was there at once.

That leaves McGonagall, Harry thought.

Ron snatched the letter and read through it quickly. "Tryouts. For the Harpies. Blimey." He looked utterly shocked.

"Professor Slughorn showed her some Omnioculars' recordings and told her about me! Can you believe it?"

"Blimey!" Ron cried again, and then he laughed and picked up Ginny, twirling her around.

McGonagall huffed. "Well, at least someone is happy today."

"You'll be back here soon, Professor," Harry said. "I'm sure of it."

She smiled at him. "Ah, well now, if you're sure, it must be true."

Go. Please go.

She went. One step, another, and she was past the gates. Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

"Did you hear that, Harry?" Ron was saying. "My baby sister! Trying out for the Holyhead Harpies!"

"That's brilliant," Harry said. There must have been something in his voice that attracted everyone's attention.

Ron stopped smiling. "Harry?"

"We should go, Harry," Hermione said.

Harry shook his head. "I have to make sure he's not here."

Hermione's eyes widened in alarm.

"Who is here? A student?" McGonagall looked up at the castle and then took a step forward, as though to return to the grounds. Harry winced when she hit against the invisible barrier. She stared at him, shocked. "Potter? What are you doing?"

"He thinks Malfoy's inside," Ron said. "But he can't be, Harry."

Goodbye, Potter.

"I have to check. I'll be right back."

"Harry, no!" Hermione took out her wand and hurled spells at the barrier. It did not help. "Let us in! We'll go with you!"

"I'll be fine, Hermione."

"You cannot know that, Potter," McGonagall said. She had her wand out as well. "The magic just lost everyone; has lost its purpose entirely. It might latch onto all your wishes. It might be unsafe to think. If someone is still in the castle, we will send Ministry experts to retrieve them. Get out, Potter!"

Get out, Potter, Malfoy had yelled in Harry's dream, but Harry could not leave. He had to kill a dragon. "I'm sorry, Professor. I can't wait that long." Harry turned away.

"Harry!" Ginny's desperate cry was followed by more shouts of "Harry" and "Potter." Behind him, the night exploded with spells. They won't get through. Not if I don't let them.

Harry clutched the Galleon in his hand and ran back to the castle.

*

Harry went straight to the dungeons. Halfway there, he stopped. Astoria had claimed she and Malfoy had led the Slytherins out of the dungeons together. Malfoy had disappeared afterward. Maybe he had simply forgotten something and returned to his dormitory. Or maybe not.

Sometimes I end up somewhere, and I don't know how I got there. I meant to go to the pitch, but I ended up there, instead. Outside the Room. I end up there most of the time.

Harry whirled around and sprinted to the main staircases. They were zigzagging wildly around, but Harry did not pause. Stop, he thought and stop they did.

He's not here. He's not. He's not.

He could not have been. Why would he be? He must have reached Hogsmeade station ages ago. But Harry dashed up the stairs, head spinning as he went round and round, leaving floors behind.

He's not here. Don't be here.

Harry all but flew toward the Room of Requirement, and then froze, shocked.

Malfoy was there. The Room's door was open; Malfoy's hand was on the knob. He was staring at the darkness inside.

"Malfoy! Get away from it!" Harry screamed, but Malfoy did not seem to hear him, even though Harry was merely a few feet away.

Harry fully intended to run up to Malfoy and grab him, tear him away from the room, drag him out of the castle, but he never got the chance.

Something boomed in the distance, roared and creaked, coming from behind the wall that closed off the corridor in front of them, turning it into a dead end. High-pitched screams reached Harry's ears. It can't be. Everyone's gone. There was no one left to scream.

The screams grew louder and the wall cracked and glowed, first yellow then red.

"Help us!" someone cried and Harry suddenly recognised the screams. Hundreds of terrified voices; the Hogwarts portraits were in agony.

"Malfoy," Harry whispered, but Malfoy turned toward the glowing wall, away from Harry. "Malfoy!" Harry tried again, taking out his wand.

The wall melted and an enormous head of a fiery dragon pushed through, heading straight for Malfoy.

"Accio Malfoy!"

It worked. Malfoy spun around and shot toward Harry. They tumbled to the ground; Harry's head hit the stone with a dull thud. His vision blurred.

"Potter?" Malfoy was above him, staring down; Harry could barely make out his white-blond hair.

"RUN!" Harry bellowed, struggling to get up; his head hurt, the world was spinning. He could feel the heat of the Fiendfyre licking his skin, scorching it.

Malfoy yanked him upward, then dragged him toward the stairs.

"Hold tight!" Malfoy said, bodily pressing Harry against the banister, the push so sudden and hard Harry thought he would fall over the edge. He couldn't see.

"DOWN!" Malfoy yelled and Harry's stomach lurched. They shot downward, the stairs falling like a broken lift left to freefall.

There was light in front of Harry's eyes. Why can't I see? Everything was blurry; the pain in his head dulled and Harry realised—he had lost his glasses. They must have been knocked off when Harry had fallen. Harry wished them back and they appeared on his nose. He could see down, over the banister, all the way to the rapidly approaching ground floor.

"STOP!" he screamed.

"What—?" Malfoy turned his head, looked down and gasped. The stairs stopped moving.

A mass of fiery chimeras, serpents and dragons danced on the ground floor, filling it with fire, burning the screaming portraits, flying up toward them.

Malfoy looked up and made a strangled sound. Above them, the fiery dragon roared and spread its

massive wings. It covered the whole ceiling, a sea of red-yellow fire.

Harry searched for a way out. "The corridor!" He pointed down. The corridor to their right was dangerously close to the fire below, but the stairs moved toward it at once and they jumped onto the marble floor.

"Where are we?" Harry asked, catching his breath.

A tall knight burst into one of the paintings hanging on the wall. He screamed, burning. The painting burst into flames. The one next to it followed suit, and then another and another, as far as the wall went.

Malfoy looked around wildly. "Second floor. I think." His dark eyes found Harry again. "We're trapped."

Harry grabbed Malfoy's shoulder. "Wish it away! Wish the fire away!"

"What the fuck do you think I'm doing? It's not working, Potter! It's Fiendfyre. It's out of control."

"Why did you—" There was no time for this. They had to get out. Find a window, a passage to the tower, anything. But the fire had closed off the Entrance Hall; it would never let them reach a window. They were in the middle of the castle; the windows were too far away.

A fiery chimera jumped into the corridor. Harry grabbed Malfoy's arm and they ran, dodging the flames that reached out from the portraits.

Second floor. There must have been a passage here; one that led somewhere useful. He only knew of the one that led to the ground floor. That was not an option.

"I know where to go!" Harry said, remembering. "Come on!" They turned left, then right, and it was a good thing they had because the fire was spreading, coming after them from every direction. They found

themselves in front of the boys' bathroom.

Harry burst inside and went straight to the sinks. He easily found the one with a tiny snake engraving scratched on the side of one of the copper taps.

"Open!" Harry said. "OPEN!"

Malfoy had closed the door and ran up to Harry, staring. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Harry looked at him hopefully. "I don't suppose you know how to say open in Parseltongue?" Ron knew, but Harry did not. He had heard himself speak the language of snakes, but it had always been so surprising; he could not hope to imitate the hissing sounds he had made. And lately, snakes' spits and hisses sounded like snakes' spits and hisses to Harry's ears. Malfoy just stared at him and Harry shook his head. "It doesn't matter." He focused back on the sink. "Open!" The Room should provide; it had helped with the stairs. "You try," he told Malfoy.

Malfoy blinked. "Potter, it's a sink."

"I'm aware of that! But it's also the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets."

Malfoy did not believe him; it was clear on his face.

"Malfoy, please. Just trust me and help me wish it open." There was smoke coming from the gap beneath the door; outside, Harry could hear the booming roar of the fire.

At last, Malfoy grimaced and glared at the sink. "Open!" he ordered, but it did not help. "OPEN!" Nothing happened.

We'll die in this bathroom. It was only moderately worse than dying in the Chamber of Secrets, Harry

assured himself. They were trapped, either way. The only thing the Chamber could give them was time. Though, Harry could not help hoping that the Chamber was deep enough in the ground that the Room's magic had less power there. Or at least the fire could not reach them. Or perhaps the Chamber was well protected. It came with the castle just like the Room did. Perhaps Salazar Slytherin had protected it against everything imaginable, even the sort of magic that was contained in the Room of Requirement. Perhaps that was why the Room could not help them open it.

Malfoy pointed his wand at the sink. "Rictumsempra!"

