Storyid: http://www.fictionalley.org/authors/george_pushdragon/VMM.html
Fictionalley.org
Name: Very Midsummer Madness
Author: George Pushdragon
Chapter 1 to 8

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Chapter: 1

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Chapter 1: Conceal me what I am

Lay down your preconceptions and travel light. Put aside the things you think you know.

I give you three guiding principles:

Time is short.

Reality bends.

Love is the end of all things.

Now open your eyes.

See how the shimmering green waters curve teasingly against the bleached sand like the arch of a lover's back against the beloved. See how the sun graces both with its golden benediction. Honeysuckle and ripe figs throw out a scented net from which no living creature escapes, and the light - the light! - the air is clear as if newly washed.

But as we swing low over the beach, see how the pristine sand is scarred with jagged brown wounds: timber, warped and torn, litters the centre of the crescent, coughed up from the very belly of the sea. A sail. A stretch of shredded rigging. Shipwreck.

Movement.

A figure lies encrusted with glittering sand, its toes lapped by the rippling waves. The dark head covered with shaggy damp locks finally raises itself and green eyes blink uncertainly.

No! Too far, too soon! You will not understand. To begin, we must go back. Take my hand. Close your eyes. Feel the coolness of time rushing past your ears.

Transfiguration lesson. Twenty minutes past eleven with a long day to go. Sun and sweltering fruit are far from here. There is only the straight figure of Professor McGonagall standing at the front of the classroom, her hands clasped around either end of her wand.

"Who can explain to the class the most important difference between creating light and creating darkness?" McGonagall asked. "Anyone apart from Miss Granger? Anyone at all? Very well then, Miss Granger."

Harry threw down his quill in disgust. Voldemort was out there somewhere, regathering his army as he picked at the wounds from their recent skirmish, and here they were wasting time on cutesy little tricks of light. It was no wonder the blood of their liberation would be on his hands when all they wanted to do was paddle about in magical theory. Four weeks into his sixth year, he found himself returning obsessively to the moment he had won his reprieve from expulsion and wondering if that was the first place he had gone wrong.

As Hermione lowered her arm, Harry retrieved the quill and began to carve the outline of a horse's head into his desk.

"Creating light requires producing energy from a particular source," Hermione was expounding. "In the lumos spell, this is simply the manifestation of the power in our wand cores. On the other hand, creating darkness means the removal of light, which is a more difficult task because it requires drawing in energy from the environment."

"Very good." Professor McGonagall produced a smooth grey object from the pocket of her robes. "The common put-outer. Today we will perform the spell that makes it function. Transfiguring light into darkness is particularly advanced magical theory, however. I don't expect any of you to achieve it on the first attempt."

Ron nudged Harry under the desk and hissed:

"I thought we were doing goldfish into gold again. I can't do advanced magic!"

"You'll be fine," Harry comforted automatically, adding a ragged wing to his engraving. "She doesn't expect us to get it right the first time."

"You don't understand! I lost my wand - it fell out of my pocket while I was teaching Sloper the Bludger Backbeat. I was so busy wiping the blood off my nose I forgot to look for it."

A sharp tapping interrupted him and they looked up to see McGonagall striking the side of her desk with her wand and watching Ron beadily.

"Weasley, since even the most advanced magic does not require your full attention, perhaps you would care to be the first to demonstrate for us. Step forward please."

Harry nudged him, but Ron scrabbled among the papers on his desk and whispered desperately out of the corner of his mouth:

"I can't! You remember the wands we found in Fred and George's dorm when they scarpered? I had to grab one of those. I don't trust it!"

Harry turned his face to shadow his scowl.

"Take mine then. If it's not supposed to work anyway." Ron shot him a grateful look and plucked the wand from his desk.

"'Dedite noctem' is the spell you will require. Concentrate on a small area and see if you can't create a patch of shadow."

Ron did concentrate. He pointed his wand commandingly into the corner of the room. Etched on his forehead were furrows of supreme dedication which never appeared when he was seriously attempting a spell.

"Dedite noctem, ah well, looks like it didn't work, Professor," he said speedily and all in one breath. "Too bad." His mouth made a wide, apologetic curve.

Harry snorted and immediately wished he hadn't. He and Ron often joked that McGonagall's forehead ought to be calibrated so that her arching eyebrows gave an accurate reading of her displeasure. Right now they were nudging towards hazardous. He'd seen her reach critical more than once in the past year, but the moment when her primness tripped over into full-blown fury still made his stomach lurch in a way he preferred to avoid.

"I presume, Potter, that your expression indicates your keen anticipation of your own moment of glory. You may be the next to demonstrate the spell."

Harry opened his mouth, bit back the indignant retort, and closed it again. Should have seen that one coming.

"In your own time."

Lying on Ron's desk was the twins' wand. It had been part of a cache Fred and George had secreted behind a portrait in their dorm (it was most likely illicit) and left behind when they fled the school (it most likely didn't work). He eyed it suspiciously.

"Any further delays will result in the deduction of points. Begin, thank you."

Harry picked up the wand with the tips of his fingers and pointed it experimentally at the space above the goldfish bowl on the professor's desk. The fish flickered from red to gold and back again as they wove among the waterweeds. It was surprising just how wrong the unfamiliar wand felt - its fibres too coarse, its weight uneven. There was no way it would perform the spell, but he couldn't care less about that. He just worried that it would produce a shower of dungbombs or dissolve the back wall into butterbeer. With a chill, he remembered that far worse acts than creating unexpected butterbeer lay both behind and before him, and that put his present anxiety in perspective. Still, his mind was only loosely grasping the slippery spell words when he shrugged and commanded:

"Duodecimus noctem!"

Everything went dark.

A black flash engulfed the classroom, drawing him into it, leaving him blind. He blinked pointlessly against the darkness. It didn't weaken but, worse, it began to move. Harry felt currents tugging at him, spinning him until he had lost all sense of up and down.

Nausea pushed at his throat, but when he opened his mouth to cry out, liquid poured in and filled him until he panicked and clawed at the oily blackness. Shooting stars of white light sputtered across his vision and he felt the strength draining from his limbs, but he gave one last despairing kick and finally he was rising. He kicked again, harder, and the water shifted, painfully slowly, from black to deep blue to crystalline green until be broke onto the surface, spewing liquid from his lips.

Sucking sweet air into his lungs, Harry flailed down the side of a wave and wished he'd been taught how to swim. A swell washed over him and he took another gulp of salt water before bobbing up again. On every side he could see nothing but waves, pitching and collapsing, a many-backed fiend. Nowhere was there stillness, only reeling, living darkness over which a greying dawn sky cast the bleakest of lights.

Borne up on a high crest, he thought he saw the pale blur of a face in the trough below him. Wild eyes looked up at him then vanished. Then the water closed round him and he saw no more.

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Come back with me now. The fine-grained beach, the honeysuckle, the overpowering push of the sun on your back. The young man storm-tossed on the shore, blinking around him in confusion. He brushes wet hair from his forehead and raises himself to his knees. Watch with me.

Harry coughed the last of the sand from his throat. Gritty specks still rubbed the inside of his mouth and he spat, but awkwardly, then wiped his lips. There was no getting rid of the taste of salt.

This was not Transfiguration class. Transfiguration was not known for the gliding sound of waves nor for the weighty sun which scorched the raw skin on the back of his neck and had already made the ends of his hair crisp and dry. It was very quiet. He raised his eyes warily.

At the end of a wide beach, the land rose steeply to a point in front of him, and to his left and to his right, the hills tumbled down into gentle plains. In a hazy row, far away, the white needles of mountain tops pierced a crisp sky. The last stormclouds glared menacingly as they retreated over the waves behind him.

Harry glared back, at the clouds and the sun and the gem-hard shards of light which made his eyes ache. He was sick and bloody tired of the unexpected. So many surprises had opened like trapdoors beneath him that, for the last year, he had never lost the sense of falling. The constant newness, a Bludger-shaped flash in the corner of his eye, stimulated reflexes stretched well beyond exhaustion.

This beach and this sun were the last in a long line of betrayals and, if he only had the strength, he would tear them to pieces with his bare hands to get back to the unwavering grey of the classroom. His fingers made the habitual curl into fists.

This particular mirage was just insulting. Too perfect to fool anybody. The only question was who should bear the blame and the brunt of his rising anger. It had all started with the spell, the spell and -

Yes, a hallucinogenic wand would be a Fred and George special - a wand engineered to perform one beloved spell, surreptitiously with no more than a flick of the wrist. He could picture George casting a quick one under the table as Binns listed the chief provisions of the Cross-Border Trade in Magical Plants Regulations, transporting his mind to this hidden place and no-one the wiser. If the theory held, it would either fade over time or be dispelled with an enchanted word.

He tried "firewhiskey", "Nimbus" and "Angelina's knickers", but the mirage remained obstinate and the waves continued to murmur at him. He rubbed his eyes and that was odd because, although he could see with perfect clarity, his glasses were apparently somewhere on the seabed

being ground down into smooth jewels. He touched his eyelids again (they felt as they should) and ran his fingers over his face (all in order), down his neck and over the damp fabric of his doublet, his stockings, his jutting codpiece, his --- what?!

He jumped to his feet and gaped at the foreign clothes as if they were a demon clamped around his body. They were wrong. They were clothes he had never seen before. And yet ... the silk of the doublet ran smoothly under his tentative fingertips, the colouring a warm malt shade. It fastened around his front in a suspiciously precise fit, and when he lifted the hem from his upper thigh, he peeped down at a rather ambitious codpiece, fashioned from hard brown leather and adorned with swirling engraved patterns. He shifted it on top of his still-damp woollen stockings and blinked at the audacity of its size and tilt.

It was the shoes that gave it away. They were flat and rectangular and slapped like ducks' feet against the sand. There was no way he could have hallucinated those, and no way even Fred and George could have made them up. Shoes like that did not lurk even in the most unacknowledged depths of the subconscious. The thought that perhaps this place was real began to flutter, moth-like, against his ears.

He was going to find Fred and George and make them eat that wand. What could they have done to it? Fred and George, or someone more sinister. In an instant, he could name a half dozen people who hated him enough to put a sabotaged wand in his path. But ... this? It was an odd method of assassination. The most dangerous thing he could see was a glittering trail of jellyfish leading down from the highwater mark.

He went back to combing the shallows in search of the wand, but all he saw was penitent water, its clear ripples concealing nothing. Wood was everywhere, splintered and lying sopping on the sand, big scabs of it and narrow strands, tangled with shreds of rope and canvas and a bleached wooden goddess who pointed an authoritative nose up the beach. Shipwreck. That seemed familiar, and he imagined he had heard voices calling to him from far away as he had tossed in the surf. If there was a wreck then there must be ...

"Ho there!" a deep voice called from the top of the beach and an exceptionally large figure strolled down the sand toward him, its messy thatch of brown hair still wet and clinging close.

Survivors.

"Hagrid!" His eyes stang, no doubt from the salt. "Hagrid, am I glad to see you!"

The older man was frowning by the time he reached Harry's side.

"That name yeh call me, young master, I don't know it. Has the seawater confounded your head?"

Harry looked around but saw no-one for whose benefit this charade could be intended.

"What do you mean, Hagrid?" he snapped. "What else would I call you?"

"The Captain, as yeh've always done before." Hagrid gave a testing grin which faded.

"The Captain?"

"Yes, lad. I've never had no other name and nor shall I, until the sea may swallow me."

He looked like Hagrid. His voice was Hagrid's. But the clothes were wrong, and so was the stately turn of phrase he seemed to slip into. Harry thought about it hard and felt certain he would have noticed if the Hagrid he knew had worn a wooden leg. Frustration began to wriggle again in his stomach.

"How far are we from Hogwarts?" he asked brusquely.

"Very far, young master. I've been sailing these seas nigh on thirty years and I can't say's I've ever heard of it."

One of them was crazy. For one tilting moment Harry thought it might be him. Perhaps Hogwarts never existed - perhaps he had dreamed it, made it up - perhaps reality was a cupboard under the stairs and smothering, endless conversations about the drill market. And, for an instant, he felt light enough to let the breeze pick him up. But then he remembered Vernon and Petunia. They were not daydreamers: even imagining furniture in any print but beige herringbone was beyond them. If they had seen the letters, flinched from the real Hagrid and shaken their fists at a flying car, then those things must be real. But this beach and this stranger, those he would see about.

"What's this place then?"

"This, sir, is Illyria!" Hagrid's broad arm took in the expanse of sea, sand and hills.

"Right. And where is that exactly? Are there wiz-" He wondered whether this not-Hagrid even knew what a wizard was. "Who lives here?"

"All kinds of people breathe Illyria's air. I myself was born but three hours march from here. Yeh're in the land of the Duchess Virginia Orsino."

Harry sat down heavily on a pile of crumpled timber.

"Virginia." This was looking worse and worse. "What's she like, this duchess?"

"She is lady of noble birth and temperament. 'ad we not missed the scarlet sunrise, I could 'ev shown you the very colour of her hair."

So Ginny existed in this mad place as well. Hagrid. Ginny. Bad shoes and a shipwreck. No matter how he shuffled the pieces, he couldn't make it look like something Fred and George had cooked up one rainy weekend. And yet he'd lived through enough Death Eater plots by now to suspect they'd leave a familiar taste in his mouth - licorice or garlic or something sinister which he didn't detect here. Still, real or illusive, this place was convincingly solid and he wasn't going to escape it just by clicking his heels and invoking home. He resigned himself to investigating.

Fortunately, for a roving seaman, Hagrid knew a great deal of scuttlebutt.

"Ah! The young Duchess was a child when I last left these shores - a little cherub with a halo of curls. She's become a maiden now, and folk say that Lord Olivier has caught her eye."

In what way, Harry wondered. The matter-of-fact affection which the Ginny he knew had for Dean, or the quivering obsession he recalled from not so long ago? Either way, when he checked himself for jealousy, he found none.

"And who is he, this Lord Olivier?"

"He is the son of a count who has recently passed on, and these last two months he has scarce left his halls for walking the corridors and bewailing his loss. He admits no visitors, not even the Duchess Orsino and her emissaries. The ladies who've seen him on horseback say it were as if Apollo himself had left his sun-chariot to ride among men. They say -"

Harry didn't give a toss what they said. Nothing in this fictitious place could rouse him to so tiring an act as caring. He was going to get out of there, and he was going to do it immediately, before the uncertainty and the sweetness of the air made him too heavy to move.

"What am I supposed to do in Illyria? Where was I going when ..."

"When the storm hit?" Hagrid grinned and winked at him. "Aaargh, your business is your own, sir, and best to keep it so in foreign lands. I ne'er made so bold as to ask where yeh might be headed. What yeh do in Illyria, that's up to your whim."

"Good. I want to speak to this Duchess Orsino." Harry managed a couple of strides towards the wooded hills and the shadows that lurked under its boughs, but the hills looked claustrophobic after the open visibility of the beach, and as he swept his gaze once more over sea and sparkling sand the beauty of this place took on a sinister shade. The light was almost too clear, the air too heady and alive. His instinct scoped the nearby sand for a weapon.

"You're right. I have to be careful until I know more about this place. I need to go armed, or disguised." He brushed his hair carefully over the scar but it was a waste of time.

"Yeh may be grateful yet for those two actresses we lost in the storm. It seems they carry all manner of disguise," Hagrid confided as he kicked a waterlogged chest that lay among the wrecked pieces of his vessel and it burst open to spill brightly coloured cloth onto the sand. He beamed meaningfully and tapped the side of his nose. "I'll not tell your secret, sir. Or madam."

Harry looked over the side of the chest. The clothes were all women's and, unlike his own, they were dry. It was a pretty flimsy disguise but it would mean getting rid of this irritating codpiece. And it wasn't so different from his everyday robes, only more fitted and virtually impossible to walk in. Oh, why bother fighting it when every second's doubt was another delay to his escape? Recently he'd had a number of lessons in choosing his battles, and this one didn't seem strategic.

Discarding the silks and velvets as too conspicuous, he slipped off his doublet and chose a robe of plain dark green linen. The sleeves were made of a lighter fabric, pale and almost transparent. Once the challenge of undergarments had been dealt with, it whispered against his skin. Hagrid chuckled as he fastened the hooks painfully at the back.

"It fits a bit tight around the shoulders, but yeh've got exactly the waist for it, and if yeh don't scorn the word of an old seafellow I can say that colour on your white skin, it's no discomfort on the eye."

A light shawl in the same dark green covered his hair so that only his fringe showed, and he picked up the largest looking pair of slippers.

"Now be off with yeh! Follow the stairs up the hillside. The duchess's castle is on the top of the ridge behind yeh." He pointed and graced Harry with a grin that bordered on lecherous. Harry hurried up the beach, distracted by the unfamiliar tickle of sand between his toes.

As he climbed the clumsily hewn stairs, he cursed the twins, McGonagall, Hagrid, Ron, Sloper and this whole sweaty, heat-buzzing land. The hillside was steep, though, and before long he had no breath to spare for complaining.

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See how he picks his way quickly up the stairs, the boy in the green dress, holding his petticoats awkwardly as he winds under laurel and cypress. Bare legs stretching up with each step, head bent in determination. Far above, he stops, where a grassy hillock swells out of the rock, stops and watches. Can you make out his expression as he scans the sea, from the shore to each corner of the horizon? Long moments pass. Look behind you. There is nothing to be seen but sea.

Would he fool you? Certainly there's a girlish shape to his face, which has never lost the soft contours of childhood, and the strands of dark hair visible at the edge of his veil. Yet even with the aid of a corset, the chest and shoulders are too square for an athletic maiden, and the furious will in him makes you wonder whether he can make his body bend into a feminine gait. Perhaps the echo between eye and fabric will save him. They are too alike in greenness, so good a match that the beholder finds their gaze travelling from one to the other wondering which has stolen the shade from which. His body may not be the first thing to be noticed.

As he disappears back into the trees, he plucks an early season fig and puts it to his lips.