The sink shuddered violently; it would not stop. Alarmed, Harry pointed his wand at it and shouted, "Protego!" a split-second before the sink exploded. The sharp pieces that flew toward them were contained and fell to the floor and through the large circular opening that had manifested before their feet.

Harry laughed, dizzy with relief. Malfoy looked disappointed, however.

"I expected better from Salazar Slytherin," he said. "Flitwick would laugh at him."

Harry grinned. "I could kiss you right now. I forgot about the damn Tickling Charm."

Harry did not kiss Malfoy, however; instead, he pointed at the pipe. "Go on."

Malfoy blinked. "In there? It's a pipe. It's a dirty pipe."

The bathroom door creaked; the smoke was filling the room. "Malfoy, plea—"

Malfoy cursed and slid onto the floor, then pushed his legs into the pipe. "Fuck this," he said, lowered himself and let go. Harry followed soon after. With a deep breath he let himself slide down, slowly gaining speed as the pipe twisted and turned, growing steeper. It seemed to go on forever, but finally the

pipe levelled out and spat out Harry straight at Malfoy.

Malfoy cursed again as they tumbled to the ground.

"I hate you, Potter," Malfoy said, detangling himself from Harry and struggling to stand. Then he grabbed Harry's hand and pulled him to his feet, lighting up his wand in the process.

"This doesn't look like a Chamber. It just looks like a dirty old tunnel." Malfoy sounded disappointed again.

"Come on." Harry lit his wand. His feet made wet sounds as they slapped against the damp floor. They hurried on, rounding corner after corner; the tunnel seemed to stretch forever. Perhaps it would take them past Hogwarts grounds. The Chamber was below the lake and only a part of the lake was enclosed by the magical barriers protecting Hogwarts. Perhaps the Chamber was even farther away.

Finally, they reached a stone wall with two entwined serpents that stared at them with glinting emerald eyes.

"Tickling Charm again?" Malfoy asked and Harry nodded. He did not have a better idea.

Malfoy raised his wand but the wall cracked open even before he had uttered the spell.

It's following us, Harry thought. This time the magic had helped them open the door. Yet it had done no such thing in the bathroom. They, or rather Flitwick, had found a loophole and broken through Slytherin's defences, perhaps something like that was beyond the magic's capabilities; a simple charm but a conclusion beyond its limited comprehension, even though it must have seen the solution in their minds. The Chamber was safe, but now, they had let the magic inside.

They entered the long, dimly lit chamber. It glowed faintly green, just like Harry remembered. Harry

closed and sealed the wall behind them, though he suspected the effort was futile.

Malfoy was looking around at the towering pillars and carved serpents that were lined up on both sides, leading toward the enormous statue of Salazar Slytherin.

"Ugh!" Malfoy said when they finally reached it. He was craning his neck for a better look. "He's ugly." Malfoy sounded impressed nonetheless. The sheer enormity of the statue was awe-inspiring.

Malfoy gasped suddenly. Harry followed his line of sight and spotted the giant skeleton of the Basilisk Harry had slain years ago. The King of Serpents, Harry thought, looked most unimpressive these days.

Malfoy did not seem to share Harry's view. "Is that—" His voice broke. "It can't be!" he breathed and ran up to the skull. He froze next to it and stared, as though the dead Basilisk had managed to turn him to stone.

Harry smiled at him and then scanned the Chamber. "I think we're safe here." For a few minutes or so. The fire would reach them down here eventually, but at least he had time to think.

He could not understand why the Room was so intent on murdering Malfoy all of a sudden. Because Hermione was right. It had had a chance to kill him before, several chances, but it never had. It rather seemed like the magic had saved Malfoy that night at the pitch. What had changed? Was it simply because this was its last chance? But how would it know that?

But the magic is kind, Harry reminded himself. Or rather, it only served. Surely, it would not want to kill of its own volition. Though, Harry could not know that for certain.

Harry scrunched up his face. He was acutely aware of his glasses, still on his nose. Had he Summoned them earlier, or had the magic Conjured a new pair for him? If the latter was true, then the magic was already as strong here as it was everywhere else in the castle.

I should wish for something. He wished for a glass of water. He did not get it.

"Malfoy! Wish for something." Harry turned around. Malfoy was still standing in front of the Basilisk's giant skull.

Harry walked over. "Malfoy?"

"That's a Basilisk, Potter," Malfoy informed him.

Harry nodded. "A dead one."

"A big one." Malfoy looked at him, stared.

"It looks smaller now, actually," Harry said, uncomfortable. It truly did look smaller, though still enormous. It was only a skeleton and Harry was much taller than he had been the last time he had seen it.

Malfoy was still staring at him. "It was true, then." He shook his head. "It can't have been. It's a Basilisk, Potter."

"What was true? That the Basilisk was in the castle? You saw the students get Petrified, Malfoy. You threatened Muggle-borns with the big bad Slytherin monster, as I recall."

Malfoy shook his head. "But I was just... I heard the stories, but I thought someone else, a person, was behind it all. Not a Basilisk." Malfoy's forehead furrowed. "It's dead."

"You think so?" Harry could not help smiling a little, even though they were just standing around,

wasting time. "Maybe it's just sleeping?" he suggested.

"You killed it. You actually killed it in our second-year."

Harry was losing patience. "Malfoy, this is old news. Everyone knows what happened. I've given more interviews than warranted." Technically, he had only given two, but they had been thorough and much too exhausting.

"Old news?" Malfoy repeated. "Everyone knew? Who in their right mind would have believed you, Potter? We were told the school would be closed, and then the next day Dumbledore stands up in the Great Hall and tells everyone the school will remain open because Harry Potter went down to the Chamber of Secrets and slew a Basilisk with a sword. The threat is no more!" Malfoy could not stop shaking his head. "It was the stupidest thing I'd ever heard! Scary monster no one has ever seen, skulking around the school. But fear not! This brave twelve-year-old boy found it and killed it, though no one actually saw it happen; and no, you can't see the dead body, because it's in a special secret chamber, which, you guessed it, no one has ever seen, either." Malfoy laughed suddenly. "And Dumbledore! He looked like he actually believed you. I had never been more sure he was a goner, insane, senile. I thought Lockhart gave you ideas and you followed in his footsteps, making up ridiculous stories; though, I must say yours was even crazier than Lockhart's. I thought, next, you'll write a book."

"Er," Harry had no idea what to say to that. "I suppose, it must have sounded a bit crazy when put like that."

"A bit?" Malfoy looked incredulous. "Harry Potter defied Voldemort and found the Philosopher's Stone, yet no one saw him; either way, Gryffindor gets house points and the cup. Harry Potter battled off a hundred Dementors! A hundred! But no one saw him do that, either. All hail Harry Potter! Our hero! He performs marvellous deeds while no one's looking! Honestly!" Malfoy's gaze went back to the Basilisk and stayed there. He seemed to have run out of steam.

"It was all true, though," Harry said, tentative. He could not help pointing that out. If nothing else, to defend Dumbledore. If nothing else, to impress Malfoy, a tiny voice in his head offered. Harry scowled at it.

"I gathered," Malfoy said quietly. "I'm a bigger idiot than I thought."

"What? You're not an idiot!"

Malfoy did not reply.

"I mean," Harry tried again. "You're right. When you put it like that, it makes sense you didn't believe it." It was hard to think like that, though; Harry had been through it all; he knew it was true. And he knew people did not believe him, but they were wrong because it was true. Harry could barely believe Malfoy had compared him to Lockhart. But, Harry had to admit, his stories were crazier than Lockhart's.

"It does make sense," Malfoy said, angry now. "But I'm an idiot for ever thinking..." He looked at Harry, his gaze searching. "For a moment, back in the hospital wing, I thought... and just now, when you came back for me..." He laughed again; it sounded bitter. "It's just something you do, isn't it? You run to fight Basilisks and Dementors, jump into fires. It doesn't matter to you."

Harry could not keep up with Malfoy's thought process. "What doesn’t matter to me?"

"Whether the person you're pulling out of the fire is worth saving."

Harry blinked. "You're worth saving," he said, incredulous.

Malfoy laughed again, shook his head. "You'd say that, wouldn't you? Do you even know why you're saying it? Because I do." Malfoy's eyes were dark. "You know, I kept thinking, this whole time, that something had happened with the Room, with the magic inside it. I thought, I spent so much time in there in our sixth-year and I was there when it died, so maybe, maybe the magic was somehow helping me, maybe we had some sort of bond, and it was giving me what I wanted. And what I wanted, what I wished for, was you. And the Room provided, didn't it? I thought it had Conjured you; you kept showing up, you were so... worried and, the way you were looking at me! I thought, this can't be real. You aren't real. But then, sometimes, I almost believed it. I started thinking my theory was ridiculous; that the Room was dead and it couldn't have been helping me with anything. And then you burst into McGonagall's office earlier, with your brand new discovery, and I realised I've been half-right all along.

Except you're not Conjured, you're controlled. By my wish."

Harry could not believe his ears. He shook his head, trying to speak. It took awhile. "That's not true, Malfoy. No one's controlling me."

Malfoy smiled a little. It was a condescending, sad sort of smile. "Did you get past the gates?"

"What?"

"Earlier, before you came back, did you leave Hogwarts grounds and return, or did you not even leave?"

Harry opened his mouth to reply, but then realised that perhaps it would be better if he lied.

Goodbye, Potter.

Malfoy was saying goodbye. He had said goodbye because he thought that once Harry left the grounds, Malfoy's wish would be cancelled and Harry would realise he had never wanted him at all.

Harry had stayed silent for too long.

"Thought as much," Malfoy said. "I wished you back."

"No!" Harry ran up to him and grabbed his arm, shaking him. "Don't be ridiculous! I'm not under anyone's control. It doesn't work like that; it can't work like that. There are things the Room can't give you, things that can't be Conjured."

"And how would you know, Potter? We know nothing about this sort of magic. And didn’t the Room give

Harper to Parvati Patil? She wished for him, and he was there, you said it yourself."

"But they both must have wanted it! And Harper was unwell, easily manipulated, his mind was a mess. Mine isn’t. I know how I feel, I know what I want." Except he did not know how he felt, and he was not sure what he wanted. Sometimes he was not sure if he would rather punch Malfoy or kiss him. Or whether to pull him closer or shove him away.

It was too confusing, too ludicrous, too new. But it was real. It was not the mindless bliss of the Imperious Curse or the obsessive surety of a Love Potion, it was messy and frustrating, wonderful and frightening. Too complicated for the Room's magic to understand, no matter how sentient it was.

Malfoy smiled again. "A likely tale." Then he shoved Harry away, pulled out of his grip. "Doesn't even matter now, does it? We'll die here."

"Don't say that!"

"It's true! And that's not all. Don't you see, Potter?" Malfoy's face contorted. "I killed you. You're here because of me. I wished you here."

"I'm here because that's just something I do, remember? I jump into fires."

"No. No, I could have wished you away. I should do it now, but I can't. I tried, but I can't."

"Wish me away?" Harry stared at him. Wish us away. He meant, wish us away, surely. "Why are you here? Why did you stay behind?"

"I didn't stay behind. I was already on the grounds—and then I wasn't. It keeps happening. All the time. I found myself in front of the Room again. I tried to run away, but it kept pulling me back. So I gave up. Stopped struggling. It wants to kill me; you know it does. It can't be stopped."

Harry had said it; he had believed it. He had changed his mind. "It wants to kill you, does it? But you just told me that the Room gave you what you wanted most, which, apparently, is me. If it wants to kill you, why do that? It makes no sense, Malfoy."

"Just another way to punish me, I suppose. Perhaps it's just cruel."

No, it's kind. "Punish you for what, exactly?"

"Oh yes, what could it possibly be?" Malfoy snorted. "Is this a part of my wish? To make you forgetful? I almost killed two people, I had Madam Rosmerta Imperiused for months, I led Death Eaters into Hogwarts, and it's my fault the Room burned and Crabbe died. Don't you see? The magic doesn't like me very much. It doesn't like a certain type of Slytherin much, either, now does it?"

"No, Draco, that's not true. The magic only serves. For the most part, it served the D.A. It listened to their thoughts, read their minds." What if Parvati had wanted someone else? Someone who had not been a Slytherin whose parents were Voldemort sympathisers? Would Anthony Goldstein have been so quick to wish him dead? Perhaps it wasn't just Goldstein, either. The rest of Dumbledore's Army never liked Harper. Everyone had known he was one of those Slytherins, the ones going around muttering about Mudbloods under his breath. All those negative feelings toward him; the magic only listened. "And it never meant to harm Peterson. It was only giving him what he wanted. It's only giving you what you want, Draco." Harry was sure of it now. That was why the Transfiguration classroom had been on fire; that had been Malfoy's wish. He had been tortured and he had taken it, never trying to free himself. He could have, though, because Draco was right about one thing: the Room's magic knew him best. He had spent so much time there; this year, too. The Room was attuned to his thoughts. He was drawn to it, and it was drawn to him. If he had wished it, he could have stopped the torture when Pritchard had attacked him. Malfoy said he had helped wish away Pritchard and his cronies, but had he wished them away before the fire started or after?

If he had wished it, he could have Apparated to the hospital wing back when he was lying on the Quidditch pitch. But instead, it had been Malfoy's wish that helped Smith's wish come true. Malfoy must have been feeling guilty that night. He could not have known his father was acting on the Ministry's orders; Lucius would not have been able to tell him; it was not the sort of information one sent in a

letter. Draco must have believed Smith; he had believed his father was trying to bring Voldemort back. How miserable that must have made him.

And the stairs, the ones that had moved beneath their feet that Sunday; that could have been Malfoy, too. What had been going through his mind? Harry remembered saying, It would make your father happy to know we spent some quality time together, wouldn't it? and Malfoy had looked shocked. Had he been embarrassed of his father again? Miserable for being pressured to befriend someone he couldn't? Fearful that Harry knew exactly how Malfoy felt about him? How much he wanted him? Had he wished for the ground to open and swallow him?

Malfoy stared at him. "Don't be stupid, Potter. I don't want to die. I especially don't want to burn."

"Are you sure about that? Didn't you just say you're not worth saving?"

"That's not—" Malfoy stopped speaking abruptly. A long moment passed before he spoke again. "I want to live. Believe me, I do. But the Room won't let me. Don't you see what it's doing? It's trying to correct your mistake."

"My mistake?"

"Yes." Malfoy stepped closer, to glare. "The mistake you made back in May. When the fire spread in the Room of Hidden Things, I was sure I would die. I kept thinking, This is my fault. Because it was. If not for me, Goyle and Crabbe would have never found you. I knew how wild they were, but I didn't care. Crabbe started that fire, not knowing he couldn't control it, but I led them there knowing I couldn't control them. I thought only of myself and my parents. I thought if I could just surrender you... But when I was trapped on that pile of rubbish with Goyle, waiting for the fire to reach us, everything got so clear. Everything I've done, people I almost killed, people who had suffered and died because of me... I knew exactly what was happening—justice, Potter. Justice coming to get me. I thought you were dead, too. I thought you were all dead. You know, I never once thought you could actually defeat Voldemort. Not once. But in that moment, I thought, what if you could? What if you were truly the only one who ever could have? And I killed you. Killed my parents, too, probably. Killed everyone. And now I'll get what I deserve. Or so I thought. But then you showed up. Alive, coming back for me. Forgiveness, a chance, out of nowhere. I thought, you're not so hopeless after all, Draco. There's someone who thinks you're worth saving. But that's not what it was. That's just who you are, what you do, and I just got lucky. My luck's

running out, though. All this time I knew it would happen, eventually. I was waiting for it. The magic's making sure that what should have happened then, happens now."

Harry flew at him, grabbing fistfuls of Malfoy's hair, clutching his head between his hands. "Draco, no. You did get lucky. You're lucky Katie Bell and Ron are alive, and, yes, you're lucky I got the chance to come back for you. But so what? It's not cause for punishment, it is a chance. I got lucky, too. I got lucky when I took your wand at the Manor and became the master of the Elder Wand. If that didn't happen, both of us might be dead. Others, too. You could have been a piece of the puzzle that ruined everything, but you weren't; you were the piece that helped defeat Voldemort."

"If I had known I had something Voldemort wanted, I'd have given it to him, Potter. I would have given it to him so he would leave me and my parents alone."

"And now? Knowing what you know now, would you still give it to him then?"

"What does it matter what I would do now?" Draco tried to escape Harry's grip, but Harry was not letting him go.

"It matters," Harry said. "Because you did get a second chance and now you're trying to ruin it. Stop going backward. You say you want to live and I believe you. If you wanted to die, you'd be dead already; you'd have died on the pitch if not before; you'd have died earlier when that dragon went after you. I wouldn't have been able to help. But if you don't let go, if you don't forgive yourself, if you don't stop thinking you deserve punishment, that this is justice, then the magic won't stop trying to give it to you. It thinks that's what you want; it thinks you're desperate for it; it thinks it's doing you a favour. It Conjured Fiendfyre for you, Draco. Fiendfyre that almost killed it, that killed the Room. The fire is cursed, wild, it can't control it, we know it can't. This time you won't be getting lucky. This time I can't save you. Please. You're the one with the power here. You're the only one who can save us. Wish us away. We can Apparate; the magic will help us. You just have to want it badly enough."