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The castle was magnificent. Smooth-cornered square turrets revealed themselves above the hilltop, weathered gargoyles standing guard in rings around each crown. The stone was struck with golden hues and pinks in the early afternoon light. Unlike the grey stone of Hogwarts, it seemed to be warm, living flesh. Harry noticed the hallmarks of aggression first - the high encircling wall and the rusted portcullis - but as he approached he saw the changes wrought by time and peace. Gardens had been nurtured, trees overhung the cobbled path and the guard post at the gate was scattered with last year's dried leaves. Still, Harry imagined the roar of cannonfire rolling down to the water.

What he heard, though, was music. Floating out from one of the higher storeys were the notes of two stringed instruments, more breathily sweet than guitar or violin. With quickened step, he followed the sound through the gaping front entrance and up a broad staircase to the first floor. He peered cautiously around the door of the high-ceilinged chamber at the top of the stairs.

Professor Dumbledore was playing a lute. Truly. Not only that, he was playing it the Muggle way: with his fingers, which he watched intently as they danced over the strings. Beside him, Gilderoy Lockhart had a larger, flatter version of the same instrument clamped in his lap. His head swayed from side to side as the rhythm gripped him. Two hundred besotted maidens weren't swooning over his every move, but the way he posed brought them to mind. A pair of drums were squeezed between Professor Sprout's commanding thighs.

Harry willed Professor Dumbledore to meet his eyes. For all that had passed between them, he was still the most likely person to have their wits about them. But their dedication to playing was all-consuming and none of the musicians looked up.

From the unseen end of the room came a voice. It was rich with melancholy, it was ringing and it said:

"If music be the food of love, play on!"

Harry twisted his head further around the door. Perched on an ottoman at the far and of the room was the unlikely figure of Ginny Weasley. Professor McGonagall stood at her side.

"Play more, and keep on playing. Play until I am sick with it! Play until I never want to hear music again! Let me kill my love with overfeeding. Play, my friends. Play on!"

Harry had known the voice but not believed it. The pitch was Ginny's exactly, only the words weren't delivered in the practical tones he knew - they rolled across the room, there was melody in them, and poise. It was all in the way she sat: straightbacked and with her jaw on a perfect horizontal. From the long red hair that fell down her back to the pale eyebrows and skin, she was Ginny, but there was a difference beyond the sculpting corset, the pearls and the ivory silk dress. It was as if someone had taken the timid romantic he had met on Platform 9¾ and blended her with the straight-talker who now beat all comers to the Snitch. Her lips were painted in a bold red flourish and he knew in that instant that she would not recognise him.

"No! Stop!" Ginny rose from the ottoman and started across the room. She pulled up half way and her skirts swirled around her feet. "That piece, it's not so lovely as before. Everything is fickle in love. The most glorious objects become worthless in an instant. Only love itself has an value. Only love."

Professor McGonagall unfolded her arms from the loose sleeves of her deep green velvet gown.

"My lady, will you ride today? The weather is mild and the sky is clear."

Ginny let out a frustrated breath and didn't trouble to glance at the narrow windows which lined the western wall.

"What use do I have for sun and sky? There is only one thing I would look upon, and that is locked behind the doors of the Olivier villa. Leaves and flowers, sea and sand, I refuse to look upon them until my lord Olivier beholds them with me."

Her fingers traced the white lilies pinned in her hair, brown decay already invading the edge of their petals. In a swift movement, she turned to face a portrait at the far end of the chamber, imposing in its thick gilt frame. The subject was instantly recognisable: the assured grace, the unnecessary parting of the knees, the hint of both cruelty and mirth in the thin mouth, the slightly hooked eyebrow that challenged the viewer. Harry scowled. This place was already unnerving and the presence of a Malfoy suggested it might actually be Hell. Draco Malfoy, Lord Olivier. It was too horrible to think about.

There was a rattling noise from behind and a slender form brushed past him into the room. Surprise was well beyond him now. He merely raised curious eyebrows at Professor Trelawney, whose voluminous skirt in moonlight grey was so extravagantly layered with glittering glass beads that she almost out-jangled the musicians.

"What news from him this time, sweet Valentine?" Ginny asked, her mouth nervous and small.

Professor Trelawney gave a dramatic heavenward look and spoke with a tremolo.

"Lord Olivier would not receive me. Once more, he sent his steward Malvolio with a message."

"Does he -"

"Yes, my lady. He sends you another refusal. His lordship begs you to remember it is but twelve months since the death of his beloved father. Grief rules him, and he declares that he cannot consider marriage until ... my lady, you may care to sit down."

"I shall stand. What is his message, Valentine?"

Professor Trelawney put a hand to her bosom.

"He refuses to consider a match, my dear lady, until seven years have passed."

"Seven years." Ginny repeated in a hollow voice and began to unfasten and pin the flowers in her hair with vicious short strokes. It was some time before her movements slowed, and all the while Professor Trelawney's lips quivered in sympathetic emotion.

"It is a mark of passion, dear Valentine," Ginny concluded with a new certainty. "It is passion that makes his grief run so deep. And if this is how he loves a mere father, then when he chooses a wife, she will be the most cherished creature in Christendom."

This was definitely Hell. And Hell was not other people: it was other people wittering about Draco Malfoy. It made his stomach turn to think that, somewhere not more than a spell away, Voldemort was turning wizard against wizard and unleashing bloody chaos across the only world he had ever loved, and yet here there was no more pressing question than whether Malfoy might be capable of any sort of love which did not involve a mirror.

"Seven years is not so very long, and I have youth on my side," Ginny was rationalising as Harry opened his mouth to give her a short speech on priorities, and then it happened. "Valentine, who is the girl you've brought with you?"

Harry looked over his left shoulder. Then his right. Then he remembered.

"I'm ... I have..." Striking a balance in pitch between feminine and just plain squeaky was hard

enough without having to use words and he found himself floundering like the shy twelve year old he thought he'd left far behind. "I just arrived today. My lady. On a ship. I stowed away on a ship."

Stowed away was good. He congratulated himself.

"They ... that is ... the Captain, he told me I should find the Duchess Orsino. So I came here to find her. Because I ... need work. Yes. Work."

He could have kicked himself. Where had that come from? In this place where he had no history, the possibilities were overwhelming. He felt as if he were running on dry sand, his feet slipping out from under him. However, Ginny smiled kindly.

"I am the Duchess Orsino. What is your name, little one?"

Harry did feel that he should have seen this flaw in his strategic planning somewhat earlier. A girl's name. "Cho" was still the first name that came to him, followed closely by "Hermione", but neither seemed to fit the sensuality of this world of silk and glittering stones. Harry's eyes overturned every object in the room for inspiration, and he had just fixed on the decidedly uncunning "Harriet" when Ginny interrupted.

"No! I can guess. Your accent comes from a faraway place and your voice, it's deep and mysterious, like a musical instrument."

One lie was as good as any other and he didn't plan to be wearing this pseudonym for very long.

"Very clever of you to guess, my lady, for my name is ..." Tuba? Recorder? Hammond organ? His eyes flicked to the corner where Gilderoy Lockhart was caressing the strings of his lute. Ah! "Viola. My name is Viola."

"Then I welcome you to Illyria, Viola. Come and sit with me." She alighted on the ottoman, making herself a white streak against the red upholstery and autumn coloured cushions. "Tell me what work you would do in my household."

Though the struggle with uncooperative skirts left him flustered, he sat.

"Do you sing? Can you play?"

His fingers filled with cloth and squeezed tight in frustration. He had come here to find out what this place was and how to leave it, not to be quizzed on his social accomplishments.

"Your hands are fine." She took up his free hand and brushed her thumb over its knuckles. "With such lean fingers you must be a master worker with needle and thread. Am I right?"

The hand, swathed in green fabric, pale and clean from the water with its typical abrasions healed in the ten months since he had last held a broom, seemed to belong to a stranger. But the warmth of the touch he felt right up to his shoulder.

"I can't sew. But I can-" he began in a sudden desire to please and then stumbled. Rarely had he felt so deeply the absence of his wand, without which he could barely open an envelope these days. After five years at Hogwarts he could think of two things he could do without it. Faking divination and - "I can tell you stories. In the place I come from, there are travellers who tell strange tales of giants living among people and pixies kept in cages. They say there are huge snakes which can kill just by looking at you."

She hadn't believed a word of it, this Muggle Ginny.

"I've never had a storyteller before." She mused and then laughed. For the first time it chased the melancholy out of her eyes. "Maybe the distraction will be good for me. I hope you will stay with us, Viola."

At the other end of the hall, Gilderoy Lockhart was plucking the opening strains of a galliard. Harry looked down at the shaft of sunlight that pooled at the hem of his skirt and wondered what was happening in the dim halls of Hogwarts.

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That evening, when cool night air was stealing into the castle and Harry was washing the salt from his skin, she came to him. At her tentative knock, he whipped the shawl over his telltale short hair.

"I hope they have made you comfortable, Viola." From the doorway, she cast a critical eye over the narrow room, unadorned but for the meagre straw mattress piled high with compensatory blankets. "Though you would have a gentler night in Valentine's chamber and two may sleep comfortably in her bed."

The case against sharing a bed with Professor Trelawney was fairly compelling. It was enough that close quarters would quickly reveal his unfeminine body, even without his suspicion that she might be in possession of a matronly snore. On a blank beach among ruined timber, building himself into a girl's life had seemed a simple matter of choice, but already it was a burden.

"My lady, it's time for me to be plain with you."

"Tell me this first," Ginny said in a rush as she slipped into the room and leaned on the door which closed behind her. Her eyes glittered with excitement. "Have you been in love? I have no company here, apart from Valentine and old Curio, and I've always wished to have a companion - someone who could understand the extravagance of my heart, someone who had the learning to

make sense of it for me. It was a sister I wanted, Viola. And now I have you."

She drifted a small kiss onto Harry's cheekbone, leaving heady floral scent where she moved. He folded concealing arms around the boyish angle of his ribs.

"I can't tell you much about love," he said.

He remembered Cho in late afternoon light by the Quidditch pitch, straightening the bristles of her broom, cheeks bright after the practice session, a figure of perfect contemplation amid the bustle of chattering students around her. He remember Cho with her nose running and her eyes red as her heaving breaths filled the tearoom. He remembered an odd dream in which Luna had wept into a wooden basin and washed his feet in it, again and again, until the world receded to the rhythm of her touch. He didn't have a name for the way those memories made him feel, but he didn't think it was the same thing Ginny meant when she used that word.

"How can that be?" she puzzled. "You spoke of travellers and tales, and all stories worth hearing have love at their centre. What can we aspire to if not to love? It's the one thing that crosses the ravine between the human and the divine."

It was doomed to be shattered, this charming illusion she had built for herself. Harry had seen the chillingly superior portrait and suffered the extremes of Malfoy disdain at first hand.

"It's dangerous, my lady. Putting all your happiness in the hands of one person, when that person ..." He tried to find a more delicate way of putting it. "When you don't even know -"

"Do I fear his rejection?" Ginny's voice grew harsh and her small fingers traced over the pearls at her throat. "I am no fool, Viola. He returns the gifts I send. He dismisses my messengers with evasive words. I have no place in his heart. And yet how vain and imperfect is love if it quails at the first sign of hardship. What a pitiful emotion it must be!"

"Suppose he never loves you at all. Some men just don't do that."

Ginny's eyes flashed.

"Is that your sisterly counsel? Not to risk my heart because there's a chance I will fail? What a cowardly life you would have me lead! No matter, Viola. He will come to me. He is only one man, and I have all the patience of the mountains."

In her determination, she reminded him of the persistent, red-braided girl who for three years had swung always in his orbit without ever quite standing in his path. For the first time, he wondered how she would have explained the blushes and half-swallowed sentences and truculent silences if he had been curious enough to ask.

"You will understand in time. He is educated and quick-minded. Not even the smallest of social graces escapes him. He is elegance itself. Nothing puts him to fear and everyone from the hardest peasant woman to the Pope in Rome can be made to eat from his hand." She put her fingers to her lips and a wicked sparkle leapt from the corner of her eye. "You will see for yourself when you take my message to him."

Harry gulped. "My lady, I -"

"I will not be swayed. You must be my emissary. You sailed in on a new wind today. For three days we were plagued by storms and untiring rain. Until this morning, when the clouds were driven off and you stepped over my threshold. It's midsummer, Viola. The season is turning. Now is the time to work for change."

She unfastened the spray of lilies from her hair and left them on the blanket, where they gave off a scent sweet with decay.

"Tomorrow we can pick fresh ones. For now, you must sleep. You've had a long journey."

When she was gone, Harry peeled off the dress and the merciless corset and slumped onto the bed. Tireder than ever, he felt a throbbing in his muscles where the furious tension had faded to confusion. It wasn't fear of danger which drained him - for all his earlier suspicions about this place, he had emerged unharmed from a wandless day when anyone could have killed him armed with nothing more than a ladle. Nor was it the constant battle to keep a straight back and a feminine step, nor even the knowledge that, far beyond his ability to help them, his friends might be in peril. Much worse than these things were the rich fabrics, the smell of fruit and flowers on air, the deep colours and the sun so close overhead he felt he could almost touch it.

Harry had misplaced his rage and lost his road. He feared he was becoming drunk.

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Time to move on.

Come with me now, pass through the walls of stone into the night air. A yellow moon reigns here, casting thick light which hangs like a syrup over the landscape.

From above, you can see how the Duchess Orsino's castle crowns the highest peak of the hills. Follow the ridge that runs inland from that peak - see there where the torches burn? That is Count Olivier's villa.

We must descend now onto the long northward plain. Can you feel how the air loses its crispness? Here the green pastures are washed of colour, but every now and again a dollop of moonlight falls on a thatched roof or a low wall of piled stone. Up ahead to the west the sea curves back inward and on the shores of the wide bay there is a cluster of tumbledown houses, village is too ambitious a name.

Come to this small shack nearest the water. Where the light breaks through the window you can see a young man curled up on a sparse pile of straw. You know him instantly, don't you? The obstinate dark hair, the round, pale face, the cramped posture which recalls the outline of a long-vanished cupboard under the stairs.

This Harry is sleeping now. It is not yet his time. Tomorrow we will see him arise.

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Chapter: 2

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Chapter 2: Even so quickly may one catch the plague

The lazy morning is ripening. Fleeting clouds drop ribbons of shadow that ripple across the bony ridge of hilltop and slither down steep slopes. In this place, the sun is never far away.

Look below you. The thread of road winds through a shimmering fabric of treetop, unfurling from the crest of the seaside hill and running inland. At the western end, where life moves slowly to the rhythm of waves upon sand, the road begins at the gates of a honey coloured stone castle - you know it, of course: it belongs to the Duchess Virginia Orsino.

From a height, trees and sea and road are no more than patterns, idly pleasing in their movement and curve. But as we descend - take my hand now - as we descend, the detail emerges. Can you see? A lone figure moving eastward along the road. Closer still and you can detect the reluctance in its step. A slender figure in a trailing green dress, dark hair almost concealed by a paler green shawl.

Harry Potter, of course. At the eastern end of the road, the alligator mouth of Draco, Lord Olivier, awaits him.

Three days have passed since last you were here. In those three days, Harry has learned to carry the name Viola without strangeness. The corset bites him and fits more like a straightjacket each time he laces it, but the guise of girlishness has become second nature. He has always been a fast learner.

You have missed his frustrated searches for an exit from this strange world. He has tested the façade of his companions, slipping words like "Hogsmeade" and "Snitch" into late-night conversations and watching for an unconscious response. Nothing. Perhaps they are, as they claim, the citizens of a land called Illyria. One slow-moving morning he asked Her Grace's gentlewoman, a prim old maid who wears the name Curio and the face of Professor McGonagall, whether she has ever dreamed she was a cat. She pursed her lips, looked appraisingly down her nose at him, and went back to her accounts. He has learned the futility of addressing questions to the musician who inhabits Professor Dumbledore's body: he merely smiles gently, as if words were an unnecessary encumbrance upon him, and continues stroking his lute.

And if, over time, his efforts have lost their edge of urgency, who can blame him? The castle has its own rituals and rhythms, gentler paced than the strict school life he has been used to but every bit as rassuring. His days are marked at one end by the aroma of the morning bread which unwinds into his room not long after dawn, and at the other by the gentle hiss of the snuffing of candles. Sometimes he has to stop still and concentrate to see past the vivid colours of the present back to his last memory of Hogwarts. He pictures Hermione striking Dumbledore's desktop with her index finger as she convinces him to devote more staff and more time to finding Harry; Ron sending furious owls to Fred and George to demand in increasingly obscene terms that they explain what they hell they did to that wand; the real Professor McGonagall perhaps stroking her Gryffindor scarf anxiously as the Quidditch season draws closer. Each image tightens his chest until he finds himself startled by the crash of a slammed door or looks down to find a heap of shredded flowers at his feet.

Still, this place has a way of sapping the anger out of him so that, at the end of a long afternoon lazy with the low clang of bells around the necks of goats, he will look around for it and feel that he has been robbed.

And what of the duchess? The straight-backed creature of silks and jasmine scent who wears the Weasley pigheadedness like a martyr's faith. When the tingle of unrequited love hardens into the real pain of wanting, it is to Harry that she unburdens her heart, listing the perfections of the cold Lord Draco Olivier as if they were a litany which might bring about divine intervention.

Harry listens. Sometimes he murmurs sympathy. The way that, when she is most given over to frustration, he will place one sisterly hand over the back of her wrist, has the action become less impatient, more tender over time? Well, perhaps. Or perhaps it is only their reflective youth and beauty that make the fantasy appealing.

But now the morning light tips over into noon and Harry-Viola in the green dress continues along the eastward road. The tale is running ahead without us.

The tension in Harry's stomach felt like vicious baby dragons by the time he reached the villa of Draco, Lord Olivier.

In the real world, an army of Draco Malfoys could barely raise him to fear, but in this place Malfoy was a count who, according to rumour, spent his days riding around the hills resembling a sun god, and Harry's position was the very definition of compromising.

"I have gone so long without hope," Ginny had said to Harry as he left the castle gates that morning. "You come from another place, Viola. You bring change with you. I know you can convince him, if anyone can soften his heart."

All the way along the road, holding his skirts above the grass, Harry had tried to think of what words of love he could say on Ginny's behalf. "Shall I compare thee to a violent storm? Thou art about as lovely and as temperate". He mined his memory of Malfoy for any traces of virtue and found none. He was a cowardly little snob who, in the five years of their acquaintance, had failed to perform a single unselfish act. "Conceited", "vile" and "obsessed" were all good rhyming words, but he suspected these were not the ones Ginny had had in mind.