"I do want it!" Malfoy shoved Harry backward and managed to push him away this time. "I've tried to wish us away, but it's not working, Potter. You're wrong. It's not doing this for—" Draco froze suddenly; he paled, staring at Harry, at his eyes. No, not his eyes—his glasses. A deep, rumbling sound made Harry look past Draco, just as Draco whirled around. There was light coming from the very end of the long chamber; Draco must have seen its reflection in Harry's glasses.

The fire was coming, through the pipes, through the tunnels. The light grew stronger.

Harry ran at Malfoy, grabbing his shoulders, turning him around. "Malfoy, please, you have to try!"

"It doesn't work!" Malfoy's eyes were wild. "There's nothing I can do, Potter. You have to save us. It won't listen to me! Apparate us, anything."

He has too much faith in me. Malfoy was waiting for him to save them and Harry couldn't, not this time. He tried; he tried to wish them away. He even considered wishing those he had left in front of the gates to come help them, but promptly shoved that possibility aside. He would only lead them to danger; they might die, too. Had he not tried to wish Malfoy back with Ron and Hermione? Three against one and it had meant nothing. How many would it take to stop the fire? It did not matter. Harry would have to desperately wish for the magic to grant them entrance and he knew he could never do that, and the magic might not listen to him at all, if it decided his wish went against Malfoy's.

The magic clung to Draco's desperation, his guilt, his surrender. It would never let Draco leave, not while a part of him still believed he deserved this. Perhaps, when the fire reached them, perhaps Draco could finally break them free. Perhaps it would be too late. Fiendfyre might have destroyed the castle by then; the magic would have to run again.

The Chamber grew hotter, brighter. I have to make him see... But how? How do you convince someone they were worth saving? That this was not justice? That they have a chance to turn everything around? Hermione would know; Harry did not. But he had do something. Make Draco fight for survival, fight for himself, stand up in his defence; Draco had done it in the past, he could do it again.

Draco gripped Harry's shoulders; he was crushing them. "Potter," he whispered, he looked terrified. "You have to..."

"I can't help—"

"You have to leave. I want you to leave."

Harry's heart stopped beating. He'll wish me away. Blackness pulled at the edge of his vision; Malfoy's grip on Harry's shoulders loosened. I'm slipping away. Apparating. Leaving him behind.

"NO!" Harry cried. There was nothing he could do. Only one thing occurred to him. Harry clenched his fist and punched Draco in the jaw. His knuckles exploded in pain as Draco stumbled backward with a cry. The world straightened and the Chamber returned to focus. Very bright focus, growing brighter. The fiery dragon flew into the Chamber, soared high up to the faraway ceiling, covering it whole.

But Draco was staring at Harry, eyes wide.

"You think I'm not real?" Harry stepped closer. "You think I'm under your control?" Harry punched Malfoy again, in the same place, as hard as he could. Malfoy stumbled backward again, eyes flashing as he rubbed his jaw.

"How's that for real?" Harry said. "You think you can't do anything to help? Of course you can't! Look at you! Always waiting for me to save you. The one time I need you to return the favour—you can't! You know why? Because you're just a whiner. And a ferret. That's who you are. You're a pathetic little whiny ferret who just gives up when things get hard. Lies down and takes it." Harry's heart seemed to constrict painfully, as though begging him to shut up. My monster, Harry thought. His chest monster tried to tell him what to do, but he could not afford to listen to it. Not this time. "That's why you wanted my cock up your arse so much, isn't it? That's why you begged for it. Or did your daddy tell you to do it? You want to be like him? You want to crawl like him? Do you want this, too?" Harry swung his fist again, aiming for Draco's face, but Draco caught it, crushed it in a vice-like grip, his face contorted in anger; his nostrils flared.

"You arrogant piece of shit," Draco said, voice low and dangerous.

Don't tickle a sleeping dragon, Harry thought and braced himself.

Malfoy's fist connected with Harry's cheekbone; stars exploded in front of Harry's eyes. He would have

fallen, but Malfoy was still holding Harry's arm captive, keeping him upright. The next blow landed on Harry's stomach, knocking out his breath, the next caught him on his face again, across his jaw and ear.

Harry was dizzy with pain and when Draco shoved him backward, he went down, falling onto his back.

Malfoy was on him in an instant, kneeling between Harry's spread legs. He caught Harry's wrists and held them above his head.

Harry waited for the next punch. His vision cleared. Draco was above him, face flushed, twisted into a grimace of fury. His wand was pointed at Harry's face. He was so angry, he was shaking.

"Would you like another scar, Potter?" Malfoy asked, nearly whispered. "I know just which spell to use. You showed it to me, remember?"

Seconds ticked by, but the spell was not coming. Malfoy was still shaking.

Harry could not help himself—he laughed. The laughter bubbled in his throat, filled him with lightness and relief.

Malfoy froze to stare at him. His eyes were on fire; the Chamber was not.

Harry looked up at the tall dark ceiling. He had thought the Room could not stop Fiendfyre, but maybe it could stop the one it had Conjured itself. Or maybe it hadn't been Fiendfyre at all, but merely an imitation. Harry didn't know, didn't care. It was gone.

Malfoy sat back on his heels; he was staring at the ceiling. He looked toward the end of the Chamber, then finally down at Harry again.

"Merlin, I'm fucked up," Harry said. His arse rested against Malfoy's thighs; his legs were spread. He was

painfully hard. Apparently, that was something fighting with Malfoy did to him. Perhaps he should simply accept it.

Malfoy blinked and looked down at Harry's crotch and the noticeable bulge there. Then he glanced around the Chamber again.

"You're..." Malfoy began.

"I was right. Not to rub it in, or anything."

Malfoy shook his head. "The things you said..."

"Reverse psychology." Harry frowned. "I think."

"You didn't... mean it?"

"Not one word," Harry promised. "Well, except the ferret part. But you're in luck. I happen to like ferrets."

"You—" Draco drew in a sharp breath. "You idiot. I could have..." He still held the wand in his hand; he lowered it hastily.

"No, you couldn't have," Harry told him. "Because that's not you. Not anymore. You don't know it, but I do."

Draco stared at him and then leaned in so quickly, the sudden touch of his lips against Harry's was pure shock. "You idiot," Draco mumbled again against Harry's lips and then deepened the kiss. Harry's body flew upward, pressing against Draco, as close as it could. He could feel his trousers and pants disappear; cold air hit his bare skin. Malfoy's or his wish, Harry had no idea. We should leave. They really should.

The magic was still here, still dangerous. But Draco thought I didn't want him. The urge to show him that he did, and how much, was stronger than any danger.

"Idiot, idiot," Malfoy repeated. "We can't... we have to..." Malfoy's hand slid over Harry's cock, his balls, and then his fingers were pushing inside Harry, slick, slipping inside steadily. It burned, felt so incredibly odd, but Harry heard himself moan. It would have been embarrassing, but Harry caught Malfoy's gaze, burning hotly, fixed on Harry's face that flushed under its intensity. All embarrassment was forgotten; Harry could focus only on Malfoy's eyes and his fingers, moving deep inside of him.

"Fuck!" Malfoy said and pulled away. Harry would have complained, but Malfoy's hand wrapped around Harry's cock, pulling on it so harshly Harry cried out.

"No, no," Harry gasped. "I want, I want you inside..." He needed it. Now.

"Yes," Draco breathed, kissing Harry again, his hand gripping Harry's cock. "Later, tomorrow, whenever, always. Not now."

"Now," Harry insisted, but hot licks of pleasure spread to his balls, his cock, the growing intensity of it made light explode in front of his eyes.

He wished it could last forever, but the Room did not grant him that. Harry forgave it; it had granted him Malfoy, alive and panting against Harry's neck, thrusting against Harry's hip before he shuddered with his own release.

Blood must have returned to Harry's brain because he was suddenly horrified by his earlier demands. The two minutes they just lost was too much. They had to leave. As soon as possible.

Malfoy gasped and shuddered again. Moments later, he rose up on his elbows. Harry blinked at him. Malfoy's hair was a mess, his face flushed, eyes bright, an ugly bruise was forming on his jaw. Pointy chin and pointy nose, which Harry had seen a thousand times before, but it only just now occurred to him—Malfoy was beautiful.

"You should punch me again," Harry requested promptly, ashamed of his own thoughts.

Malfoy frowned. "I don't want to."