All too soon, the black front door of the Olivier villa loomed before him, its stone gargoyles leering down at him from either side. Knocking on it would only hurry the moment where he would have to look Malfoy in the face and lie. A winding path ran down the side of the villa. He followed it and hoped he could get himself lost.

He had not taken ten steps when he heard Ron's voice, the familiarity of it piercing him and hurtling him forward in time to a world of wands and broomsticks. He fought the disorientation and hurried to the open window from which the sound came to peer over the sill.

Ron was sitting beside a rough wooden table, leaning back in his chair with his boots on the tabletop and his hands behind his head. The fledgling ginger beard, mustard coloured doublet and white stockings proclaimed that he was not the Ron Harry knew, and yet the indolent pose was so distinctive they could have been back in the Gryffindor common room. For the first time, the stab of homesickness caused him pain.

Ron was in the middle of a rant.

"All this mourning is more than I can bear, Maria," he was complaining. "It's unhealthy. It's a year since his father died, and yet Lord Olivier still expects us to move around on tiptoe."

At the other end of the table, a woman in a white bonnet worked on her embroidery using stitches so speedy Harry had to look carefully to be sure she wasn't using magic.

"Was that you I heard tiptoeing in the kitchen before sunrise this morning?" she chided as she looked up. "I wondered if a whole regiment was tiptoeing along beside you."

It was Hermione. No wonder she could sew like the devil's own seamstress, and at that rate a whole army of house elves was due for a liberation. Harry caught himself and remembered, in this place she was Maria and, if he mentioned elves, he was the one who would be thought peculiar.

Ron was defending himself vigorously.

"That was hardly my fault! I didn't see that pile of pots. How was I supposed to know it would be there?"

Hermione smiled into her needlework.

"The slatterns! Shame on the cooks for hiding their pots on top of the kitchen cabinet! Toby Belch, you are a trial! What were you doing there? Climbing in the window?"

"Don't be absurd."

"Hunting for cooking sherry?"

Ron gave a sly smile.

"Lord Olivier guesses you've been drinking, you know."

"Well bully for him!" cried Ron, slapping his thigh. "What tipped him off d'you suppose? The constant drinking, the drunkenness, the screaming hangovers?"

Hermione's frown - affection streaked with frustration - made Harry feel at once at home and very far from it.

"I am quite serious. His Lordship can cut you off, you know. He was saying at breakfast - as you would know if you had deigned to attend - that you tried to present a pompous knight to him yesterday. He said you were too drunk to remember his name, while the knight kept trying to bow and falling on his nose."

Ron laughed uproariously at the memory and began rifling through the cupboards which lined the wall of the small dining room.

"That was Sir Andrew Aguecheek, a fine fellow with a brilliant education and a stupendous head on his shoulders. Speaks five languages and dances like an angel. His Lordship's new clerk, scribe and household treasurer." A pile of trinkets and papers was growing as he emptied the cupboard. Hermione watched him suspiciously.

"I didn't know we had a new treasurer."

"Neither does his Lordship, but he will be delighted to find out! All I have to do is get Sir Andrew drunk enough to approach him and sober enough to keep his balance, and the job will be his. Ah! There she is!" He removed a tall gourd from the back of a shelf and plucked out its false top to disgorge a pottery flask which he put to his lips.

Hermione's tutted. Ron imbibed. Then the door creaked open and Percy Weasley strutted in wearing a superior expression and a green velvet cap which sagged under its fountain of peacock feathers.

"Sir Andrew!" Ron roared magnanimously, spreading his arms. "Maria, may I present to you the distinguished Sir Andrew Aguecheek, soon to be clerk, scribe and household treasurer to his Lordship, the Count Olivier. Sir Andrew, this is Maria."

Percy took Hermione's hand in his, yelping high and sharp as his finger collected her needle.

"Mistress Maria, I give you both my hand and my heart."

Hermione was nonplussed.

"And I return them to you for I can't see what use they'd be to me. Toby speaks highly of you, sir - five languages indeed! I suppose you are something of a connoisseur."

"Not at all, I assure you," Percy replied speedily. "It's just an allergic reaction - I expect the rash to clear up any day now."

Chortling quietly and making Harry long for the days when the solidarity of the Weasley family was the one thing he could count on, Ron held out his flask.

"A drink! A drink, Sir Andrew, to soothe your sluggardly tongue."

The newcomer pressed his knuckles to his temple and winced.

"Dear Sir Toby," he croaked in the flat tone that was so distinctively Percy. "Please be so good as to keep that deadly substance away from me. There was too much wine on the pheasant last night, it must be that because I felt quite lightheaded by the end of the evening. I fear I may have disgraced myself before his Lordship the Count."

"Of course you didn't!" Ron declared, clapping him on the back. "You danced like an angel!"

Percy gulped. "I danced?"

"With one of his Lordship's pigs, who I must admit had the better of you in the second waltz." Percy let his head sink to the table with a moan of despair.

Ron and Hermione's grins met above his head and reminded him that, a long time ago in the days where grinning was a simple act and free, the three of them had laughed until their eyes ran at the thought of Percy locked inside a pyramid, Percy chewing Bartemius Crouch's lunch for him, Percy demanding that Penelope write him an agenda of the places she most wished to be touched in order of increasing pleasure. Who had taken that easy laughter from him?

"Excuse me."

Three faces turned to him. He waited three beats for the slightest hint of recognition, but it didn't come.

"I'm here to speak with Lord Olivier," he ended up demanding. "I have a message from her Grace the Duchess."

"You're not the usual messenger," Hermione noted, hand on hip.

"No." He willed her to find something familiar about him. "I'm new in Illyria. My name's Viola."

"And my name is Sir Toby Belch. Welcome to our lair, lovely Viola!" Ron proclaimed with a broad grin and shattered Harry's hopes. "Do you drink, lovely Viola? This is His Lordship's finest."

He raised the flask to Harry's lips and a sweet, rich wine burned down his throat, almost too

strong to bear. Harry coughed and wiped his lips.

"And now, lovely Viola, you must walk around through the rose garden to the courtyard, where you will find his lordship basking in the sun and tormenting the serving boys. I shall go before and announce you."

"Do you think that's wise?" Hermione cautioned him but he waved her away.

"I am no more than merry, my dear Maria. My spicy banter will only enliven his lordship's morning and - ooh, they've put a step in here, fancy that, nearly made me fall."

As Harry walked away, he heard Ron saying "Now, good Sir Andrew, can I prop you up with another drop of His Lordship's finest?" and Percy groaning painfully into the tabletop.

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Quickly now! No time to smell the roses. The courtyard awaits us, the courtyard and its lord.

Stand with me here, in the dappled shade of the trellis, under the vines. Leave the grapes alone. You don't know this place. If you eat its fruit, it may claim you forever.

Now can you see? The narrow shelf of land, squeezed between the villa and the slope which plunges down into the northward plain, is dotted with cypresses turning their silver-backed leaves flirtatiously up to the breeze. Here and there a fountain, a stone god, a flowerbed blooming in perfect geometry.

Its centrepiece is the courtyard, a cool square lined with a mosaic of green, grey, blue and black.

Cypresses mark the lower edge, while to the east and west loom rows of lemon trees, protecting ungenerous fruit and pointing barbarous thorns in every direction

Beneath a particularly gnarled and ancient citrus, a slender figure reclines on an upholstered chaise longue, grey breeches and a silk shirt in pale blue making an oddly serene brushstroke of pastel among the vivid hues of leaves and flowers. Its grey-stockinged legs are crossed with one foot pointing skyward. Even the languid stretch of body makes a criticism, proclaiming that there is nothing here worth sitting straight for.

Who else but Draco? Do stay and watch.

Reaching the end of the rose garden, Harry swung around the corner of the villa, but, when he saw Malfoy's recumbent form, he halted and stared. And all at once the empty space under his stomach was filled again with tension and slow coals.

His face turned away from Harry, Malfoy was plucking grapes from a bunch and tossing them idly into the foliage. The thwack and rustle of wasted fruit washed rhythmically over the courtyard until Malfoy, with a growl of frustration, flung the remainder of the bunch to splatter on the tiles.

"Feste!" he called in a voice that strained pathetically with the inconvenience of having to shout. "Feste, come here at once! This boredom is squeezing the breath out of me."

He glared at the ruined grapes as if uncertain whether or not to pick them up and dash them again.

In a mad streak of colour, Fred and George Weasley bounded out from the back of villa and into the courtyard, their limbs swathed in loose harlequin robes of purple and orange, many-peaked caps fastened onto their heads by some force which defied gravity. Bowing with flourish and perfect synchronisation, they cried in booming ringmasters' voices:

"Feste and Feste: jesters, acrobats, minstrels and adulterers at your service! We sing! We dance! We expose our buttocks at propriety! Can you lend us a florin until Tuesday?"

Without permission, the corners of Harry's mouth tugged upwards. Malfoy, however, wore a sour expression.

"Where have you been?"

"Out in the world." Fred's eye glinted conspiratorially. "We have rescued damsels in distress, we have searched in treacherous places and found hidden treasure -"

"Treasure? Where is this treasure?"

George winked. "In your pocket. Can you lend us a florin until Tuesday?"

Malfoy passed his hand over his eyes.

"I've seen funnier things spilled down Sir Toby's shirtfront. You've become stale, Feste. And you're unreliable. I shall cast you out in the wilderness unless you find something to amuse me."

"Hard words, my lord." George grew serious. "Then let me mend. I shall tell you the funniest thing I have ever heard."

And he recited:

"There was an Illyrian lord
Whose grief was as deep as 'twas broad
All around him love stirred
And the bees shagged the birds
But he scorned maiden, duchess and bawd."

The blond nobleman's face became so pale and tight Harry feared the twins were in for a beating, but at that moment there was a sudden clutter of breaking pottery and oaths from which Ron stumbled forward and plonked himself down on a wooden chair at the end of Malfoy's chaise.

"I have a message for you," Ron declared and added a half-hearted "my lord".

"If you've come to tell me the wine stores are empty, I can guess that by the way you smell."

"The wine stores are empty?!" Ron panicked.

"You'll just have to lick the inside of the barrels, or have you already done that?"

That brightened Ron up.

"I think I will. Which brings to mind the messenger. Her Grace the Duchess has sent another emissary, a big-eyed young lass called Lovely Viola. I sent her down the path through the rose garden."

Malfoy turned to survey the area and Harry's cheek scraped the stone corner of the villa as he hurried to conceal himself.

"Malvolio! Find this messenger!" Malfoy commanded.

From a spartan stool concealed beneath overhanging branches, the unmistakable pointy form of Professor Snape unfolded, so like a spider it surprised Harry to see he had only two legs. The sunlight seemed to dim a little.

"Tell her I'm sick. Yes, tell her it's the Black Death. Tell her any lie you please - what you will - only see to it that she leaves."

"I most certainly will, my lord."

Snape began to take long strides towards Harry's corner of the courtyard, his black cloak rippling behind him to expose the equally black costume he wore underneath. Harry retreated along the side of the building and made a show of studying the little pink roses which grew up the side of the wall. He looked up with his best impression of innocence as Snape approached.

The professor studied him with such distaste that Harry felt sure he had recognised him. When finally he spoke it was if he had just bitten down on a particularly noxious variety of cockroach.

"Lord Olivier will not see you. You may go."

He turned to make that pronouncement a fait accompli and there it was, the clash of powerlessness and fury which only this man could produce in Harry. But in the act of lowering his eyes to quell the angry retort, he remembered that detention belonged to another world. This Snape - this petty bully - had to fight here without the protection of his status as teacher. It was as close as he would get to even ground and, against all wisdom, Harry determined in that moment that he would deliver Ginny's message to Malfoy if he had to pass through nine levels of hell to get to him.

"Lord Olivier doesn't have to see me," he offered with a smile that stopped just short of sarcastic. "I can speak from another room, but I won't leave without delivering my message."

"His lordship is asleep."

"Then he will not be disturbed when I deliver my words."

Snape's brows were descending lower to cast angry shadows over his eyes.

"His lordship is unwell. He has a mortal illness."

"Then my mission is all the more urgent. My mistress would never forgive me if his lordship died before he heard her message."

Snape turned on his heel and strode back through the garden. There was a heated conversation from which snippets carried to Harry: "extremely ill-mannered ... very bold for a maiden ... appeared to mock my authority!!". Finally Malfoy proclaimed in a voice he might have used to order a tooth removed:

"Very well then. Bring her to me."

He reached beside his seat to retrieve a large black mourning hat whose wide brim soon obscured his face. Snape announced: "You may approach" and Harry picked his way along the path to stand before the reclining figure. Snape was turned away from him, arms folded in high dudgeon. Ron was nodding off under the sunlight in his chair and the twins were watching silently from under a low-hanging bough. Swallowing hard to quell his rising distaste, Harry began with all the sincerity he could fake.

"My most noble lord - am I right to presume that you are the lord of this house?" Malfoy's mouth, the only part of his face visible under the hat, twitched slightly.

"I am Lord Draco Olivier. You may begin, but be succinct. I'm very busy."

"I wrote some rhyming couplets. Only two but they're quite good. I'll do those first."

"No."

"Fine. The sonnet then-"

"No."

"I'll do the first four lines. It's not easy to find something to rhyme with Olivier."

"That will be all." Malfoy waved his thin hand dismissively. "That ridiculous duchess has sent bad poets before but none quite as tongue-tied as you. Malvolio, show her out."

As Snape descended upon him gleefully, Harry snapped.

"What do you expect in a place like this? There's a snoring drunk man, two fools and a hovering vulture. It's not like I'm here to put on a puppet show. I won't tell you her secrets in front of an audience."

"I did not request it."

Harry ducked the bony arm of Professor Snape and skipped away. The professor's triumphant leer goaded him almost as much Malfoy's presuming to give him orders.

"Let me put it this way. If I said these things in public, they'd only sound cheap. They should be spoken in confidence. They should be ... whispered in your ear. Let me speak to you alone."

The thin lips, the only feature Harry could see under the hat, fought a smile, and Harry felt triumphant.

"Very well. You may leave us. Yes, Malvolio, I wish you to leave. And take that reeking Toby Belch with you. "

The space felt too vast, too empty and quiet when only two people were left in it. For a long moment, Malfoy sat concealed under his hat, watching the twitching hem of Harry's skirt as he shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. Abruptly, he spoke.

"You have a strange manner. Where are you from? What is your lineage?"

Not two minutes and already they were onto pedigree. It made Harry short.

"My lineage is no lower than yours. Should I begin with the poetry or the praise?"

"If you utter one word of poetry I'll have you whipped."

Harry clenched his teeth and remembered his status in this place.

"The praise then."

"The praise is becoming tedious."

"I took a long time thinking of how to put it."

"Then it will hardly be sincere, will it?" Malfoy's lip was curling. "I granted a private audience because you promised me something too confidential to say in company. So let me hear it. Unless it's truly filthy I'll have you scrub out Malvolio's chamberpot before you go."

"Well," Harry stalled. " It's strange talking to a hat. I'm sure I could praise you better if I could see your face."

Malfoy's voice lilted in amusement.

"I don't think your mistress would wish for you to look upon what I deny to her. That pleases me."

He whipped off the hat and threw it into the garden behind him, biting meditatively on his lower lip with his gaze fixed on Harry. Then he stretched and crossed his arms behind his head.

"Well then. Is it worth all this wailing and bad poetry?"

And Harry found that his hard-planned words had deserted him.

The change in Malfoy was not something he could put his finger on. As with Ginny, it might be no more than the clarity of light in this place and the loquacious beauty of the background. Certainly his paler than pale colouring was the same, only the sun had added healthy undertones where once there had been bluish shadows under the eyes and in the hollows of his cheeks. It couldn't be the hair - though it fell to a uniform length at his chin, it was the same fine-textured blond Harry knew.

"Your verdict?" Malfoy queried with an idle quirk of eyebrow and Harry knew what was different. It was as if someone had taken an eraser to Malfoy's portrait and rubbed out the lines - the mean ones that gathered on his forehead in moments of disappointment or defeat; the vindictive ones that hardened his eyes when he said words like "Mudblood". It was the difference between the harsh blaze of a flash photograph and an impressionist's smudged contours.

There was haughtiness, undeniably, but not the whipped-dog defensiveness and redoubled aggression to which Harry was accustomed. Malfoy had always carried himself as if he ought to be royalty, and Harry had to admit he had been right. The constant affirmation of "My Lord" appeared to have leached the ugliness out of him, and even his smallness seemed made for the close fit of breeches and the caress of silk.

And beauty? The word took shape on Harry's lips and caught there. Clarity of eyes, smoothness of skin, whiteness of hair all worked on him, but there was something else, a fierce self-possession that tipped mere symmetry over the edge and made it more. Yes, that was beauty, Harry realised, and blinked twice, and found himself looking at a complete stranger.

"Speak, girl. Say something."

"I ..." Harry began. He thought that, given the circumstances, it was a good start. "There's

nothing wrong with your face."

The words were miserly and Malfoy's expression confirmed it. Perhaps if he could dissociate the face from the person attached to it, he could be more generous.

"Fine. They were right. All those people who can't stop telling me how beautiful you are, they weren't completely mad."

A familiar smug look stole over Malfoy's face.

"But there's more to a person than how they look. You're also vain, and cruel and cold." The sharp eyebrows angled upwards, in astonishment or offence Harry couldn't say. "You hide up here with your beloved beauty as if you were too good to share yourself with the world."

"Oh, everybody has a piece of my beauty," Malfoy told him with a scrape of bitterness. When he rose from the chaise the fine shirt stretched across his torso and, completely unbidden, the realisation that riding must do more for the figure than Quidditch popped into Harry's brain. "I sit for portraits. I endure the farm girls pointing and giggling when I pass. My famous beauty is everybody's but my own."

With a flick of his hand he dismissed it.

"Enough of it. Tell me what land you come from."

The way Malfoy stood by Harry's side, just a little closer than polite indifference allowed, set him on edge and he shrank back, rounding his shoulders, suddenly aware of the flimsiness of his disguise and the boyish shape of his body beneath it.