"I'll settle for a kiss, then." Smiling, Harry yanked at Malfoy's hair, pulling him closer. When their lips touched, the pain in Harry's cheek disappeared; Draco must have wished Harry's bruises away.

"I think these are my favourite," Harry said, breathless, long moments after. "Slow, right after..."

Malfoy stared at him. Well, they are, Harry wanted to say, defensive. But then Malfoy cocked his head and said, "Can you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Harry listened, frowning, but then he heard it: a deep rumbling sound coming from the distance. It grew steadily stronger. Harry pushed at Malfoy and sat up. "Draco, no!" He shook Malfoy's shoulders. "What are you doing? What are you thinking?"

Malfoys eyes were wide. "It's not me! I'm not—it's not me, Potter!"

"Malfoy, please!"

"It's not me!" Malfoy yelled. "I get it, Potter, I do. I have a chance and I'm taking it. Believe me, there's nothing I want more. I want to get the hell out of here and live. Fuck punishment. And..." He grabbed Harry's face. "This is real, I know it now. I know." He kissed Harry again, a desperate hard kiss. "I know," he repeated. "I'm fucking happy."

Harry swallowed thickly. "Then get us out of here." He struggled to stand. Malfoy sprang up and pulled up his clothes. Harry wished for his pants and trousers but they did not appear for him.

Malfoy grabbed his hand. "We'll Apparate."

"Wait. For fuck's sake, Malfoy, I need my pants!"

Malfoy blinked and then pointed his wand at Harry. "Aparecium!" he cried and Harry's pants and trousers were back where they belonged.

"Okay," Harry said, calmer now that he was no longer half-naked. "We should—" The ground shook and did not stop shaking. This can't be. Was he wrong? Was Malfoy right? Was the magic truly trying to kill him?

"Potter, I can't. I'm trying, but I can't Apparate us." The ground shook harder, the giant pillars squeaked, sooth flew everywhere, little pieces of rock fell from the above.

The world turned into a blur. Harry's glasses had vanished. They were Conjured; they were not mine. "Malfoy," Harry whispered. "My glasses..."

There was a bright flash of light and a pair of glasses appeared on Harry's nose. They were all wrong. They helped him see, but the image was not right and the glasses threatened him with a headache.

"They'll do for now," Malfoy said. "Come on, we have to concentrate."

Harry shook his head. It made him dizzy. "It won't help, Malfoy. The glasses were Conjured. By the Room. And now they're gone."

The earthquake grew stronger. The pillars won't last.

"But..." Malfoy looked around. "What's happening, then? Is the magic gone, destroyed? By the Fiendfyre?"

"Maybe," Harry breathed. "The Chamber's collapsing; we have to get out." But how? They could not Apparate and the tunnels were unsafe, too.

"Potter!" Malfoy whispered; he sounded alarmed. "Look!"

Harry looked above and gasped. The enormous head of Salazar Slytherin leaned forward, teetering, then leaned harder with a deafening creak. There was no time to run from something so large.

"PROTEGO!" They shouted as one, wands raised, and the head rushed toward them, larger than it had seemed seconds before. The left side of the giant face crashed against their joint Shields. Painful vibrations spread through Harry's arm, leaving it numb. Their bright Shields were dimming, but the head rolled to smash the Basilisk's skeleton with a sickening crunch. Pieces of rock and bone flew at them, bouncing against their weakening Shields.

"Potter, the pillars!"

They were breaking, one by one in a circle. We'll die here, after all. Harry's hand found Malfoy's and squeezed.

And then everything went still.

Malfoy's fingers felt cold in Harry's grasp. "Is it over?" Malfoy asked.

It did not matter. Harry had only one thing to say. "RUN!" he shouted and pulled at Malfoy's hand. They sprinted toward the tunnels; their feet made wet, dull sounds against the ground. If the ground shook again, they were not safe there, either, but if they stayed in the Chamber, their deaths were certain.

Shields could not save them.

"Potter," Malfoy said, tone urgent. He tried to free his hand. "We'd run faster if were weren't holding—"

"We'll risk it!" Harry snapped back. He had no intention of letting Malfoy out of his sight or out of his grasp.

Parts of the tunnels had collapsed, but Harry and Draco cleared their way with spells. The way back seemed shorter, but they were both sweaty and breathless when they reached the wide entrance that led up to the pipe and, eventually, the second floor bathroom.

Harry rushed to the pipe's entrance and stared up. It was burnt, but there. "Any ideas?" If the magic was gone, and the absence of Harry's glasses seemed to indicate it was, then Ron and Hermione would be able to get into the castle. They would find Harry and Draco, eventually. But waiting around was not a plan. They could try to Summon their broomsticks, but those were all the way in Hogsmeade by now and even if they managed, flying up through a narrow tunnel would be complicated, to say the least. Harry turned to Malfoy. "I think we'll have to climb."

"Wait, I..." Malfoy scanned their surroundings and Levitated a large rock. It landed before him and Malfoy shot a few spells at it, grimacing. "It's a complicated enchantment," he was saying. "I only ever read about it." The rock turned into a square block; it looked like a stone step. Malfoy shot more spells at it. Harry recognised the Gripping Charm's incantation, which was usually cast on Quaffles to make gripping it in midair easier, and Geminio, cast several times, which duplicated the step.

Harry could do little but stare; he was not sure what Draco was doing, though he guessed he was creating a staircase. Draco cast another set of charms, but looked unhappy with them. He tried again, lips pursed, brow furrowed. Harry found himself smiling.

"What?" Draco growled. He must have noticed Harry's grin. "It will work. It's just taking awhile," he added.

"I believe you!" Harry said quickly. He did not want to explain why he was smiling. The sight of Draco

working hard on getting them out filled him with warmth. It reminded him that, earlier, Draco had tried to save Harry, tried to Apparate him to safety and stay behind. It had infuriated Harry at the time, but now, the mere memory of it made him feel he could fly up that pipe without the aid of magic.

Draco pointed his wand at the steps and then at the pipe. The steps followed the indicated directions and flew toward the pipe, one after the other, creating a stairway.

"Er," Harry said, though he tried not to doubt Draco. "Isn't that stairway a little short?"

Draco grimaced. "It's enchanted. It's supposed to move with us."

"Will it?"

"We'll find out, won't we?" He made a shooing motion. "You first. It's safe," he added, when Harry hesitated.

"No, I just..." Want to keep an eye on you. "Thought I'd get to stare at your arse on our way up."

Malfoy gave him a disdainful look, though his cheeks were pink. "The last step is the original, Potter. If the enchantment wears off, I'll have to spell it again."

Harry did not move and Draco sighed. "I'll be right behind you." He took a step closer, grabbed Harry's face and pressed a rough kiss to Harry's lips. "I promise."

Reluctantly, Harry went, but not before he pointed his wand at Malfoy's jaw and healed the bruise Harry himself had left there. Malfoy rolled his eyes at that.

It was easier to climb up the steps on his hands and feet than Harry thought it would be. Malfoy had probably placed more enchantments on them than Harry had realised. They were glowing faintly,

lighting their way; Harry could see them appearing in front of him, sprouting out of the pipe as they moved upward. The pipe was wobbly and burned through in places, but the steps clung to air when needed.

Harry could not help turning around to make sure Draco was following.

"Turn again, Potter, and I'll start poking you with my wand," Malfoy told him. "And guess where I'll poke."

Harry resisted the urge to check on Malfoy's progress after that, but he listened carefully to make sure Malfoy was behind him.

It was a long way and Harry's hands threatened to give out; the pipe was blocked in several places, but Harry widened the passage with the Gouging Spell. The third time he cast it, there was an odd breaking sound above them, as though Harry's spell had shattered glass or a sink. A waft of fresh air reached Harry's nose.

"I think we're close!" Harry yelled, looking down at Malfoy.

But Malfoy was frowning and staring past Harry. "What is that?"

"What?" Harry turned and something cold hit his nose. He blinked at the mass of white snowflakes floating toward him, melting away. "Where are they coming from?" Harry whispered, climbing up faster. They were heading toward the bathroom on the second floor; no snowflake could reach it. Was it the wrong pipe? It couldn’t be.

Harry's heart beat faster as he inhaled a lungful of cold air. He could see the exit now; it was round, dark, starry...

Harry climbed out, looking around in horror. Malfoy followed him out, eyes wide, shock clear on his face.

"Where is it?" Malfoy asked. "How could it just..."

"I don't know." But somehow, Hogwarts was gone. All that remained was rubble. Stones, desks and sinks were strewn across the ground in all directions, as far as they could see in the dark. But that was all that was left of Hogwarts.