"My home is far away. You would never have heard of - don't do that!"

He turned his face away from where one thin-boned finger was tracing the line of the shawl as it fell along his neck. Malfoy withdrew his hand, letting it trail over the bare skin covering Harry's collarbone. The flesh, so rarely exposed to air or to scrutiny, prickled at the touch.

"Who is your family?"

"They're noble born and none of your business!" Both the sharpness of tone and the lie surprised him. Muscles he didn't even know he had were tensing along his back. The best place to have a Malfoy was Siberia, but failing that it was wisest to keep them where you could see them and this Malfoy had edged around behind him, his voice dropping to the edge of a whisper.

"I think I'd like to hear those words of praise you wrote for me."

Harry plunged a mental hand into the murky water of memory, but his snatches of rhyme had long ago become heavy and sunk to the bottom. The process wasn't helped by the fact that Malfoy had suspended his hand at thigh height, where it couldn't help but brush against Harry's skirts. This conversation was becoming one endless stumble.

"The Duchess Orsino never tires of describing your virtues," he tried. "She says you are the very essence -"

A long sigh cut him off and Malfoy appeared again on his left side.

"Do you see why I turn her messengers away? These words are formulaic. They lack sincerity. Why don't you try telling me in your own words. Tell me what you think, not your mistress."

And he slid the back of his fingers along the plane of Harry's stomach, giving off heat even through shift and corset. Harry removed the hand as if it were a dead thing.

"I think you are the most cold-blooded man in Illyria to treat my lady the way you do."

That made him step back, his eyes losing their hooded sensuality and hardening with all the abruptness of a slamming door.

"I have told the Duchess I can never love her. She's ..." His mouth made a bitter shape as he paced. "Your mistress is wet eyes and tumbling hair and cloying female sentimentality. Oh, I suppose her pretty enough and possessed of the usual accomplishments. And yet with each emissary she sends I find I like her less."

Malfoy plucked a lemon with enough viciousness to leave the branch shaking.

"She's unhappy."

"That's not my doing," came Malfoy's swift reply. "I have always been plain with her. She should have given up this vain pursuit months ago."

Yes, Harry thought. She should have. But he remembered how, one afternoon in the orchard, Ginny had chastised him: "Don't preach to me of other men. It's his face I shall see on my wedding day, whoever my groom might be." Then she had gone back to her reading but had not turned the page for some time.

"If I were the Duchess, I wouldn't understand your answer, no matter how plain you made it. If I loved you with her passion, it wouldn't make sense."

Across the courtyard, Malfoy leaned against the slender trunk of a cypress.

"What would you do?"

Passion was an exotic creature to Harry, dangerous and clumsy. But he knew its movements. He had observed how, when Ginny recited the sonnets that reminded her of Malfoy, her skin flushed and her breath became feverishly fast until her thumbs left damp prints on the edge of the page.

"I would stand at your door and tell you how I loved you. In different languages, in songs - I would write it in blood if I thought it would move you. And I would chain myself to your gate so that no-one could make me leave. You wouldn't sleep because every day and night you'd hear my calling out your name. Nothing but your name. In the end, I'd wear you down."

Through the long silence that followed, Harry felt the piercing gaze on him and shifted under its intrusiveness.

"You might do much," Malfoy said finally and stepped forward. Even at a distance, Harry shrank back. Malfoy paused, checked himself and slipped a silver ring from his finger.

"Take this. Keep it as a fee for your services. Or give it to your mistress as the price for ceasing her entreaties. I care not which."

It twinkled in the sunlight as he held it out.

The ring nestled in the hollow of Malfoy's curved hand, lying over a deeply etched lifeline, the perfect excuse for him to leave and return to Ginny. But as he reached out for it, the fingers

curled in and the hand slowly retreated. His determination provoked now, Harry followed its movement as the glitter of metal climbed into the air until it was suspended, dangled some way above the blond head. Of course Malfoy was playing a game, but damned if Harry was going to let him win even this point.

With teeth clenched, he reached up, but Malfoy was leaning his hand back so that Harry could only scrape his wrist. There was nothing for it but to ignore the warm breath on his cheek, stand on tip-toe and reach again, steadying himself with a hand on Malfoy's chest. That laugh, victorious and low in Malfoy's throat, stung him into making one angry lunge.

As his fingers closed on the ring which those spidery hands refused to relinquish, a warm, wet mouth closed on the corner of his lips and kissed him twice - slow, testing kisses accompanied by a hand on his waist and the length of Malfoy's body bending to press itself against him. He overbalanced and fell forward into the embrace.

Silk was the thinnest of fabrics, Harry learned, fitting exactly over the skin to give a very accurate feel for the nakedness beneath. "Sun god - so warm - Malfoy" was a close translation of the tangled thoughts which clogged his brain during the three seconds of contact. Then he snatched at the ring and tore himself free, hitching his skirts to run back along the path through the rose garden. His feet kicked up messy clods of earth as he went.

"Come back tomorrow with another message," called the imperious voice behind him but he didn't turn.

Draco, Lord Olivier, leaned back against the tree and put a hand to his lips.

*

Listen. What can you hear? Settling of leaves. Far away, the regular beat of an axe on wood. Birdsong, fleeting then subsiding. And a whisper.

The blond nobleman in the cypress shade, see how his lips move as his gaze fixes on the point where the path disappears at the corner of the villa. Can you catch the muffled words which escape through barely parted lips? "Too fast!" he speaks. Then later and with anguish: "Soft, soft!", the sharp features alternately blank then contorted.

Did you miss that reluctant fragment?

"Even so quickly may one catch the plague?"

He crosses back to his seat and lowers himself onto it. Absentmindedly, he plucks a grape from the broken bunch on the tiles and puts it in his mouth. Then, apart from one finger which rubs along the blue silk at his forearm, he is perfectly still.

And so we must leave him.

*

This way now. The afternoon is burning down into evening and we have one more visit to make. Over the ridge and down the steep slope, across the long northward plain to the blue bay which cuts back inland. In the ramshackle fishing village, inside the hut nearest the water, a young man is tying up his frugal pack.

Yes, you should know him. He wears dark brown breeches and a linen shirt that ten summers ago might have been white. He would be aghast at the thought of a green dress - and yet this young man is Harry also. He, too, has been in Illyria for three days and he, too, is prey to twofold musings: firstly, how to get home and, secondly, whether to get home.

Now, finally, he speaks.

"I can't stay, Antonio." He ties the last knot in his pack and lays it down, but keeps his eyes on the pack. "This isn't where I belong."

A tall man with callused hands and a mess of dark hair had been watching him pack.

"Where will you go?" asked the older man, leaning on the door frame.

"The Duchess Orsino's court. You said it's not far. I'll leave as soon as I can."

He looked away as his companion scratched at the fabric at his shoulder and caught a finger in one of its many holes.

"You must forgive me for not offering to go with you. I'm an outlaw in that part of Illyria. You will take care, won't you Sebastian?"

He pulled the young man into a rough hug.

"Antonio," Harry said quietly into the weave of hessian at his companion's shoulder. "Does the name Sirius Black mean anything to you?"

The tall man frowned. "You said that name once before. I don't remember him. Should I?"

Released from the embrace, Harry's arms didn't seem to know where to put themselves.

"I knew him once, in another place. You could be the same man. Almost."

And now the man with Ss^ face was awkward too, his gaze intent on the ill-fitting boards of the wall.

"You will find your answers at the court. I'm sure of it. But it's too late to start your journey now. Stay one night here where you're safe, and we can drink to your adventure." Brightening, he dipped into the chest made of old ships' planks, he took a single amphora, chipped and badly made. "To your health, Sebastian!"

"Harry." The younger man examined the contents of the mug. "My name's Harry. That first day, when you pulled me out of the water, the sun was so bright and I couldn't see where I was. When you asked what my name was, I thought you shouldn't have to ask. I wasn't sure who I could trust."

"You lied."

"Yes."

"You were afraid."

"Not just that."

"You're not making this journey alone, Harry. There's no danger if I'm careful. I'll come with you, never mind the risk."

And, though the lone window was small and the fire had burned down, the whole room seemed alight with the look Harry turned on him.

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Chapter: 3

br>

Unstaid and skittish

For such as I am, all true lovers are:
Unstaid and skittish in all motions else
Save in the constant image of the creature
That is beloved.
Orsino, II.4

Stillness. Fleeting kiss of air.

Prickle of grass beneath your wrists. Your head in my lap and a drizzle of sunlight spattered over your waist.

Open your eyes.

Late afternoon, the Duchess Orsino's orchard. The afternoon sunlight is a tangible substance, don't you think? With its golden tint and its liquid thickness. We could be looking through cider.

Can you taste the sweetness of fruit?

Overhead, a snowfall of tiny seeds borne on their parachutes of feathery silk. Let me brush away the grain that has fallen onto your cheek. See how its strands disintegrate at my touch? Think of it. In its own ancient way, a tree has just made love to your face. Your face and my fingertips. Look again and know this snowfall for what it is. The flirtation of trees. A moan of desire from dumb creatures whose only manifesto is: flourish. It's all around us, this wild orgy of blossom and seed pod. The air itself is thick with lust.

And you thought this place was innocent.

Sit up and cast your eye over the rows of alder which sprawl behind the castle. A lithe-limbed figure with capable shoulders and her head swathed in muslin is striding through the trees. You want to call her Madam Hooch, but in this place she has no name. She is the Second Gentleman, or the Messenger, or - today - the Gardener. She is tending the bees, loudmouthed whoremongers who encourage the flowers in their come-hither scents and courtesans' colours.

Mollified with smoke, they hum a drowsy cloud around her head as she withdraws the shards of honeycomb and the bucket accepts them with a thud. As she puts her finger to her mouth to suck off a smudge of honey, what do you suppose she is thinking? What do you suppose the honey is thinking? They go together, appetite and consumption, desire and surrender. They are older than blood. They will have their dominion.

Look carefully. Feel the warmth of the earth under your thighs. Perhaps now you understand what this place is.

There are footsteps at the gate. Watch for me, be my vigilant eyes as I brush the grassblades and crumpled petals from your back. A figure coming into view? Of course. From here, he will be dwarfed by the granite lions which guard the path, let alone by the mass of the castle itself. It's Harry, isn't it? He will be tracing a winding way, the hem of his dress catching in the grass and dragging the burden of the news he has to bear. Do disbelieving fingertips search the corner of his lips where he can still feel the clumsy mouth of Draco, Lord Olivier?

He walks briskly, you say? With hands clenched at his sides. How delightfully unexpected! Even here, he refuses to tread the path laid out for him. Still, how long does he expect his resistance to hold when the first smug peaches of the season are already losing their grip and falling?

We must see where this strange mood leads him. Make haste now and we can catch him inside the doors.

Harry strode up the first four steps and stopped with his foot on the sixth. Firing his glare up the curved length of the staircase, he put his hand on the banister, gripping hard. The veins in his head throbbed, but then he had walked hard and the Mediterranean heat was a form of attack - the heat and the olive saplings which seemed to sidle up to the path to make tears in his skirt as he passed. He pressed his palm into the marble until the coolness soaked in. Then he turned and descended.

The entrance hall and the vast dining room echoed emptily as he hurried through them, fabric still whipping behind him, until he reached the sanctuary of his little bedchamber beside the kitchens. There he stopped still and forced five deep breaths down his throat.

They weren't enough. A certain silver ring shot through the air, clinked angrily off the back wall and the right, then skittered across his blanket to land in the centre of the floor, where it glinted insolently in the slab of light which fell from the doorway. The obliteration spells he hissed were wandless and impotent. It twinkled. He seethed.

The slick rustle of silk approached and then halted.

"Viola?"

Ginny was holding herself cautiously just outside the room, her skirt catching the loose threads from the embroidery frame which dangled forgotten in her hand. Despite his determined silence

and the unwelcoming turn of back, she spoke his name again. One last chance, he decided and pressed his teeth together until his jaw hurt.

"Did you deliver my message?"

"Yes."

Only the walls could see his disgust, but it must have tainted that one barked syllable because he heard the fleshy sound of swallowing before she went on.

"Did you receive a response?"

His laugh had a nasty edge.

"Oh yes. He made himself pretty bloody clear."

When he forced himself to face her, she had clasped her embroidery behind her back, chin raised to meet the news. Well then. If she was determined to make herself a martyr, he could build her a pyre to climb onto.

"There must be thousands of men in Illyria and you've chosen the worst of them."

It was an unfurling of banners, that one half-truth, and it ought to be accompanied by the cry of battlehorns.

"This bloody Greek god Lord Draco, he's - oh, where do I even start with him? He's vain and he's selfish and he doesn't think about anything except what pleases him. He's never happy unless he's making someone miserable. He is the worst sort of snob." Harry's pulse galloped, he knew his voice was rising, and as he spoke his hands made jerky, emphatic swipes in the air. "It's as if everybody was put here just to entertain him. He's manipulative - no, that's too kind - he's a downright liar, and he's never done a day's work in his whole bloody spoiled life. He's a coward and he's a cheat. And you can dream all you want, but he will never, ever feel about anybody the way you say you feel about him."

He punctuated his verdict with a triumphant silence.

Wide and glossy though they were, her eyes stayed on him. His skin itched. He tugged at his shawl and wiped away the sheen of sweat which had collected around his hairline, but something about him still felt unkempt.

"I know what he is," Ginny said levelly. She came into the room, sat on the very edge of his bed and smoothed her skirts. "Now tell me the precise words of his message."

He had burned all his anger to launch that tirade and had nothing left to fuel another attack.

"He -" Harry closed his mouth. Every way he framed the words they sounded sticky, too intimate to be spoken. He touched ... He breathed ... His fingers ... He kissed ... No. The way Malfoy had ... the way Malfoy had *done those things,* that was a secret he would have to keep.

"What was his message?" she asked again and turned her gaze to her lap. He remembered the ring that sneered unseen on the floor between them and he stepped forward so that his hem concealed it.

"There's no light in here. We should do this outside where it's brighter."

"If you wish." Though she looked at him strangely, she went ahead down the short passageway which led to the kitchen.

The ring clinked helplessly as he kicked it under the bed.

At this midpoint between meals, the kitchen was quiet. A blackened copper pot bubbled on a trivet above the stove's glowing coals, the table beside it piled with baskets of berries. At the workbench which bisected the room, a sweat-slicked Oliver Wood was using all the power in his famed Keeper's biceps to grind almonds in a massive stone mortar. With a swift glance at his mistress' demeanour, he gave a curt bow and disappeared through the door to the herb gardens, turning at the last moment to venture a shy smile in Harry's direction.

Harry ran his fingers over the filmy scarf which tucked into the top of his bodice and camouflaged its lack of curve.

"No more delay, Viola. Tell me his message, as precisely as you can remember."

Standing by the stove, Ginny took a handful of berries and waited for his answer.

"He didn't give me anything you could call a message. He mostly asked questions, and then he bit my head off every time -" A trilling laugh interrupted him. Despite all logic, it appeared to come from Ginny, who put a strawberry to her lips and watched him with glittering eyes. "I don't see why you think it's funny. He didn't like my flattery and he wouldn't even listen to the poem."

"You saw him face to face." The first small steps of a dance possessed her feet. "This is far better than I hoped. For weeks, that snarling hound Malvolio has stopped everyone at the gate and turned them away with a message. Those curt words you endured are pure spun gold to me, my dearest Viola. Now come here."

She stilled herself as he approached.

"Tonight we will drink to your triumph." He accepted the berry she held to his mouth, small though it was with its shade more white than red. "There will be fine wine and cheese and pheasant roasted with apples and nutmeg and all the pastries you can eat."

As she leaned up to feed him, the folds of their skirts fell together in one shower of cloth, and the memory came to him unwanted of silk-clad shins making the same impression, of warm breath and the smell of lemons. With deliberate slowness, he took the second berry clumsily, his lips closing on her fingers. The briefest ripple of curiosity washed the blue of her eyes before they hardened and she pulled her hand back. The way she stepped around him, he could have been a piece of furniture.

"You performed a small miracle for me today," she said from the door and gave him the empty smile she used on petitioners and visiting priests. "We mustn't let it go to waste. Tomorrow you will return with another message."

He hurled the profanity of his protest at the empty room.

*

We must travel again. Eastwards. The afternoon wanes swiftly as we pass - it is dusk, it is twilight, now evening, now black midnight as we follow the winding path along the edge of the Olivier villa.

The rosebeds loom as one tangled mass in front of you; their fragrance still lingers faintly in the darkness. Beyond them, you can just discern the outline of Count Olivier's villa, pitch against charcoal for the moon is veiled tonight. On the topmost floor, the milky light in one square window suggests candles burning distantly, and on the ground floor there are unmistakable signs of life.

Loud voices pierce the silence, then laughter. Follow the sound, through the garden, through the scullery window into the kitchen, where two figures are warming themselves by the roasting fire. Take your seat on the bench, here between the enormous mushrooms and the odorous heads of cabbage. Listen.

"It's late, it's late," Percy observed with his trademark exactitude from where he stood at the fireplace, staring into his drink, lips shaping the words only loosely. "Toby, I tell you it's late. It's too late to be going to bed."

Amid a litter of forgotten foodstuffs - a hunk of cheese, handful of dried apricots, chicken leg, a ragged end of bread - Ron sat cross-legged on the kitchen table, his long calves bonier than ever in their white stockings and dinner crumbs clinging to the ruffles at his collar and the mustard coloured silk of his doublet.

"Nonsense!" he bellowed. "It isn't late at all. I think we've missed late and gone straight to early."

Another mouthful of liquid wisdom and the eloquence flowed through him.

"In fact, unless I'm very much mistaken, it's almost time for breakfast. Mmmmm .... breakfast!" And with that one lascivious syllable, he threw back the last contents of his mug.

"That's not breakfast." Percy was filled with a sudden certainty. "Breakfast doesn't cause you to expose yourself to strangers. It's not breakfast that makes you put on a petticoat and insist that the servants call you Nelly. That would be ale."