It can't be. Was it the fire? Had it swallowed the whole castle?

Bright flashes of lights twinkled above them. Suddenly a beam of light hit Harry's eyes and he squinted and grimaced, blinded.

"HARRY!" The voice came from above. "OVER HERE! THEY'RE HERE! THEY'RE ALIVE!"

Beams of light surrounded them, coming closer, becoming brighter. Hundreds of them. A broom shot toward Harry and he recognised Ron. Hermione was sitting behind him and she jumped to the ground and flew at Harry so fast it looked like someone had thrown her in his direction. Her arms wrapped around him in a choking hug. "I thought you were gone! I thought you were dead! Oh Harry!"

She was crying, Harry realised. He wrapped his arms around her. "It's fine. I'm fine."

Ron ran up to them, too. He was pale, almost green; his blue eyes seemed unnaturally large. "Thought we lost you there, mate," he breathed. His gaze flickered to Malfoy, who stood still, looking away. For a second, Harry was sure Ron would attack him, accuse him of almost getting Harry killed, but instead Ron looked back at Harry. "We thought you burned."

Hermione shuddered in Harry's arms.

More people flew at them; they were jumping off their broomsticks, running in their direction. Someone

flew overhead, nearly brushing against Harry's hair. "Bad aim! Sorry!" Seamus cried from above.

Hermione pulled back and Harry breathed in some much needed air, but it was knocked out of his lungs again by Lavender's ferocious hug.

More D.A. members were crowding around him and Harry panicked, afraid they would separate him from Malfoy. He stepped to the side and found Malfoy's hand, squeezing it tightly, trying to will Malfoy not to pull away, but Draco returned the squeeze and held on.

It seemed half of Hogwarts was there, students from all houses; Harry noticed a few Slytherins nodding at Malfoy. The teachers were there, too; Harry was surprised to see McGonagall on a broom. She landed gracefully, but stumbled when she took the first step. There were unfamiliar faces in the crowd; Harry recognised a few Hogsmeade villagers and even an Auror or two.

And then Ginny was there, hugging him tearfully and pressing Harry's Firebolt into his free hand. "It was still in my trunk," she said. "I kept thinking, if you'd only had it with you..."

"It wouldn't have helped, Ginny," Harry assured her. "And I wouldn't have taken it with me even if it had been in my trunk."

She sniffed, unappeased. Her gaze fell to Draco's and Harry's joined hands. She shook her head. "Warm enough?" She eyed Harry. "Need a blanket?"

Harry bit his lip. "I'm all set, thanks."

She shook her head again and snorted.

McGonagall was staring at him; Harry thought he saw her glance at Draco and Harry's joined hands, too; her eyebrows rose at one point, but she made no comment on the subject.

"Where were you?" she asked.

"Chamber of Secrets. I thought the magic couldn't reach us there. I thought it was far enough. Perhaps even outside of Hogwarts grounds."

"Did it reach you?" Hermione asked and Harry nodded. "It did," he said. "The Chamber is a part of Hogwarts."

"What happened to the castle?" Malfoy asked, staring at McGonagall.

Hermione sniffed.

"We..." McGonagall's voice broke. "We Vanished the castle."

Harry blinked. "You, what?"

"Oh Harry!" Hermione cried. "It was on fire and you were in there. And we couldn't get inside! We didn't know what to do. The fire was spreading. Dragons and chimeras tried to break free. Go after us."

"We summoned everyone back," McGonagall said. "The students, the teachers, everyone we could reach. We broke through the magical barriers surrounding Hogwarts grounds easy enough, but the castle... The Fiendfyre was out of control. It was consuming the castle; it would have consumed everything in its path. We had to do something. The fire was Conjured; the best way to counter it was with Vanishing magic. So we tried it. First in groups, then all of us together."

"And it worked," Hermione said. "We Vanished the fire, the castle, everything. We think maybe the magic heard us and helped, even though we were outside. It must not have realised that if the castle was gone, it would lose its purpose. Or it did. I don't know. Maybe it was more aware of itself than I thought.

We were so scared and angry. The magic must have lost control over the fire. It couldn't stop it so it stopped itself. In the only way it knew how. It destroyed the castle, itself with it, so we could stop the fire. We thought we'd Vanished you with it. If you hadn't burned already." She looked ready to cry again.

"But you didn't," Harry said quickly. "We're fine."

"The magic is gone," McGonagall said, "but we should leave, nonetheless. The site will have to be examined before it can be declared safe."

"And Hogwarts?" Harry asked. "Can it be retrieved?"

McGonagall's expression tightened. "I do not know."

Harry looked around at the distressed faces of his classmates and smiled at them weakly. "Thanks," he said.

Seamus shrugged. "So we blew up the school," he said. "Isn't that every kid's dream?"

"And we've saved the Saviour. Don't forget that," Parvati added brightly, but the tear-tracks on her cheeks told a different tale.

Students were staring at the rubble: charred desks and blackboards, broken statues and picture frames, trophies and sparkling gems, some red, some green, some blue, some yellow. House point hourglasses were shattered. Their history burned and vanished.

Harry stared at the gems. They were scattered everywhere, a mix of colours, without a pattern.

We can't go backward now, Harry thought suddenly. The knot in his stomach eased.

"Come along," McGonagall said and mounted her broom. One by one, the students followed her lead. No one said a word when Harry sat on his Firebolt and Draco slipped on behind him, arms wrapping tightly around Harry's waist.

They kicked off the ground and soared toward the sky. Despite everything, Harry could not help smiling. They were alive, Draco was with him, and he was flying.

They had to move slowly at first because there were so many people in the air; they flew forward in batches. Dumbledore's Army stuck close to Harry.

Draco leaned in to whisper in Harry's ear. "But the fire retreated in the Chamber. We were safe. The magic did stop it."

"But maybe that was all it could do," Harry suggested. "You wanted to protect us and it did its best."

"I also wanted..." Harry could hear Draco suck in a breath. "I burned down Hogwarts."

Harry turned around sharply. "No! Draco, this wasn't your fault. You didn't burn down the castle and our friends didn't Vanish the castle. It destroyed itself. And it only ever did it to help. It served us with its last breath." Harry narrowed his eyes at Draco. "Now, nod and say, 'You're right again, Harry.'"

Draco snorted and then bit Harry's ear. "You're annoying, Potter," he said instead.

"Good enough," Harry concluded with a smile. He turned to press an awkward kiss to Malfoy's lips, temporarily forgetting there were hundreds of people around them. If someone noticed and said something, Harry did not hear them.

"Eyes ahead, Potter," Draco said. "You're transporting a precious load."

"Why, I'll be more careful then, precious."

Draco's eyes narrowed, mouth twitching. "I meant your cock."

Harry laughed. He would have blushed, too, if a faint glow in the distance had not caught his attention. They had not moved far from the ruined castle, but it was covered in darkness. The last flashes of lit wands had abandoned it. For a second, Harry thought someone had been left behind, but the glow was too muted.

"Isn't that—" Harry said, frowning.

Draco turned to look. "Peeves? Is it Peeves?"

It was Peeves. Where he had come from, Harry did not know, but he was there, floating above the castle's remains. He had taken off his hat, clutched it to his chest and stared down at the ruins. Slowly, his small shimmering body grew dimmer and then vanished.

The only thing left to see was a huge block of white stone. Dumbledore's tomb, Harry realised with a jolt.

Sudden sadness choked him. Dumbledore's portrait was gone, too. Burned or Vanished.

Draco's arms wrapped tighter around Harry's waist.

"We'll build a new school," Harry said. A brand new Hogwarts, one without past a person could lose themselves in.

Draco pressed a kiss to his neck. "Fly."

Harry turned, angled his broom and set for Hogsmeade station.

Epilogue

They barely made it out alive. Harry was sure he would either suffocate to death or get squished by the masses. The fresh air filled his lungs and Harry felt better immediately.

"Blimey!" Ron exclaimed. "Whose bright idea was this?"

Hermione huffed and stuffed the packages into her beaded bag. "It was a bright idea," she claimed. "But apparently everyone else had the same bright idea."

"This is why one should do their Christmas shopping before Christmas Eve," Ron said wisely. "All the shops are packed today. Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade, it doesn't matter."

"I bet Diagon Alley's empty," Hermione said bitterly. "I'm sure half of the wizarding world was in Honeydukes just now."

"We did buy everything we came for, at least," Harry pointed out, although he was unhappy with his purchase. He had no idea what to buy Draco for Christmas, so he had ended up buying him chocolate. Specifically, he had bought him a set of chocolate wands. It had seemed funny at the time. He imagined himself handing them to Draco, saying, "I remember taking a bunch of wands from you once. You can have them back now. I might have licked them, though." But now that he thought about it, he doubted Draco would appreciate the joke. It had been a stupid idea. And now Harry had no present for him.