Ron held up a pointed finger on which his eyes could barely focus. "And that's where you are in error, my dear Sir Andrew. Firstly, no-one calls me Nelly and lives to see daylight. And thirdly, you're looking at it wrong. This ale we see before us is only barley left to go sour. It's a grain. In

another life, it might have been bread. Think of it that way. Think of it as bread - it's bread in a mug!"

"Father, give us this day our daily ..."

"Oh, I'm very religious, more religious than St Peter's left buttock. Daily is not nearly often enough for me. I say: take, eat, this is - Feste! Do come in, Feste! You too, Feste! Pick up a mug!"

Two orange and purple caps sailed onto the table and Fred and George Weasley slid their sturdy bodies onto the bench.

"Evening Nelly." Fred tipped an imaginary hat.

George inspected the empty mug and grinned. "Here's a sight - the honourable Sir Toby Belch reduced to ale! The world has gone mad."

Ron balanced the mug upside down on the table, not without difficulty.

"I'm in pain, Feste. A man like me wasn't made to be denied. That's it - I'm going to lick the inside of the barrel."

Percy spluttered into the fire.

"Don't be an ass!"

"Where's the sin in a little licking?" Ron protested. "The twelve apostles drank blood. Chronos the Titan swallowed five of his children."

"Jonah ate that whale." Fred winked.

"Exactly! And I can lick the inside of a barrel!"

"Don't be an ath," Fred mumbled into the tabletop.

"An ath? What's wrong with him?"

"Splinter in the tongue."

Ron laughed so hard the chicken leg rolled onto the floor.

"What good's a mute fool? It's like a ... a juggler with no arms. "

"Feste," George said ominously. "I believe that's a challenge."

And Fred began to hum. And George hummed with him. And then they broke into song:

Mary was a buxom lass and wicked were her eyes,
But the first time that I kissed her I was in for a surprise
"Your cheek is rough beneath my lips," I said. My hands grew bolder.

She laughed a little deeply and she threw me over her shoulder.

Oh Mary Oh Mary
A little too hairy
They laughed and they jeered
Cause my girl wore a beard.

She tossed me on the sand. I said "Your strength is unbefitting"
She said she wrestled sailors but the muscle came from knitting.
I asked her 'bout the solid shape that pressed against my thigh
She said she'd picked a carrot and I did not spot the lie.

Oh Mary Oh Mary
Her muscles were scary
They laughed till they choked
Cause my girl was a bloke

Yes Mary gave me many things, the first one was a shock,
That summer's night beneath the pier when she -

"It's three o'clock!"

Hermione appeared in the doorway, her face framed by an aureole of hair making its escape from sleep-loosened braids. The door slammed behind her.

"Ah, Maria, my very own Mary," Ron was beaming when she clamped her hand over his mouth.

"I was woken by Lord Olivier storming about upstairs, and God strike me down if he hasn't ordered that ghoul Malvolio to come and make you keep quiet." She lessened the pressure of her

hand but let one finger rest on his lip. "Toby, if you provoke him, his lordship will cast you out, and I don't know what would become of you then. You live here only by his grace."

Ron scowled and spat: "I know that. He never lets me forget it."

She brushed the crumbs from his collar and removed a smear of grease above his eyebrow.

"Well, perhaps you could sing only during daylight. That would go a long way towards mending things. Maybe if Feste and Feste learned to sing a different song, not that women with ... well, not that they can't be funny. Some of the time."

"For you, Maria." Ron gave a small smile and turned his lips into her palm.

"Ah Mary!" George sighed.

"Oh Mary," sang Fred and with that they plunged into the chorus again.

Oh Mary Oh Mary
I gave you my cherry
They laughed all night long
Cause -

"Desist from this song!"

Professor Snape stormed into the room with a swish of cape and glowered down at them, a fearsome sight with his eyes red-streaked from interrupted sleep.

"It is past midnight, you lunatics. What is the meaning of this clamour?!"

The effect might have been more fearsome still had he not fastened his cape over a threadbare nightshirt which revealed a little too much of what lay beneath.

"Verily," George commenced and sent a grape on a flamboyant high curve to his mouth. "Verily forsooth, my esteemed Malvolio. The meaning of our clamour is thusly. We were singing what is known as a lay."

"Or a shanty," Fred clarified helpfully.

"Or, more colloquially, as a drinking song. Our particular genre was what is nomenclated in the trade as a bawdy ballad. Forsooth-"

"*Marry* forthooth."

"Marry *verily* forsooth, should you require elucification as to the specific verbature used therein, to whit: "girl" or "woman"..."

"We recommend you attend the Elephant on Friday night with a bag full of florinth and a very hopeful thmile."

"In your case," George inclined his head thoughtfully. "Two bags full of florins. And a disguise."

Snape paced around the table, cape and arms folded like dormant wings around him, averting his

eyes from the midden which covered it and his ears from the familiar ditty which Fred and George were humming anew.

"I have, in all modesty, a tolerable ear for music, and I can assure you that the fowl on slaughter day make a more harmonious sound than that with which you have assaulted our ears." He sniffed the air between them and delivered his conclusion with a snort. "I would expect no better than this base carousing from a fool and the rabble which follows him. However, I am shocked to see a gentleman of my lord's household behaving no better, and at a time when his position in the household is ... shall we say, precarious -"

"Malvolio, Malvolio," Fred sang under his breath as Ron caught Hermione's indignant straightening and realised the barb had been aimed at him. Before he could locate his legs, let alone stand, George and Fred had dashed their mugs together and raised the volume.

"Malvolio, Malvolio
He might die of polio."

"He'll never be droll-io."

"His mother banged a troll-io."

"He's limp down below-lio."

"Go jump in a hole-io."

Percy began to make white-faced, apologetic shrugs as Snape's expression curdled.

"I shall inform his lordship that you do not care for his comfort, no matter how generous the patience with which he prevails upon you." Snape graced them with a starved flicker of smile. "Sir Toby, in all affection, I advise you to retire and comfort yourself with a good night's rest. Particularly since this night may be your last in this house."

And he swept out of the room.

"Oh, go f-" Hermione's lips closed puritanically and strangled the offending syllable, but all present agreed. Her eyes on the space where Ron's long fingers were tearing the bread limb from limb, she spoke slowly. "We needn't worry about his lordship. Since the new messenger came from the castle, he has been too distracted to care for discipline. As for Malvolio, however ... yes, I think I can see to him."

"Do we smell a plot?" George asked, and Percy nodded enthusiastically.

"I have it in my nostrils as well."

"Perhaps." Hermione's voice lowered, making four red heads lean in to her. "Do you not suspect that Malvolio has a very particular regard for our young master - a regard which is well above his station? And have you not wondered what might happen if some encouragement were placed in his path? I can make my handwriting a precise copy of Lord Draco's. I could forge a letter that even he himself could not swear was false."

Ron stopped mauling the bread.

"Maria, excellent woman, you go to my head like a gallon of ale." Fred nudged him and whispered. "Do you think so? Very well then. Like three gallons of ale!"

That she coloured was certain, but in the shifting light from the fireplace it was impossible to be

sure of the cause.

*

In time, the room empties and the fire curls up to smoulder sleepily. Clear away the mugs and the apple cores and sit with me. Let the story run along without us for a moment.

How often do you find a silence like this? Outside, the darkness is so complete that even the trees are dreaming. If an owl swoops here or there, it moves with reverent care as if it would add to the silence rather than break it, and without the irregular sputter and hiss of disintegrating wood you might wonder if your ears had failed.

It isn't just the story that matters. This room heats quickly, with its low ceiling and the lumpy plasterwork which rounds out the corners and seals off invading drafts. Stretch out your hands where the vault of fireplace narrows into chimney, here above the spit which decades of carcasses have made black and murky with grease, and let the heat wind into your knuckles. Close your eyes. Tell me about the kitchen smells, deeper and more animal than anything you are used to. Even from the dairy, the sheepsmilk cheese oozes a rancidity to compete with the cured meat in the coldbox and the wilting dandelion leaves under the window. A faint powder of soot is everywhere, and the acid blast of lamb's flesh has soaked into the very grain of the wood.

You see, it isn't just the story that matters. Sit a while and learn to separate out the scents - the dryness of cumin undercut with sweet basil, the musty stench of feathers from the ducks strung in the larder, the living yeast and the small pastries soaked in rosewater. Linger all you will. Time is free here, and malleable. When the day is a few hours old, we shall throw open the front door of the villa, and he will be approaching with grim determination along the seaward road, a borrowed coat hoisted over his shawl to keep out the rain, his hair disordered, his lips a pale line: Harry.

*

Roasted pheasant and fine wine and an early night had only stoked his foul humour. In the blurry moments where an unblemished night's sleep faded into wakefulness, he had lain boneless in the warmth of his fortress of blankets, too contented even to articulate the emotion, before the memory of yesterday had crashed upon him like so much iced water. Twenty four hours had passed and he still had no wish to remember the detail of his first encounter with Draco, Lord Olivier. Every time the memory approached, he batted it away, but with each eastward step he took, the memory more resembled a horde of swooping pixies.

It didn't help that he had woken to find his hair a good two inches longer and undeniably sleeker than the day before. And then today, the action of turning his head to protect his face from the rain was so familiar that, whenever he looked up, he expected to see three goal hoops in from of him. By the time he reached the Olivier villa, the constant raising and dashing of his hopes had worn his patience to a thread.

The entrance to the villa gaped open with all the allure of a crypt, but it was dry.

"Hello?"

Though it echoed around the atrium until it sounded foolish, his call drew no response from the stone walls or the busts with their familiar haughty mouths which looked down on him from either side. He shook out the coat and folded it over his arm - at least the dress was still dry enough to hang loose from the flatness of his chest - then followed the long passage which ran down the middle of the villa and called again.

As he opened his mouth to try a third time, a pale arm reached out from a side door and pulled him inside.

In the darkness, he panicked. He should never have let Malfoy get him into a confined space in an empty house. He'd already had a taste of what Malfoy liked to do with messenger girls in isolated places. A hand laced around his wrists and pinned them against his stomach and there was hot breath against the back of his neck. His snarling and kicking tightened the arm around his waist, pulling him closer against the body behind him, and brought a hand down over his mouth.

"Stop thrashing about! You'll ruin everything!" It was Ron's voice and it dispelled his panic. "Swear not to make a sound and you can stay and see something funny."

As soon as Harry nodded, the multiple arms released him. The streaky light struggling through a high sliver of window gradually revealed a cramped storage room which, rather improbably, contained Hermione, Ron, Percy, George and Fred, who removed his silencing hand and wiped it on Percy's sleeve.

"Beg pardon, good Sir Andrew," he said to Percy's stammer of protest. "Thought it was mine. It's dark in here."

Hermione made hushing noises at them both and went back to standing on tiptoe to peer through a rectangular grate.

"Are you certain you left it where I described?" she whispered. "I can't see it at all!"

Crouched at her feet now, Ron was taking advantage of a hole bored through the mortar.

"It's under the smallest jug, just as you said."

Harry leaned forward and put his eye to the slit where the door jamb didn't quite join the stonework. It led onto the kitchen, framing a narrow stripe of plasterwork, cupboard and yellow glazed tiles. A dark shape cut off his view. Black cloth and hair swished across his aperture of vision, then the figure span to show a section of white face: brow hanging furtively, dark eye, sparsely fleshed cheek and top lip turned up in unconscious displeasure. Snape.

With one last glance around the kitchen, he turned to reach for an earthenware jug on the shelf above. Too intent on his purpose to notice the neatly folded piece of parchment which tumbled down, he tipped the jug to layer green-tinged olive oil on his hand, and, in one practised movement, he slicked it through his hair. Harry had eaten his last olive.

It was just as Snape turned to leave that the parchment crackled underfoot and he disappeared from sight to pick it up. There was silence, then a low triumphant laugh, and he began to pace back and forth, gripping the paper tightly before him.

"Oh, I know this writing. His lordship's hand is unmistakable - I know the very curve of his 'f's and his 'g's. 'To the Unknown Beloved", it is addressed. Could it be ... no, only a fool would dare hope. And yet he says 'I may command where I adore'. That could be ..."

"We have him!" one of the twins hissed and Hermione kicked him into silence.

"Maria, ingenious wench, I could marry you for this," Ron breathed against the wall and Hermione didn't kick him.

Snape continued to think aloud in his anticipation.

"'I do not dare to speak my love plainly', he writes. 'But do not forget wo commended your yellow stockings.' Ah, yes. Then it is clear. Only I, proud Malvolio, wear my stockings in yellow. My master would have me as more than his steward."

With a lazy smile, he folded his arms across his chest and leaned back on the wall.

"Finally, it has come to pass. A count he may be, but I too have a nobleman's dignity and it has drawn him. How long, I wonder, has he hidden his desire? He need hide no more. Let the household grumble the first time he disrupts the dinner table order to have me sit by him. In

public places, he will find slender reasons to have me touch him, and in a darkened room my hands will burrow under those layers of silk. The evenings will be best, long evenings when Sir Toby and his comrades will be cast out of the dining hall so we can discuss the great philosophers and discover the taste of claret directly from his skin. But then in the mornings the maids will gasp as they enter his chamber to see their master's fair head making a trail along my belly."

Such shuddering filled the closet that, on the shelf outside, a plaster cherub tipped over and lost its wing. Snape's attention, however, was far from the present.

"He bids me give my answer by action. 'If my affection is returned,' he writes, 'Wear your yellow stockings, wear them bravely cross-gartered, and bless me with your smile which lights up my dreams.' Very well then, my most dear lord. I will come to you cross-gartered and smiling. And when I have caressed you into compliance, there will be changes. That bumbling idiot, that weak-livered cur-"

Ron lurched towards the door. "I'll break his-"

"Do pay attention, Toby," Percy admonished. 'Tis me he means."

"... that peerless ninny Aguecheek, he will be sent away. Toby's ale will run dry. I shall suffer no more pert little messenger girls, no more casual glances at the thighs of the pageboys. Oh, yes. There will be changes."

Snape and his army of grievances marched from the kitchen. No sooner had the door closed than the little storage room exploded in laughter until Percy's eyes were streaming, Fred and George clutched each other for support and Ron was forced to smother his mirth in Hermione's neck. Harry laughed until he was breathless and the muscles in his ribs and shoulders were loose; he chuckled right up until the moment where George wiped his eyes, straightened and said:

"Well, lovely Viola. I suppose you have come to deliver another message to his lordship. Let me

take you to him."

As he was led through the kitchen and directed up a narrow staircase by the courtyard, Harry shuffled a plan together. Say little, keep to the point, don't turn your back, don't let him provoke you - he repeated the lessons with each step and straightened the line of his bodice. Finally, the stairs opened out onto a long, airless gallery, empty but for some dusty suits of armour and a collection of scimitars mounted on the back wall. Its length was broken in the middle by a wide set of doors whose promise of air drew him closer. Beyond the doors lay a covered balcony, and as he stepped onto it his breath stopped.

From a height, Harry looked down on the courtyard, but behind it the land fell away to give a perfect view over the curve of hillside and the rumpled sheet of the plain below. He could see the whole grey-green chessboard of pastureland and crops, the majestic avenues of fruit trees and the far mountain peaks cut down to molehills by vast distance, and over them all the silvery sweep of mist. Inside, the summer air was warm, yet the rain still fell sparkling before him and, unthinking, he reached out to catch the tumbling jewels on his fingers.

"Magnificent, isn't it?" said a quiet voice behind him.

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Chapter: 4

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And I sat down under his shadow

"Magnificent, isn't it?" said a quiet voice behind him.

Of course, it was Malfoy. In the corner of a long bench against the balcony's back wall, he sprawled with such apparent ease, one leg bent upward and the other dangling down to the floor, that the wood might have moulded itself graciously to accommodate his body. It pleased Harry to see that the damp weather had spoiled his fastidious presentation, adhering the filmy grey shirt to his skin and weighting his hair into limp strands which he had pushed back from his face. His only adornment was the book - large and leatherbound - which lay open in his lap.

After the world of Hogwarts where the books so greatly outnumbered the wizards it was hard to say which was studying which, Harry had been perturbed to discover that, here, they were a rare curiosity - causing more excitement than the latest pregnancy but less than a handful of nutmegs - and far too unscholarly to tell him how to get home. His gaze caught on it as he longed simply to pick it up, feel its weight, run his finger over the elaborate illustrated rectangle which caged the first letter of the chapter title: *canticum canticorum*.

"There's no finer view in all Illyria," Malfoy continued with a slight slurring of words which seemed less the product of alcohol than of lazy meditation. "Stay and watch for as long as you wish."

Harry kept his back to the panorama. Malfoy might be a picture of harmless indolence, with the buckles at the knees of his breeches unfastened and his arm draped nonchalantly over the back of the bench, but a prompt exit was still the wisest course.

"I have another message from my lady the Duchess."

Malfoy turned his face away.

"Don't speak of her. "

"There's nothing else I want to discuss with you. She loves you. That's my message." His commission was poetry rather than petulance, but the words stuck in his mouth and came out as a challenge. "Did you really think you could put her off with a bit of scorn and a cheap ring? Why don't you get it over with and invite her to dine with you."

Malfoy stopped a fraction short of outright laughter.

"I would sooner brick myself up in a monastery than spend an evening in her company."

Good, Harry thought. He would have left their conversation there only he remembered too many Weasley cheeks reddening under the whip of Malfoy tongues and he could not let the insult stand.

"A few minutes of your afternoon then. Invite her to take tea with you. All you have to do is sit in your garden and discuss the weather. You don't look like you have any more important business."

"Do you say this to vex me?" Malfoy snapped and relinquished his slouch to put both feet on the floor. As he straightened, the pained expression evolved into something more cunning. "Are you angry with me? Is that it, Viola? Tell me why you're angry. Could it be, perhaps, because I kissed you? Or are you angry because I let you go?"

When Harry's power of speech returned, it came in a spluttering rush of air.

"Angry?! I'm angry because - I'm not angry. I couldn't care less what you did. It's you - you're the one who should be ashamed. Since lies and trickery are the only way you can get what you want. You can't do that to people."

From the way Malfoy frowned at him, Harry might have spoken in Chinese.

"But I can," he said with simple mildness, and Harry saw it then, how it was not only Ginny whose eyes took on a rapture when she spoke his name. He remembered how Malfoy's cold portrait in the castle's great hall was rarely without an audience whispering behind the shelter of hands, how despite the serving boys' disdain of the polishing rag only that picture's frame was never tarnished, and how even Professor Trelawney glanced aside rather too often when she described his equestrian accomplishments with indifference in her voice and colour in her face.

Malfoy arranged himself deliberately with his arms outstretched over the back of the bench.

"Now," he said clearly. "Please - and you will note the word - please put aside this coquetry and use your admirable bluntness to tell me what you are trying to procure from me with your reluctance. I can be generous when it amuses me, and I think that in your case it might amuse me."

Harry presumed that coquetry was what happened to women when somebody like Gilderoy Lockhart in his glory days (or, in recent times, the gravely charismatic Remus Lupin) walked into the room. It was a guarded advance for those who wouldn't risk making their interest plain, and that was how Malfoy saw him. Well, this Malfoy hadn't been there when Harry had screwed down his will and made himself speak the truths that other people evaded - had spoken them to Umbridge, to Fudge, to Dumbledore, to his friends and had paid the price for his words, again and again and again and again. The skin of his right hand stung and he shook it. He matched Malfoy's most lordly tone for coldness.

"The only thing I've asked for is your love for my mistress. I don't want your ... attention." He spat out that word like he'd found a worm in it. "Is that blunt enough? You have nothing I want."

For a moment, the muscles in Malfoy's mouth appeared to lose all control and could form neither sneer nor smile. He remembered the book in his lap then, turned his attention to it with a sudden glare as though it had crept there slimy and uninvited, closed it with a dusty thump and hurled it

onto the bench beside him.

"Nothing," he repeated sceptically and only then looked up.

The small shrug Harry gave had all the rush of a blow. In its path it left silence as Malfoy watched him with those hard, pale eyes, watched him for a long time.

"Well then."

Malfoy had no more than stood up before Harry dropped his coat and readied his fists. Though his eyes darted to where delicate sleeves stretched tight across the tensing of Harry's biceps, Malfoy's only response was an unpleasant laugh.

"You have nothing to fear from me, girl," he said, a touch of the sneer returning. "You have made yourself clear. I would not so much as stoop to seduce a queen, and you need not imagine that I would put myself to greater effort for a messenger."

As good as his word, he passed Harry without a sideways glance to clamp his hands over the balcony rail, where he stood with his gaze on the far landscape and the fine fringes of the shower spattering on the tip of his nose.

And Harry lingered. Because this thing that looked like victory - limp and lacking the hot blood that pounded in his ears when he snatched the Snitch from between Malfoy's fingertips or produced a potion that even Snape couldn't fault - left him unsatisfied.

"Why are you still here? Your message is delivered and if you have set your aim higher than a count then you have no time to lose. Seduction is a slow business, you will find, and most of Illyria's dukes have one foot in the grave already. "

With a slow letting out of breath, he leaned forward until the rain fell on his forehead. His eyelids flinched once then relaxed and let the droplets wash over them as transparent pearls wound their way down the strands of his hair and Harry faded into invisibility.

"You've got it all wrong," Harry protested, a beat too late. "This isn't some kind of scheme. I don't want to marry a duke - I'm not after any man. Only you would think like that."

Malfoy looked at him then, sidelong through glittering slits of eye.

"What is it that you want, little Viola?"

Harry wanted Hogwarts and unchallenging grey stone and enemies who knew how enemies were supposed to behave and he wanted it with such sudden fierceness that he had to turn his face to the rainstorm to hide it.

Malfoy saw, though. Whatever he saw, it drew him across the gap between them and made him seize Harry's hand in both of his, sliding it in one swift movement under the slippery fabric of his shirt so that Harry's palm lay over his breastbone. Smooth skin, Harry registered numbly. Wet from the rain but giving off a sticky heat. And a pulse - there was a pulse in there hammering away like it was ten seconds before Judgment Day. Anger, perhaps. Desire. Or fear. He didn't trust Malfoy to distinguish the three as separate emotions. But, now that he was closer, he could see the same furious beat rippling under the skin of Malfoy's temple.

"There," Malfoy said as if that put something beyond doubt.

Released, Harry's hand slipped down, but his fingers only bumped over two ribs, three, before he stilled them. The whole possibility of Malfoy having ribs and skin and a heartbeat seemed ridiculous and so astonishing he needed to keep his touch on it for proof.

It was perhaps only an instant that he stood there, Malfoy's damp shirt clinging to the back of his hand, before the space between them disappeared. Malfoy was still almost an inch shorter and his hair smelled faintly, sweetly of vinegar as he leaned in until his nose was just inside the folds of Harry's shawl. He found Harry's free hand with his own and put his fingertips inside the curl of Harry's. Then he waited, and he could have counted twelve beats of the heavy raindrops that rolled off the balcony roof before he turned his face up and caught Harry's bottom lip between his.

The heat overwhelmed him, under his hand, along his lips, and where it radiated through thin fabric from Malfoy's chest, and by the time the shock of it released him it was too late, because Malfoy's hair was tickling his cheek and Malfoy's breath was on his skin and Malfoy's knee had insinuated itself very gently into his skirts and Malfoy's tongue was inside his mouth and stroking the very tip of his and coaxing his jaw to open wider. The right hand he needed to separate their bodies was pressed between them but when he moved it his nail dragged over Malfoy's nipple and the instant hardening of flesh sent a jolt from his fingers to his stomach that turned his knees traitor and made him stagger back against the rail. Malfoy followed with his whole body and thrust his mouth against Harry's until their teeth scraped and by then it took only one graze of Malfoy's narrow hips over his own to make Harry shudder and press back with a murmur of abandon that caught in his throat.

Mid-moan, he remembered the dress. And the conflict between his skirts and the telltale flesh beneath. Though his body writhed and hardened and denied it, his whole identity in this place was built on femininity, and to let his façade slip was to risk the loss of all the trust he had built here. With the grief of his exile from Hogwarts still so raw, he flinched from the prospect of another parting and he struggled.

"Don't!" he panted around the obstacle of Malfoy's tongue and teeth, and in one unkind shove he had his hip in Malfoy's groin and Malfoy's lips were full of hair.

All movement stopped then. Harry drew big shaky breaths, tangy with the scent of sweat and spit. Their torsos separated. The heat was swept away by a chilling blast of air, and there was nothing but the grind of Malfoy's fingernails into the flesh of Harry's wrist.

When Malfoy spoke, a new depth of loathing had twisted itself into his mouth.

"Go back to your duchess." He cast away Harry's hand with its ugly bracelet of abrasions. "Tell her I will cut out the tongue of the next messenger she sends to me. And take your false virtue out of my sight."

A pale whip of movement flickered in the corner of his eye, a spray of water droplets hit his cheek, and then the stairs echoed with the clatter of heels. Harry waited a long time with the rain trickling down the back of his neck before he started the journey home.

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Which one of them would you follow?

The shawled figure who has stepped back into the storm without his coat and walks with head bent low? Or the aristocrat with the hair in his eyes who has lined up pomegranates along the dining table and annihilates them one by messy one with the swing of a jewel-studded scimitar?

Trust me, and let me lead you away from both. There is another Harry, you recall. Perhaps he is faring better.

Pass with me out of the villa and eastward further, where the hills make a steep descent to the north plains and the township nestles between two thrusts of rocky land. On the slope below the town, the rain fades to a fine lacework of hovering drops.

There. Two figures climb towards us, following the stream, spare packs fastened about their shoulders and moist shirts clinging to their sides. You need no introduction this time. Harry, who could never be mistaken, in a man's shirt and breeches, and his companion: a tall, striking fellow with long dark hair and his shirt unlaced rather rakishly.

Don't you think there's a carefree aspect to Harry's frame - an exultation in the rush of pulse and breath as, with each step, he stretches arm and leg to devour as much distance as he can. You should have seen him when he washed up on these shores, furious and lashing out in fear, his gaze probing every fissure in the rock for a trace of the Transfiguration classroom which had vanished before his eyes. How he kicked his legs as he lay on the sand and roared at the alien sky, hands crunched into ugly fists, seaweed in his hair.

When he turned his head and saw who had rescued him from the water, he fell silent.

"Sirius?" he said, very quietly. Then he put his forearm over his eyes and made no movement for a long time.

Do you wonder that it took him three whole days before he could make his first hesitant steps toward home?

They move quickly up the hillside now, the older man leading and making such easy strides with his long legs that, every so often, he will disappear from view among the trees.

"Wait!" Harry calls and runs for a few steps, rounding the path's curve only to find his companion leaning against a laurel tree and greeting him with a grin. "Don't go where I can't see you," he snaps, the peevishness regretted before the sentence is even finished.

But Sirius only grins that grin.

"I'm not so careless as to lose you, Sebastian, not when I've come this far to guard your safety. I'll see you delivered to the Duchess's castle."

And if his young companion's wavering smile doesn't quite fire in him the same surge of protectiveness that, four days ago on a storm-licked beach, bound him into service without a moment's reflection, then it's still a very near thing.

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By the time the downpour had eased, the fire in the great hall was crackling fiercely behind him, his hair was almost dry, and he had learned how to tuck his legs comfortably under the too-short skirts of the robe Ginny had insisted he borrow.

Across the room, Ginny was playing dice with Professor McGonagall, who alternated between citing classical scholars on the evils of gambling and clicking her tongue in glee when the roll fell her way. Once the showers grew gentler, Fred and George had appeared under a beribboned yellow parasol with the offer to sing any song in history for a florin, and, three florins richer, they now performed with Dumbledore and his lute.

Lord Draco Olivier might as well have fallen off the edge of the earth. He had not been mentioned since Harry had returned with the lie "This time he refused to see me" and Ginny, taking one look at the drenched state of his clothes and the pallor of his skin, had promised him an afternoon of rest and two days' reprieve from any message bearing.

If Harry thought of him - and, with his chin resting on one knee and the torchlight making a golden sanctuary against the gloom outside, he did - it was no longer with dread. He understood one thing. What he had in this corset was a kind of power, not the sort that brought down dark wizards, but enough to give him a new sort of leverage. Though it was as unfamiliar in his hands as a rocket launcher, he would use it if he had to. He tucked the drying scarf into the aperture of his bodice. It was a strange thing to pity a Malfoy.

"Leave your daydreams, Viola, and join our game." Ginny crossed the room and perched on the arm of his chair. "You are under my care in this castle, and I command you to play."

She laid her fingertips on his forehead, evidently finding his temperature satisfactory, and went back to the table. Outside, a fine gauze of rain still trailed from the sky. The twins harmonised quietly:

In delay there lies no plenty -
Come and kiss me sweet and twenty,
Youth's a stuff will not endure.

A goblet of red wine sat on the floor by his seat and he realised, with the same surprise with which he might have noted that a warm room had become cold or a dull pain had gone away, that he was happy.

*

"Stay a little."

It was a command, yet she grasped the end of his sleeve lightly between finger and thumb.

Over her shoulder, Harry watched the dancing shadows in her chamber, the stocky redwood furniture and the woven carpet rich with geometric colour. The air that escaped from it was musty from the fire's long work. Though its warmth reminded him of his long neglected bed, he followed her in and, before the door had quite scraped closed, she rounded on him.

"Perhaps now that you've rested you can tell me how you found him."

The day's levity had left her now and Ginny's eyes had a challenge in them. Experience had taught him, however, that the only way to curtail this line of questioning was the barefaced lie.

"I didn't see him. I only spoke to the guard at the gate, and he said that the Count was sick and didn't want any visitors. He wouldn't even take a message to him."

On the two occasions he'd been invited into her chamber, the dress had seemed to hang from his limbs, ill-fitting, a dirty and shameful disguise. It still made him uncomfortable, and as always he found himself moving in a safe arc no more than two feet from the doorway as she leaned on her dressing table, ornate with its gilded combs and scent bottles, and studied him.

"Yes. So you said." With the candelabra behind her, shadow obscured her expression. "You were gone a long time."

"I stopped under a tree to get out of the rain."

"As you will, Viola," she said opaquely, turning from him to slide into the chair with a dextrous manipulation of skirts. "And what do you suppose this means, his sudden silence? What is his strategy and how do I counter it?"

"This isn't Quid- ... it isn't a game, Ginny. You sound just like him with all these tactics and trickery." In the mirror, her eyes widened curiously. "Even I know that you can't trick someone into liking you."

She laughed at him.

"What are a romantic you are! Trickery, lies, feigning, poetry - why be delicate about it? As you say, my dear, this is no game. If I fail, I can spend a lifetime watching him parade about with a great Venetian beauty or a country girl with no letters and a fawning smile." Pushing away the powder box which strained in her grip, she carried on brightly as she began to unfasten her coiffure. "You have travelled. Tell me, is it true that Venetian ladies are lovely enough to put angels to shame? How do they wear their hair? Is it true they bathe only in milk? "

A difficult pin wrenched several red strands with it and she fixed it with a glare as if it were the last in a long line of traitors. His own unbiddable locks felt the sting sympathetically.

"Let me do it."

The reflection of her eyes snapped at him.

"I don't need your help."

He slipped his hands under hers and worked his fingertips between the tines of another pin.

"I know," he murmured in the tone he used to calm a Thestral or a Hippogriff and she let him have his way. When her hair hung free about her shoulders, she passed him a gilded brush. His first clumsy stroke provoked a grimace.

"What if," he prodded in a moment of spite. "What if there's no trickery or plotting that can change his mind. What if he likes someone else."

Chewing her lip, she considered the prospect as the tangles in her hair slowly gave way to smoothness.

"It's impossible." She looked up at him directly with the crown of her head pressing into his diaphragm. "I will never accept that."

For a moment he had no answer as he glued his gaze to her mouth, avoiding the sudden perilous slope from her chin along her throat to the creamy undulation of neckline and the shadowed space between her breasts. It was a cruel lure, the corset. The way it forced her young bosom into hard curves of flesh was more indecent than he would ever have imagined from history books. Mercifully, she returned her attention to the mirror.

"And what if man came to you," he rejoined when he was sure of his voice. "He sends you poetry and presents and he wants you with the same passion you have for that count. What would you say to him?"

"No." The quickest lightening could not have passed between question and reply.

"Of course you would. You don't love him. You tell him so. And he must take his answer." Her mouth tightened at the roughness of his strokes. "And so must you."

She caught his wrist, oblivious to the recent wounds beneath.

"How dare you compare my love to a man's?" Static charged strands of hair squirmed about the pale anger of her face. "Their feelings are shallow and quick, and their desire is always temporary. Oh yes, they can love a brave hunt or a well-turned waist or a barrel of fine wine, but the next day their fancy will be fixed on something else. They're not like us, Viola."

He snatched his hand away from her.

"How would you know?" he lashed out. "Just because they don't prattle on about it twenty four hours a day doesn't mean they don't feel anything. I know-"

He knew altogether too much about the business of holding your grief inside you.

"What do you know?" Ginny asked gently, took his hand and kissed it with anxious eyes upon him. "Forgive me. I speak with too little thought."

The skin tingled where the wetness from her mouth was disappearing. Wordlessly he tilted her head and, this time, as he brushed, he tried to get back to the rare peace of the afternoon. He let his eyes slip out of focus and aimed to do the same to his mind. The candlelight scattered ruby and gold into her hair, heavy and smooth under his touch, and in time his breathing and the slow strokes made one soothing rhythm. The air was thick with the honeysuckle scent that rose from her and the smoky heat of the room.

"I think you've been luckier in love than I have," she mused, her eyes closed in contentment. Though he laid down the brush and set about twisting the compliant tresses into a semblance of a braid, she was not diverted. "Am I right, Viola?"

He ran his hands along her neck to gather the last reluctant strands, then repeated the gesture with his fingertips, once and again. The texture of her skin was a revelation. Unlike his own, which was rough despite its rare exposure to the elements, Ginny's skin was tender and pliant like the outside of a late summer apricot, warmly alive with a little trembling pulse running beneath it.

"Who was he? What did he look like?"

As he made short strokes along the place where smooth skin gave way to young curls of hair, she sighed and the sound seemed cruelly short.

"Oh, he was a nobleman." His fingers looked like sea serpents gliding their way through lush red waves. "He had the same colouring as you."

Her voice dropped another level, somewhere between a murmur and a breath.

"Then I'm sorry for him. Was he old?"

"No. Not old. He was young. About your age."

And then he was doing no more than running his fingers through her hair. With a feathery touch along her forehead, he stole her interrogation, and with slow circles just behind her temples he reduced her to a low hum of pleasure as she leaned into his caress.

"You must never leave me, Viola." The words were slurred, all stumbling consonants. "Your touch is exquisite."

His fingers dipped lower, following the tendons of her neck down to the delicate tips of collar bone. The stalling of her breath transformed her into a perfect marble statue whose stillness invited contemplation, so he placed his thumb in the soft indentation under her ear and traced the curve of her jaw with such gentleness it might have been cobweb. His free hand skimmed her shoulder, pushing her sleeve with it to bare all the skin in between, and that curve of flesh with the warmth and the scent rising off it demanded to be tested under his lips.

With one shudder, all the tension came back into her body.

"You are tired." Her tone accused him and she was suddenly very much awake. "I have asked too much of you today. I shall keep you no longer."

Then the shoulder he had almost kissed was Ginny's again, freckled like Ron's and more likely to taste of soap and sweat than of honey. The straightness of mouth underlining the command in her gaze, he knew that look as the one that froze tactless comments on Dean's lips across the table in the Great Hall.

She pulled her hair over her shoulder, swiftly twisting a plait.

The muttered "Goodnight" he threw from the doorway didn't hit the right note of nonchalance and the cold of the corridor ran up his legs.

Let him go.

Wait with me, here by the door, and watch the young duchess as she ties her hair tightly with ribbon and extinguishes the three flames of the candelabra in one efficient breath. Once, as she undertakes the brisk task of disrobing, her fingers trace the line of her jaw, a curious gesture. Then she is sitting on the side of the bed in the light of the remaining lamp.

On the chest of drawers beside the lamp, a cameo portrait leans against the wall, ivory on dark blue velvet. With its sharp chin and steep incline of nose, its subject would be unremarkable were it not for the sacrifice of rose petals strewn around it. The petals bruise as she works them between her fingers, the scent bleeding from them, and then with a jerk of movement she has the top drawer open and sweeps ivory and flowers all inside it. Leaving no time for reflection, she winds the lamp's wick down into oblivion and pulls the covers over her.