"Where are you going?" Ron asked as Hermione went ahead, leaving Ron and Harry behind. "Aren't we leaving?"

"In a minute. I want to see something. Come on!" Hermione called.

Ron groaned. "This shopping business is tiresome."

Harry nodded gloomily. They followed Hermione, their feet crunching the freshly fallen snow. Hogsmeade was beautiful, bright and richly decorated with colourful ornaments and glowing fairies that twinkled and fluttered above them in all directions.

"Hermione," Ron sighed suddenly.

They had almost exited the village and Hermione stood on top of a small hill, staring ahead. "It won't just reappear, Hermione," Harry said when they reached her.

"I know." She sniffed.

Harry looked in the distance, where once the magnificent castle had stood proud and beautiful. There was nothing there now. The Ministry had gathered experts from all over the country and beyond; they had led a crowd of people back to the site and tried to force the castle to reappear. It never did.

Ron wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Everyone remembers how it looked. They'll build another, just like it."

Hermione huffed. It would never be the same, they all knew that. Harry shared Hermione's grief, but he kept his hope for himself. A new castle felt like a new beginning. And Harry had decided he liked beginnings.

"You know, I wonder..." Hermione said. "The magic never gave me anything."

"Well, it couldn't fulfil all wishes," Harry said. "And you hardly spent any time in the Room of

Requirement."

"What were you desperately wishing for, anyway?" Ron asked.

Hermione shrugged. "Knowledge, perhaps. For everyone. For the wizarding world to change for the better." She sighed.

It will change, Harry thought. Maybe Hermione would get her wish.

"What about you?" Hermione looked at Ron.

"Ah, well," Ron said. "Got what I wanted most way before, didn't I?" He smiled down at her, his gaze soft.

"Oh," Hermione said. She sniffed again.

Harry cleared his throat.

"Oi!" Ron looked at him crossly. "You're interrupting a moment, mate!"

"You're interrupting my moments all the time."

Ron grumbled and mumbled something about evil blond gits.

"Speaking of..." Hermione coughed. Her cough sounded a bit like gits, too. "We should hurry. To cook, apparently. Not that either of us knows how."

Harry immediately regretted interrupting their moment. They had both promised to help him cook dinner before they left for the Burrow. Well, Hermione had promised; Ron had said he might peel the potatoes if he remembered the right spell. It would have been nice if Kreacher could help, but the house-elf spent his days in Buckbeak's old room. He insisted he was dying and wished to be left alone whenever Harry suggested he ought to clean or cook.

"Are you sure your mum won't be cross with me?" Harry asked Ron.

"For the tenth time, Harry, as long as you show up for Christmas dinner tomorrow and let her stuff you full of food, she'll be happy."

"Definitely," Harry said. "Draco's having dinner with his parents tomorrow, anyway." Besides, the three of them would surely cook a poor meal today and Harry would be hungry tomorrow and ready to eat several platefuls of Molly Weasley's delicious cooking. Harry knew he could have asked her to help him with today's dinner, too, and she would sent him packages of everything he desired and more—she might even be cross he had not asked—but Harry wanted to cook it himself. More or less. Ron and Hermione didn't count.

"Did you hear that, Hermione?" Ron mock-gasped. "Draco is having dinner with his parents. Remember Draco's parents?"

"Oh yes!" Hermione imitated Ron's gasp. "Draco's parents! Dear old Lucius and Narcissa."

"Lucius!" Ron exclaimed. "D'aw! You think I should start calling him Lucy?"

Harry glared. "I'm leaving." He promptly Disapparated. He reappeared a second later in front of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, slightly disoriented. He had never fancied Apparating. He was resolved to find another place to live, a place he could travel to by broom. Although, surprisingly, he was quite happy here, for the moment.

Ron and Hermione were staying with him for the time being. They hadn't really discussed where they would go from here, but, for now, it did not matter. They still had their N.E.W.T.s to focus on, as

Hermione liked to remind them daily. Fortunately, the house was large, and they could all have their privacy, something Harry very much needed on the evenings Draco would stop by for a visit or a study session. Though, Harry was careful not to refer to his visits like that because the first time he had told Ron and Hermione that Draco would show up later for a study session, both of them had nearly died laughing.

"Is that what they're calling it now?" Ron had asked. "Last I heard, it was referred to as 'having a stroll.'"

The last couple of weeks had been peaceful yet exciting, which was something Harry would never have thought possible in the past.

Today, though, was not one of those peaceful, exciting days. Draco was supposed to spend the whole night here, which meant that, first, he would have to explain to his parents why he was abandoning them on Christmas Eve.

Ron and Hermione showed up soon after Harry, still laughing. It took awhile for the three of them to drag their feet to the kitchen. They were armed with a cookbook, Molly Weasley's handwritten instructions and several cooking spellbooks, and felt rather confident. Almost three hours later, the burnt meat, overcooked potatoes and something brown and slimy was thrown into the rubbish bin and promptly Vanished.

Hermione brushed flour from her hair. "The chocolate biscuits look good," she said bracingly.

Ron had already taken a bite and was hurriedly Conjuring a glass of water. "A bit spicy, though," he said, after swallowing a large gulp.

Hermione groaned and Vanished the biscuits, too.

"I'll make sandwiches," Harry said, defeated.

"Sorry, Harry." Hermione patted his shoulder.

He shook his head. "We tried. It was an experience, to say the least." The kitchen was a mess and so were they.

Ron thumped Harry's back. "You'll eat tomorrow, mate," he consoled him.

Harry snorted. "He might not come at all. Maybe I'll have to go rescue him from the Malfoys' dungeons." He winced. Perhaps he should not have mentioned the manor and its dungeons. The memory of that place was more than unpleasant, for all of them.

Ron waved his hand dismissively. "Piece of cake." But then he frowned. "But call us if that actually happens."

"I'm sure it won't," Harry said; though, he was not really so sure. He had no idea what Draco would tell his parents exactly and how they would react. Someone might end up in the dungeons after all.

To Harry's relief, however, Malfoy showed up half an hour later.

Harry successfully reached the door before Ron and Hermione. He had nearly broken his neck running down the stairs; his hair was still damp from the shower. Outside, he found a very grumpy Draco.

Draco showed a package into Harry's hands. "Mother sends pie," he grumbled and then shoved a bottle toward Harry, too. "Father sends wine."

Ron showed up and promptly snatched the bottle from Draco's hand. "Hermione, Lucy sent us wine!" he called.

Draco scowled at Ron, then at Harry, and pushed inside. Harry handed the package to Ron. "Could you

please—?"

"Check for poisons?" Ron suggested.

"Of course not!" Harry said indignantly, but then noticed that Draco had already stormed off to the drawing room. Harry nodded at Ron. "Definitely check for poisons," he whispered.

Ron accepted the package and walked away, shaking his head.

Harry hurried after Draco. He found him sulking in the drawing room.

"That bad?" Harry asked tentatively. "They didn't disinherit you, did they?"

Malfoy shook his head. "They were..." He grimaced. "I told them everything. I think. I'm not sure what I told them, exactly. It’s a bit of a blur."

Harry winced in sympathy. "And?"

"They seem to have misunderstood me. Somehow."

Harry narrowed his eyes at him. "Misunderstood you how?"

"Well," Malfoy looked uncomfortable. "Father looked ready to cry, I swear. I thought he lost it. I was ready to call St Mungo's, fearing he was having a heart attack. But, well, then he... thanked me. For, er..." Draco gave Harry a shifty sort of look. "Sacrificing myself."

"Sacrificing yourself?"

Draco nodded, clearly miserable. "He seems to believe I discovered your inclinations and have taken advantage of them. And now I'm... er, servicing you. Providing favours, which could later be collected."

Harry stared at him.

"He looked so proud." Draco shook his head in wonder. "I've never seen him looking so proud of me. He said he never thought I had it in me. That I would go so far to save the Malfoy family name."

"Er, and then what happened?" Harry suspected he knew the answer. "Did you explain it's not like that?"

"Well, I..." Malfoy coughed.

"Draco..."

"He looked so proud, Harry! And then Mother made mince pie and Father brought elf-made wine from the cellar..."

"I get it, I do," Harry said. "But you can't just go along with it. Eventually, they'll realise—"

"Father promised to buy me a Firebolt. A Firebolt, Harry."

Harry sighed and gave up. "They're your parents. Do as you will."