Not long after midnight, the room will awaken to the scrabbling sound of an idol being restored.

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One moment longer, I beg you. One more scene before we part.

In the gloom of the kitchens, Harry in the borrowed dress leans his elbows on the bench. The empty goblet stands before him and his stance is unsteady.

"What is love?" he hums, now in his natural tenor, but almost too soft to be heard. "What is love? 'Tis not hereafter."

On the surface before him lie the last of the berries and he rolls one in distraction under his fingers.

"Present mirth hath present laughter. What's to come hmm hmm hmm hmm."

From his own hand, the berry tastes bitter. He spits it into the goblet.

"Youth's a stuff ..." He follows the notes down. " ... youth hmm hmm ..."

Loose and unravelling, his mind makes odd connections and it's as if a great abstract truth were nudging his palm then darting away too soon for his fingers to close.

"Youth's a stuff will not endure."

The dead coals and the shadows in the pantry make no answer.

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Chapter: 5

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"you are now sailed into the north of my lady's opinion;

where you will hang like an icicle on a Dutchman's beard"

Fabian, III.2

No stillness on a night such as this. The sky is awash with brilliance. The stars shimmer and jerk, a hasty in-out of respiration so wild and without rest it makes you wonder if the sky will last the night before its black surface shatters with the sheer weight of light. It's a night to make you believe in falling stars. No celestial bodies, these, but shining jewels which at any moment might tear themselves free from their setting and float down through the stratosphere to settle in the palm of your hand, crystalline and sharp-edged with the white curd of the universe clotting in -

No!

That won't do.

Forgive me, I beg you.

It's not the stars that matter. For you to see stars yourself is only a matter of choosing. It's Harry that matters. I brought you here to see Harry. For here, under the starlight, under a ragged length of cloak, he is cold.

The tree trunk against his back sucks warmth rather than giving it, so he winds the torn cloak tighter around his shoulders and presses his hands under his armpits until they stop quivering. His badly made shirt and breeches are poor barriers against the chill, and yet Sirius, lying not far away and dressed in less, stretches his long limbs on the rocks and roots as if he slept on eiderdown.

Harry watches the coals which smoke between them, remembering another time and place where a mere flick of his wrist could have sent them roaring. Five days now since he last held a wand - the twins' treacherous wand in a dull Transfiguration class in the last moments before the world went mad. He remembers a mumbled spell, a sudden swoop of darkness, a hideous tearing feeling along the length of his bones and then seawater tossing him and smothering him until the darkness descended once more. And then this. A world which, day by day, so impresses its bright colours and insistent smells upon him that the memories he knows to be true - the stiff weight of robes, the Snitch's first flirtatious flutters, the sun-bleached pale streak along the red upholstery of the cushions and chairs nearest the common room windows - these memories have started to fray at the edges.

He knows he has to go home. He has tried. He has shaken walls so crudely held together they resemble a hasty set. He has climbed every high point to scrutinise the landscape, turned over writhing sardines and strands of jasmine in his hand, felt the texture of stone and wood and cloth, always searching for flaws to prove they are false. But the illusion is perfect to the smallest detail. If his progress has been slow, it is only because of the time he has spent with a troubled eye on his companion, pondering how he might hold onto this one phantasm when all the others disappear.

As the sky lightens, Sirius stirs. Watch with me.

"Sebastian," Sirius muttered and raised himself on an elbow. "Why aren't you sleeping? Did something disturb you? You must have been cold with the fire burned so low."

"No," Harry said quickly as Sirius sat up and stretched his long legs in front of him. Never did he so closely resemble the hunted outlaw of Harry's memory as in those first moments of waking, his hair tousled with dead leaves and twigs and his eyes blinking itchily into the shadows.

"You look miserable, lad," he observed. "Food. That's what you need after a long day's walk, and at your age more than any. That'll put the colour back in your cheeks."

Before Harry could protest, he had drawn a pungent cloth bundle from his pack. Salted fish. Harry's stomach tightened. For three meals now, he hadn't had the courage to mention that the salt was too frugal and the flesh beginning to decay. He watched queasily as Sirius laid the untidy white-grey corpses on shards of hard bread.

"I'm not really hungry," Harry said and banished the image of the tables in the Great Hall, piled until their legs shook with pudding, roast chicken, muffins, pies, potatoes, mushy peas, trifle, pumpkin juice, sausages. "You have the fish. The bread will be enough for me."

Sirius gave a hoarse chuckle.

"And I suppose you live on bread and water in that noble house you come from, do you? You shall eat fish as long as I have any to share."

They were inescapable, these wild fancies Sirius wove about Harry's history. Harry had not been awake an hour in this unwelcome land, bruised and dizzy with the seawater still damp in the armpits and pockets of his clothes, when this impossible Sirius had bent over him with a bowl of pale brown tentacles in watery broth. As the brew caught in his throat, he had coughed: "Salt?", if only to cover his revulsion, and ventured a weak smile. "May I have some salt? Or pepper?"

If he had asked for crushed emeralds, Sirius could not have been more shocked.

"Salt, is it?" he had repeated, colouring, and withdrawn the bowl. "You'll find no such fineries here, my young lord, nor nutmegs and sacks of tea either."

And from that moment, there had been no defeating the power of Sirius' imagination. When Harry was evasive about his past, he must be a runaway royal fleeing a bloody plot. If his fury with this treacherous world made him sit on the doorstep in mulish silence, Sirius imagined him an exiled prince grieving for his people, and when sheer boredom drove him to help with mending the nets, Sirius hid his delighted flush and grinned that it had been long years since such high-born hands had been turned to fishermen's work.

It made him sick. It made him furious because Sirius had no right to flatter and fawn when Harry, in another place but still so vividly it poisons his dreams, had failed him. Might as well have pushed him through that gateway himself. Even though this Sirius didn't know it, it was always there, lying on the ground between them like a dead body - rank, pestilent, Harry's worst betrayal.

"Let's see if that revives you a little." Sirius passed him the fish on bread and its accompanying stink. Averting his gaze from the meal, Harry watched him wiping his fingers on his shirt. Watched those hands with the easy strength in them, the long calluses and the knife scars that made them so different from the Sirius of his memory, and the restlessness that made them exactly the same.

Harry gobbled the bread and fish. He would get to the Duchess Orsino's castle, he would find someone who could tell him what this place was, and he would go home. It was better.

*

Professor Trelawney cut off a dripping corner of honeycomb and slid it from the knife between forefinger and thumb.

"And the letter from Petruccio of Messaline. Will you answer him today?"

Shovelling tiny morsels of bread and cheese into his mouth as if the daintiness of the pieces

could disguise the boy's appetite he was feeding beneath corset and gown, Harry paused with his mouthful halfway to his lips.

"If time permits," Ginny shrugged. "It is no great matter. I shall give him the same answer I give the others."

She frowned at her empty plate and Professor McGonagall pushed a platter of ginger cakes across the table towards her. Clasping the monocle that hung at her neck, she studied her young mistress, who turned a cake in idle circles in front of her, shifting it with her small fingers.

"By all accounts, he is a fine man," McGonagall said carefully. "His estates are as they should be. He is godly. He is educated. He has travelled."

Ginny looked up, grave and calm.

"He will not do."

If a twitching in the corner of her lip might have betrayed doubts, she conquered it and made herself still. It was misleading the way she did it, Harry thought. Without giving the least hint of open rebellion, she would make her will a great block of stone that the world would have to work its way around. She would smile politely, she would answer in the same even tone, but she would absolutely not be moved, whether the matter at hand was a card game or a citation from St Paul or the happiness of all her life ahead. He who had felt her skin under his fingers knew it to be warm and fine, and yet as she faced McGonagall across the table, she was as cold as marble with her hair wound back in its compact morning knot and the skin of her shoulders and neck a white parchment on which every freckle showed like deliberate characters.

McGonagall's disapproving pursing of lips did not escape her.

"He is almost forty, Curio. There is scarcely a fleck of colour left in his beard. When he was young he may have travelled the world, but now he struggles for breath after one flight of stairs. Why would I take him when there are men who can ride the day long and still not tire? I would wake every morning in Petruccio's bed to wish that his cheek were smoother, his neck more slender, his tournure of calf more graceful. It won't do, Curio. He can't compete with youth and beauty."

As Ginny stabbed a fig and added it to her untouched collection, Harry remembered grapes flung away with a snarl and a thin mouth which all the delicacies of the world could not coax into a genuine smile. The bread looked dry in his hand and weevil-shaped shadow slithered over it.

"Youth and beauty? He won't have those forever, your wonderful Lord Olivier." Harry's scorn turned into outright revulsion. "He'll have thinning hair and rotten teeth and a taste for laying hands on the servants. Will you love him then? When the only thing you recognise is that famous foul temper, will you love that?"

Ginny laid her knife down and looked at him appraisingly.

It was Professor Trelawney, however, who leaned down the table to give his wrist a reassuring pat.

"Don't worry, dear," she said. "You won't always be plain. Certainly you'll grow into your figure soon, and then you shall have suitors aplenty."

And Harry was so taken aback that the moment slipped away from him completely.

*

"Out of my sight."

Percy's spoon clattered into his bowl. He straightened it fastidiously and frowned at it, then drew a deep breath.

"It is a matter of unimpeachable logic, my lord. Let me be brief. My talents are not inconsiderable, and your household is in need -"

"I do not wish you to be brief," snarled Draco, Lord Olivier, and tore his bread in two. "I wish you to be gone. You may well be able to recite The Iliad in its entirety - in Greek or Oriental, it's all one to me - but I am in no mood for your prattling. Feste, escort this babbling ninny to whichever dungeon he dwells in. If he utters one word further, put him in the stocks and whip him."

On the opposite side of the table, Ron's gaze met Percy's and he gave an anxious nod. Percy's napkin fell into the butter as he rose and departed. The vacant chair teetered, wobbled and finally fell still.

"Not a word from you either." Draco fixed his glare on Ron, who stuffed a hunk of bread and salami into his mouth and grinned around it. "Where has Malvolio got to? There is no idle chatter when he is at table."

No-one answered him. The ritual of breakfast resumed in silence, broken only by the splash of Ron swigging messily from his mug and the soft swish of Draco's silk sleeves on the tabletop as he diligently shredded his meal until it was a feathery pile of torn bread.

"No appetite, my lord?" Hermione asked hesitantly as she reached for the salami. Ron's hands got there first, though, passing the sliced meat to her balanced on the knife. Somehow in this simple act, their fingers brushed, and she coughed furtively.

"Disgusting," Draco spat and pushed his plate away.

*

Ginny had barely grazed her ginger cake when Neville Longbottom in his blue pageboy's livery burst through the doors in the eye of a flour-and-soot cyclone and tripped on the end of the carpet.

"Fire!" he cried as he stumbled to his feet and wiped ash into his eyes. "Fire in the kitchen!"

He had not stumbled three steps back the way he had come when Harry was on his feet, struggling with his tangle of skirts and staggering across the room. The end of the hallway disappeared in smoke and only the orange light spilling from them marked out the doors to the kitchen. Harry lifted his hem and ran.

"Viola!"

That tone, Harry knew it all too well. It had played like background music in the most horrible moments of his life: impotently, in terror, in malice or in reprimand, someone calling out his name. It washed over him unnoticed and she called again.

"Viola, what are you thinking of?" Raising her voice now, Ginny stood in her seat and fixed all her Weasley fierceness on him, and this time he caught the door frame and halted. "Curio and the kitchen boys will take care of this."

It took a moment for him to translate the unspoken addendum to that sentence. *And you need not.* Professor McGonagall passed him with efficient steps, wiping her lips. *And you need not.* The crash of pottery down the corridor called directly to his reflexes. He had to hold himself still.

"Come back to the table," Ginny said more gently and unwound the napkin from her fingers.

Professor Trelawney's astonished mouth reminded him. He was a girl and therefore incapable of mastering anything more dangerous than a spinning wheel. His only responsibility was obedience. Though he dragged himself back to the table, his limbs, denied the activity they'd been roused to, draped awkwardly in the chair. Professor Trelawney swung her legs and cut off another chunk of honeycomb. He had only sat a short while - stiffly and counting the knots on the tabletop - when the shouts and clatter down the corridor quietened and McGonagall's brisk steps headed out to the gardens. Ginny let out a long breath.

"There was no cause for you to place yourself in danger," she said. Her hands hovered uncertainly before she pushed the plate of fruit across the table towards him.

Harry opened his mouth to reply, then thought better of it. Instead, extracting his fingers from their vicious tangle, he put a peach to his lips and bit.

*

Breathe.

Breathe it in.

Breathe deeply and let it go to your head.

The air in this place is clean like you have never known it. Clarified by its long journey over the frozen mountaintops, it is a new substance, pure and crisp and sweet. It works on you like alcohol. It pumps immortality through your veins, right down to the lobes of your ears and the

tiny capillaries behind your knees. It is a liquor that could revive dead men and make the birds fall drunk from the sky.

The air here is so benign that, if you cast yourself forward over the abyss, you know it would catch you in its cool folds and bear you up. Try it, if you like. In this place, petty realities will not stand in your way.

In front of us - eastward before the sun - stand the mountains, high enough to draw down the snow which melts and flows over their sudden edges to trickle a thousand sparkling paths down to the great river. The river roars down from the heights, blasting out the rock to make a thin, jagged valley, but here below us, it changes. It halts its tumbling course and flattens to turn lazy loops across the northward plain, where little hamlets and farmsteads and monasteries draw their living from its waters. One day - perhaps, if weather and temperament permit - the old snowfall with its memory of flight will make it to the sea.

Above this point where the river loses its rage, perched on the eastern tip of the long ridge, lies the town.

Sitting on vertical shafts of rock, it might have been set down by some divine hand, long ago, and forgotten. But see how, despite its precarious position, it seems to angle its walls outwards over the crumbling rock as if curious to see what lies beneath. It's a mangled thing, a deformed pentagon of walls packed with higgledy-piggledy buildings: one storey, three storeys, attics tacked on like swollen tumours and houses clambering over streets or fusing into the wall itself. The only cleared space is the wide cobbled square outside the town hall, in which the market day crowd already scurries.

On the western edge of the town, two roads diverge: the low road running down to the plain, steeply enough to make a man's lungs ache in either direction, and the rarely used high road which leads to the Duchess's

castle and the old defences against the Venetian conquerors.

In the shadow of the town's wall, at the juncture of the two roads, Sirius Black stands. His face is

turned to the masonry and one broad hand conceals the worst stains - fishguts and ash - on the sleeve of his shirt.

"Rotten as ever, this stinking little slum," Sirius grumbled, but Harry, laying down his pack a couple of paces away, didn't miss the flash in his eye. "Even the air smells of syphillis. But here's where you'll find your answers, Sebastian. All the travellers come through here. The seers and water-readers and the charlatans as well."

On the last stretch of hill, an old man with a face full of plague scars pulled at the reins of his stationary donkey and its load of hessian sacks filled with onions and wrinkled purple-white carrots. For a long moment, their wills did battle, man and donkey regarding each other with the same drooping eyes, then finally the beast bowed its head and continued its slow climb. Two girls with lazy plaits escaping from mop caps snatched an onion as they passed, laughing softly to each other.

"Where should we start?" Harry's wand hand tingled because the buildings which rose before him, ancient and chaotic, were like a squashed down Hogwarts, full of surprising stairways and little rooms waiting to divulge their secrets. He was eleven years old and standing on the lake's shore, and this time Sirius was beside him.

"You must explore the town without me."

Harry examined his face for jest. "Why?"

A scrawny grey cat sidled up to Sirius and he busied himself with nudging it teasingly as it brushed against his boots.

"It's best I wasn't seen here. I haven't set foot in this place for ten years. If the Count's men recognised me ... well, I wouldn't be welcomed back."

The cat turned its face full of scabs and seeping eyes up to him and he kicked it away. Harry's eyes hardened.

"You've never told me, Antonio. What did you do to get yourself exiled?"

"It was a long time ago."

"It must have been serious. Did you kill someone?"

Sirius laughed uncomfortably.

"Nothing so bloody. Nothing important. I'll meet you in the evening. There's an inn called the Elephant. Behind the guildhall - you'll know it by the trail of blood and vomit leading from the door."

Under Harry's judgmental silence, Sirius grew even less comfortable, his long arms swinging pointlessly against his side.

"Take this," he said abruptly. The roughness of hessian pressed into Harry's palm: a small bundle tied with twine.

"Don't give me this, Antonio. I don't need your-"

But Sirius had already stepped out of reach and, since there was no alternative other than dropping the gift into the dirt, Harry slipped the twine strands around his neck, making the parcel's few coins clink forlornly. When he fumbled and cursed, Sirius' larger hands closed over

his and deftly made the knot.

"You won't spend my money idly."

And there, with Sirius' arms, strong and straight as the beams of houses, reaching out to grasp his shoulders, and Sirius' trust written plainly on his face, Harry could have stayed, and damn the miserly world he thought of as real.

In the silence, Sirius cleared his throat awkwardly.

"I sank one of his ships. There. Loosened its moorings and watched it float away. Rashness of youth. No more than that. You see?" He shook Harry's shoulders gently and waited for the little curve of smile that touched the corners of his lips. "Now go."

The gently spoken words were like a shove in Harry's chest. He wasn't sure he had the willpower to walk away.

A high shriek split the air, turning all heads. Around the last bend in the road came a troupe of Arab merchants: three men whose flowing robes and easy stride made Harry piercingly homesick, their heads swathed in white cloth so that only the coals of their eyes showed, one of them spitting out a date seed, another carrying a rolled scarlet carpet under his arm, and the third with a monkey screeching and capering on his shoulders, and all of them, right down to the black serving boy who led their mule, reeking of cumin and of coffee. The one with the monkey threw back his head and laughed.

When he looked back, Sirius was thirty feet along the high road:

"The Elephant."

"I do remember."

With a grin as brief as it was bright, Harry snatched up his pack and plunged through the gates.