Draco beamed, apparently no longer in a sour mood. "At least they won't give us any trouble."

"They will start asking for favours, you realise that? They'll tell you to ask something of me and they'll

expect to get it. Then what?"

Draco was temporarily stumped, but he brightened quickly. "By then, I'll have a Firebolt and will be able to fly away very fast."

Harry laughed. "Brilliant plan, I'm sure."

"Mind the sarcasm, Potter," Draco said. "Or you won't get serviced tonight."

A muffled laughed sounded from the door. Harry winced as Hermione peeked inside, biting her lip.

"Malfoy," she greeted curtly.

Malfoy nodded at her, looking a bit flustered.

"Just letting you know we're leaving now, Harry," she said.

"Have fun, you two. And tell Mrs Weasley—"

"Yes, yes, yes," she said impatiently. "Stop worrying. We'll see you tomorrow." She smiled at him and, as she closed the door, she gave him thumbs up, probably indicating that the wine and pie were safe for consumption.

"Well now..." Malfoy said, studying Harry speculatively. "We're all alone. How unfortunate. What will we ever do to amuse ourselves?"

It just so happened, they did find something to do. And they did it promptly, right in the drawing room.

And then they did it again in Harry's bedroom. At that point, Draco had expressed a wish for desserts and Harry had handed him a handful of chocolate wands. It had turned out to be a brilliant present, since Draco had been amused and then proceeded to show Harry what one could do with chocolate wands, a little imagination and a Melting Charm. It had been a scrumptious discovery. Harry was very proud of himself; he had even remembered to use a Shield Charm.

Soon, they were exhausted and famished, so they made their way to the kitchens to demolish Harry's sandwiches. It was late, but they were wide-awake, so they rushed back to the drawing room and Conjured a shockingly large pine tree. It would undoubtedly disappear in a few hours, but this did not bother them. Harry fetched a small box of Christmas decorations and Draco turned on the Wireless. They set to work and, together, produced the most horridly decorated Christmas tree Harry had ever seen. Parts of it were colourful, full of most ridiculous Conjured ornaments, parts of it covered with Conjured snow that insisted on melting, and parts of it filled with tinsel that glowed so fiercely it hurt to look at it. The fairies they had Conjured seemed displeased and were flying around the tree like mad, as though trying to find a pretty place to settle on. Finally, Draco stuck their feet to the branches with a Sticking Charm but, in retaliation, they had refused to glow.

Harry was in such high spirits he had even agreed to have a slice of mince pie and a glass of wine. The pie was delicious, but Harry claimed Lucius Malfoy's wine left him with a bad aftertaste. He promptly washed down the taste of it by giving Draco a very awkward, very short and very nerve-wrecking blowjob that had nonetheless left both of them grinning like idiots.

Afterward, they found themselves sitting on the carpet, half-asleep and tipsy, with their backs against an old armchair, staring at their tree. Draco's head fell to Harry's shoulder and Harry amused him greatly by casting a Cushioning Charm on it.

Harry studied the fairies, who were buzzing furiously, pulling left and right, trying to separate their feet from the pine needles.

"What will you do now?" Harry asked.

"Sleep?" Malfoy yawned. "I hope you aren't suggesting more sex. I refuse. I won't be up for it for another ten minutes, at least."

Harry snorted. "I didn't mean now. I meant, you know, with your life. After N.E.W.T.s. Plans for the future, career."

"Oh." Draco said and fell silent.

Harry waited, wondering if he should repeat the question. Perhaps Draco had fallen asleep.

"I don't know," Draco said at last. He raised his head, frowning at the tree.

Harry was sorry he had asked him that. Draco seemed gloomy.

"Something involving charm work?" Harry suggested. "And you're not bad at Transfiguration, either. You... er, you did fix that Vanishing Cabinet in our sixth-year. That sounds complicated." I shouldn't remind him of these things. Harry cursed his babbling mouth.

Draco scowled. "Took me half a year."

"But you did it! It would have taken me forever, I'm positive. And those staircases you Charmed back in the Chamber of Secrets were impressive, too."

Draco made a noncommittal sound, then gave Harry a sideways look. "You think so?"

Harry nodded enthusiastically. "Are you joking? That was brilliant!"

"Oh, well." Draco shrugged, possibly aiming for modesty. He failed at it. "I always thought I'd be a Ministry official of some sort. A very important one," he assured Harry. "Worrying about laws and

paperwork, having lunches with important people."

"That..." Harry frowned. "Sounds very dull."

"It does," Draco agreed, though he looked surprised by his own proclamation. He turned toward Harry, grinning suddenly. "You know, I always dreamed of inventing something spectacular and clever. I had quite a few ideas, too."

"But?" Harry prompted. Draco's tone seemed to suggest a but.

"Well, it's ridiculous, isn't it? I could spend my whole life working on something and then..." He shrugged.

"Can I hear your ideas? Maybe they aren't ridiculous."

Draco bit his lip. "I'll tell you about them. One day." He shook his head. "I have time to think about what I want to do."

"All right, then. I'd love to hear them, though," Harry assured him. "Whenever you feel like sharing."

Draco pressed a quick kiss to Harry's lips. "And you?" he asked. "Running off to finally be an Auror, are you? I hear you already have a job offer."

"Yeah." Harry grinned. "I do have a job offer." He had talked to Kingsley after Hogwarts had Vanished and Kingsley had asked him to join the Auror Department again. "But I thought... maybe I should stop playing Auror for five minutes."

Draco blinked. "You don't want to be an Auror anymore?"

"Of course I do!" Harry exclaimed, scandalised. He had wanted it forever; he suspected he always would. "I just... thought I'd take it slow." His desperate wish to be an Auror had nearly cost Tommy Wright his life and he still wasn't sure whether or not he had helped lead Draco into dangerous situations just so he could save him. None of it would have happened if not for the Room's magic, but Harry felt like his own mind had betrayed him. Maybe he wanted to be an Auror a little too much, so much his wish might send him rushing into another situation he could not control, and then someone might get hurt again because of him. Forward, but slowly, he had decided. "I plan to go through training first. Three more years of additional studying. That sounds dull, too, but well... at least I'll have more time. For other things I want to do."

"Such as?"

"Well, have sex. And have sex. And maybe even have sex. And also—"

"Enough!" Draco laughed. "Has it been ten minutes, then?"

"Why, how did you guess?"

"We'll require crutches tomorrow, you realise that?"

Harry burst out laughing. "Hardly," he argued when he calmed down. "Now stop complaining. I think I have a right to make a few demands. You haven't even bought me a Christmas present."

Draco's eyes widened. "I have!" He frowned. "Well, I didn't buy it, but I did get you something. I planned to give it to you after midnight. But well, since you're so demanding..." Draco took out his wand and Summoned a small package.

Harry tried to snatch it, but Draco was not letting go. He hid the package behind his back.

Harry mock-gasped. "Oh, I'll never find it there."

"Come and get it, Potter. I'd like to see you try," Draco threatened.

What followed was a heated struggle with much hair-pulling that left both of them flushed and panting. Harry did get the box, but Draco had managed to bite Harry's neck, possibly leaving another nasty bruise there.

Harry quickly unwrapped his present. Draco grinned as Harry took out a pair of glasses.

Harry studied them. "Are they—?"

"They are," Draco assured him. "I went back to get them. Quite a feat, I must say. The area is restricted. I thought, maybe they survived. And they did. They were broken and partially Vanished, but they're as good as new now."

Harry narrowed his eyes at him. "What, you don't like my new glasses?" Harry had bought a new pair. A slim, elegant-looking things. They felt odd, but Harry supposed he would get used to them.

"No," Draco said and pulled Harry's new glasses away. Then he carefully slipped the old pair on Harry's nose. Harry closed his eyes, wincing, and opened them again when they were where they were supposed to be. Draco beamed at him, grey eyes raking over Harry's face. "Perfect," he declared. "Now you look like my Potter."

"If you say so." Harry shook his head, amused. He did like having his old glasses back. He leaned forward for a thank you kiss, but a deafening bang made them both jump. Their Christmas tree had popped out of existence. A few ornaments crashed against the floor, others disappeared. The fairies were gone, too.

"Pathetic," Draco declared, staring at the mess. "Next year, we'll get a real tree," he said, then blushed.

Next year, Harry thought, suddenly light-headed. And the next, and the next. Their whole lives were ahead of them.

Harry all but grabbed Draco and pulled him closer, lips pressed against lips. Draco's eyes were half-open, dark-grey, warm. Harry grinned. "Yes. I think we will."

Fin

Don't forget to go back to H/D Holidays on LJ and leave feedback!