Though the town's streets were narrow and dark and swallowed him up immediately, Sirius stood a long while at the roadside and watched.

*

The morning still had a long way to go.

"My love, more noble than the world,

Prizes not quantity of dirty lands.

The parts that fortune hath bestowed upon you,

My lord, I hold as giddily as fortune.

As giddily as fortune ... as giddily ... what in all heaven did I mean by that?"

In the shaft of light under the window, Ginny stopped. A drop of black ink fell from Harry's quill onto the paper below, glittering briefly as it soaked in. The new blot was barely noticeable next to the thicket of false starts and erasures which covered most of the page.

"This is tiresome, Viola. It should be enough that my family has ruled these lands for two hundred years and that I love him. All these fine words, all these pretty rhymes and degrees of untruth demean us both. I refuse to do it."

Harry laid the quill across the paper.

"Good."

She was doing it again, squeezing the amber beads she wore at her throat - each one in turn until her resolve gave out. Three beads, four. The room was small and filled with the honeysuckle scent she favoured.

"And yet to lose my chance through trivial pride ... no. I have wasted dignity enough on him before now. A little more is no great matter. Now let me see if there is anything to be salvaged."

The page lay on the very edge of the desk, resting against Harry's ribs to shift and rustle as he moved. She had to reach over him to flatten it against the tabletop. Her beads clinked just above his ear and the perfume rose drunkenly from inside her bodice as she reviewed the massacred draft.

"'Oh when mine eyes did see Olivier first, methought he purged the air of pestilence.' I can imagine his response. He will read it aloud to his companions. He will lean his head back just so, and he will laugh. This couplet here is no better ..."

Harry watched the dancing of her short-nailed fingertips over the paper as they followed each line. They were plain fingers, clean and blunt, and yet the strength of them could hold her steady on a broom in vertical flight. They could work deliberate miracles in embroidery. They had steered Dean's much larger hand as he trailed after her wearing his surprised, contented smile. Harry laid his finger in the hollow of her elbow - in a tiny, surprised movement, she turned the tender underneath of it towards him - and traced it down to the gathering of veins at her wrist.

"Come, Viola." She whipped the paper away, hardening into the stiff formality she reserved for the young maid who had chipped the glassware or the doorman drunk at his post. "You say you are my friend and yet, when my need is greatest, you have no help to give me. You have spent more time in his company than I have. Tell me then. Why do my letters fail to move him?"

Strange how the more she put on the airs of nobility, the more he remembered how she had always failed to notice the mud which clung to the bottom of her robes in the excitement of a victorious match.

"They don't work," he said evenly. "Because they don't sound as if you really mean them."

Ginny gave a splutter of disbelief and straightened her beads. That familiar quickening of pulse was coming back to him, the surge of rebellion, and he wondered how he had lived without it these last few days. He titled his chair back on a precarious angle and threw an unladylike arm over the back of it.

"Purge the air of pestilence? The air around him -" ... smelled of lemons, and powder, and new sweat along his hairline ... "- was just like the air anywhere else. He's not stupid, you know. Purged the air! Of course he'll laugh at you, because even he knows that's rubbish."

Very still and pale, she considered him.

"It is poetical, Viola. It does not need to be literally true. The aim of a love letter is not to capture reality but to show the leaps in perception which the object of the letter inspires. Yet you, you would have accuracy. Should I write, then, that his height is five feet and seven inches or that he has ten fingers and toes? Shall I address my letter "Yond Sovereign Cruelty"?"

Harry reached for the quill.

"That one isn't a bad start."

She laughed - a startling burst of sound which echoed in the room.

"Yond Sovereign Cruelty," Harry read aloud as he straightened a new piece of paper and scrawled, and she gave that guilty laugh again. "Shall we be plain, my lord? I own most of Illyria and you have all the charm of an angry scorpion. Do you really expect to get a better offer than this? I advise you to marry me now before I realise what a fool I've been. Yours ... how shall I sign it?"

It struck him how odd is was to see her with her head bent down, she who - unlike his own Ginny - had been schooled to keep her back straight and her chin level. When she looked up, he understood. It was mirth she hid, and the wicked glitter of her eyes made him think she would reach out and show him a cache of Extendable Ears.

"I leave that at your discretion, since you will be the one reading it to him."

The chair thudded back to the ground and ink sloshed over the rim of the well.

"I'm not taking any more messages."

Malfoy malice was a thing he knew intimately, intimately enough to recognise that what he had seen at their last encounter was something deeper and more bloodthirsty than that. Apparently there were now two things which could raise Draco Malfoy to the sort of fury that left his hands shaking and made all his little teeth glint white and saw-sharp when he spoke it. And, unlike in the guarded halls of Hogwarts, in this place he had the power to take all his vilest fantasies of vengeance and make them real.

"It is not -"

"No."

His voice was hard and his shoulders tense and square, and for a moment she seemed at a loss.

"Nobody else can do this for me," she murmured from behind him and, with a soft rustling of skirts, moved to lean against the side of the desk, dark blue silk spilling over the chestnut wood. "You must let me persuade you."

Gently, she took the quill from his fingers, brushed its ragged end as if idly across her palm and then her lips. She turned her big, dark eyes down on him.

"You are very dear to me, Viola. Will you not do this one small thing for our friendship?" Before he could speak, she reached out to smoothe a lock of hair from his forehead. "Are you so very cold?"

"Cold?" It wasn't as calm as he intended, but he held back from shouting and bit back the furious indignation that was building in him. "Well I suppose I must be. I'm not taking any more messages. I'm sick of hearing about him. I'm sick of all the stupid pretending. I'm ... sick."

It was the clenching in his jaw that had made him think of it.

"I have a toothache. I'm walking to the market to get ... something. You can take your message yourself if it's so important."

Shaking off her placating touch before she could give it, he tore open the door and left it swinging behind him.

He had come to resent the way she had taken to calling his name, softly and with an idleness which implied that he might have the freedom to refuse. However, in that moment, he found he liked her silence less.

*

As he strode through the gates, Harry slipped onto the third finger of his right hand the only object he had which he thought could be traded: a silver ring which had lain three days under his bed before he could bring himself to look at it without his stomach clenching in discomfort.

He had almost passed the Olivier villa when he heard the scream. He had gathered his skirts and hurtled ten feet before his conscious mind registered to whom the sound belonged.

*

The straight form of Draco, Lord Olivier, could have been a shard of bone in its white costume, with the morning sun washing the front of him in brilliant light and burning a black shadow on the ground behind. He stood on the frontier of the Olivier lands, where precipice dropped down to plain. His arms were tangled in front of his chest. The set of his back disclosed, precisely as he wished it to, nothing.

Above him, unbearably bright and reflecting the fierce light like a weapon, stood the previous lord of the estate. Atop a rearing stallion with straining flanks and teeth bared forever in a frightful grimace, the old count betrayed no emotion, from the sure grip of his thin fingers on the reins to the hair spilling in sleek obedience down his back. Indeed, the sharpness of cheekbone and unimpressed slant of mouth were scarcely colder in marble than they had been in life.

Draco made no move to acknowledge the footsteps approaching.

"I do not care for conversation," he snapped without looking around.

Hermione gave the statue a quick appraisal and turned her shoulder to it.

"Perhaps I could send Feste to you."

"I have no use for a clown." Draco gave a dry laugh. "I have comedy enough as it is. No, there is no company I would keep. Unless you bid Malvolio come to me. He is sad and civil - yes. Send Malvolio to me."

Hermione's fingers worked quickly, straightening sleeves which were perfectly arranged.

"Malvolio is not himself, my lord. A sort of madness has -"

Dry earth eddied at Draco's feet as he whipped around.

"Am I no longer master of this household? Send Malvolio to me. I will have no other, and the next time I find my directions questioned it will mean an afternoon in the stocks, servant and gentlewoman alike."

For a moment it seemed that Hermione would stare him down. Then, with a noncommittal nod and a curt "Certainly", she was gone. The silence changed with her departure. It seemed judgmental. Malfoy kicked at the base of the statue, where the plaque proclaimed platitudes about the giant who had been his father and the rosemary was already sending adolescent shoots

into the air. He kneeled to uproot a length of it and crushed it between his fingers until the scent rose.

When he looked up, Snape had cleared the last of the cypresses and halted stiffly, slowing the rush of his breathing. He smiled. No. That was no mere smile. The corners of his lips snaked upwards, yes, with slow deliberation, but there was no mirth in his eyes. They were dark, darker than Draco remembered seeing them.

"I see you at least are in fine spirits today," Draco said bitterly.

Snape's low, intimate laugh jolted him.

"Any man would be intoxicated by the letter I have received. Not entirely unexpected, I must say, but no less a delight for that."

Draco glared at him from between the horse's legs.

"I did not summon you here to tell me idle news. Speak of plain things, Malvolio. Make your report of the month's accounts. Tell me - oh."

Snape had rounded the statue and now posed in all his glory. Jerkin, doublet and codpiece, all in their customary black, seemed to fit more sleekly than before and their contours were no longer hidden by the cape which the steward had flung in debonaire disregard over his shoulder. It was the stockings that made Draco doubt his eyes. A shade of yellow that would put sunflowers to shame, they were bound by a lattice of gartering which carved his calves into diamonds of flesh that begged to be pricked with a pin to see what might ooze out. A bow in the same colour flourished behind each knee. Draco stood.

"Malvolio, are you feeling quite yourself today?"

The smile - if that's what it was - widened.

"Shall we say, my dear master, that I am not yet feeling what I intend to be feeling and - you are quite correct - it is not myself."

Snape's palms smoothed the length of his doublet where it hung from his fleshless waist and ballooned just under the hips, ran back up and repeated the gesture.

"You misunderstand me. Are you unwell?"

"I need not hide it from you, these garters do constrict the bloodflow. And, I confess, I slept little last night for a recurring dream which was, to put it delicately, vivid."

"I have no interest in -"

"Come now, my lord," Snape fairly purred and came a step closer, the cape slipping down to drape nonchalantly over his arm. "We are both of us men of candour. Let us speak directly. I believe there is something you would say to me."

Draco turned his chin up haughtily as he considered.

"Very well. Your speech this morning is vulgar and well above your station. I suggest you retire for a time and reflect on your conduct."

Snape shook his head and took slow steps closer, bringing with him the smell of old ink and candlewax and not for a moment losing that smile. Despite Draco's desperate glance, the statue gave him no help.

"Then I order it. I insist you go and lie down until - "

"O ho!" Snape smirked. "Now we reach the heart of it. I must lie down! Very well, my straight-bodied young master. Let us retire to your bedchamber."

Draco's pulse quickened at his temples and the base of his throat, but still he stood firm as the taller man drew up to him, the only sign of anxiety a defensive curling of his hands.

"It was your bedchamber I had in mind, Malvolio," he advised in his iciest tone, leaning away from Snape's advance. "I meant for you alone, as was perfectly clear."

It was not becoming for a man of rank to lay hands on his steward and push him, or else Draco would have done just that as a lock of Snape's hair fell against his cheek.

"This is very midsummer madness! Step away immediately, sir!" He knew exactly the descending tone that would have made that command incontrovertible, but somehow his voice couldn't hit it. Panic gripped him. He stepped back too quickly and the statue's base caught him in the back of his legs and knocked them from under him. This was what weakness led to, he heard his father sneering as his head knocked against the steed's hind leg and his foot struggled for purchase on the marble. Snape leaned over him.

"Remove your hand," Draco hissed, but breathlessly.

"With pleasure, my lord. I shall remove my hand from here." The fingers digging into the outside of his hip disappeared. "And place it here."

Wide-eyed and speechless, Draco watched as a yellow-clad knee slid onto the pedestal between his thighs.

"Tutor me, Draco." He had a voice on him, Snape, that could run like pure honey when he had a mind to use it, and Draco felt it working unbidden in the pit of his stomach. "Guide me. Show me where you have imagined my hands exploring. Teach me to touch you in all - " and he bit softly at Draco's jaw " - the places - " and he bit less gently at Draco's chest " - you long - " and Draco felt the warm breath at his navel through the silk of his shirt "- to be touched."

And his teeth skimmed lower. Draco was falling - the lurching in his stomach told him so - and the paper dry fingers of the family steward were sliding under his clothes. He looked helplessly up at his marble father and shrieked.

"Maria! Come here! Toby! Feste! This instant I say!"

"No more obfuscation." Those black eyes glittered at him, now from very close. "I will hold nothing back from you. Nor you from me."

Draco wasn't sure how much of what met his hand was codpiece and how much flesh; all he knew was that the more he struggled, the more Snape's grip crushed his wrist.

"How dare you presume to touch me!" he snarled and, though it might have been only the play of sunlight through his father's arms, that leer did seem to falter.

"What ho, Malvolio!" Although it was already slurred and the sun not yet at mid-morning, Ron's voice was salvation itself. "Such festive dress, and you a Puritan man! Now what is this wild behaviour?"

"Toby, remove this man from me."

"What do you think, Feste? Is this behaviour worthy of our most esteemed household treasurer?"

Ron and one of the twins were circling around the statue, craning their necks in gleeful curiosity. A little way off, Hermione stood with Percy and the other twin. None of them moved to his aid and Snape pressed closer to shut out their gaze.

"Feste, make haste," Draco snapped.

"My dear Sir Toby." The twin was wallowing in the moment. "Malvolio appears to be, though it pains me to conclude thusly, carousing. Indeed, to the experienced eye, this would appear to be base carousing."

Ron tutted sadly. "How can we hope to mend our ways when this is the example we are set?"

Snape looked up with his eyes dark and his teeth bared and his hand still on Draco's bare stomach.

"Leave us."

In the merest flicker of silence, Ron and the twins shared a malicious glance, then they grabbed Snape roughly under his arms and dragged his raging form upright. All his kicking and wrenching of shoulders was useless against three assailants and in time he stilled.

"You fools," he spat, wedging his chin under Ron's freckled arm that held his throat from behind. "You will regret every wrong you have done me, for I speak with your master's voice now."

Ron laughed outright and Hermione crossed her arms over chest, but all eyes turned to Draco.

"My lord?" Hermione prompted.

From the way Draco continued straightening his doublet, it did not appear that he was trying to restrain his gulping breaths and fumbling for a master's well-aimed words.

"Malvolio is unwell. Attend to him carefully, for he has been faithful to my family until today." Draco looked anywhere but into the eyes of the stranger who had recently been his steward. "Maria, you will take charge of his duties for the time being. See to the household accounts and the supervision of the servants."

The smell of crushed rosemary was everywhere; it would ever after make him nauseous.

"And if the messenger comes again from the Duchess, conduct her to the library. Lock her in and bring me the key."

A strange hissing sound came out of Snape's mouth, grew, then cut off as he bit, hard and vicious, into the first limb he could reach. Ron screamed loud enough to deafen as he ripped his arm free and cradled it against his chest. In one brutal burst of muscle, Fred and George launched Snape onto his back, knocking the breath out of him so that his curses trailed off into spluttering. They fell upon him with all of their combined weight.

Draco watched him for a very long while as he bucked and growled and his choking obscenities finally gave way to a dusty cough. One garter had slipped and a bony stretch of knee, grazed and bloody, protruded from the silk stocking.

"Take him out of my sight," Draco said in a quiet, passionless voice. "Take him somewhere cold and dark and lock him in. Use whatever force you wish."

He cast a last glance over the steward with his shoulders pinioned in the dirt and his two yellow legs flapping impotently in the air, and then he turned back toward the sunlight.

*

Stand here by Draco's side and see what he sees.

The messenger girl - Harry - is running through the rose garden. She runs with her green skirts hitched at the top of her thighs and both white stockings on display, her legs stretching in great, wide steps reaching up high in front of her. She swerves nimbly around the chaise longue in the courtyard and he believes he can see the tense trembling of muscle in her thigh each time she changes direction. Her shawl is hanging loose behind her and the hair which has been so carefully hidden from him until now is short and very black and flies back, unkempt, from her face. All her fierce will is bent on the task of running. Her skin is shining with exertion, and the whole picture of her is utterly, naturally, unconsciously indecent.

He wants to claw at Time itself, to tear his fingernails into the flesh of it so that it halts, or slows, so that this moment never passes. He wants to throw her into the grass by the fountain and devour her. He wants to sink to his knees and bury his face in her thighs. He still wants to cut out her tongue.

She passes through the cypress border and stops, and when she drops her skirts he has to bite his lip to keep from protesting.

*

Finally Draco's breath came back to him.

"Viola."

"Are you hurt?" Harry asked, but he was speaking to Ron, who stood by the statue gaping, white-faced, at his broken flesh with its half-circle of blood spots making thin trickles down his arm. Gently, he lifted Ron's protective hand from the wound so he could inspect it.

"The wound is shallow," Draco snapped. "Maria will see to it. Where have you been?"

Watching Hermione out of the corner of his eye, Ron pulled away from Harry's inspection.

"Answer me, Viola."

But, with a tiny nod which was no substitute for a courtesy, Harry announced: "I'm sorry to have disturbed you," and took his leave.

Draco caught him in the rose garden, matching Harry's pace without giving the appearance of hurrying as the hardened thorns tore at his sleeve.

"I would have you stay a while." Harry only walked faster. "Viola, you are messenger to the Duchess, who is, according to her rather unmaidenly correspondence, my willing slave. And you will find that my servant's servant is, as it were, my servant."

That stopped him. By the great gilded sundial, Harry took his stand.

"I am leaving the Duchess' household." Harry paused. "No. I have left it already. This morning. So I am nobody's servant, and certainly not yours."

Then he leaned in until his breath condensed warm against Draco's ear. He steadied himself with a hand on Draco's shoulder and he whispered:

"I hope her next messenger is a Turkish blacksmith who will tear off your arms if you lay a finger on him."

For an instant, he smirked into Draco's face, just close enough for Draco to make out the hazel rim around the green of his irises and the pale, knitted slash of skin on his forehead. Then in one swift movement he was gone, knotting the shawl under his chin as he made his way back toward the road, concealing the windswept hair and the sweat-slicked contours of his collarbone.

No threats or curses passed Draco's lips as he watched his visitor walk away, but only a hesitant smile. For he had not failed to notice the silver band on Harry's finger which glared blindingly each time it caught the light.

*

"My lord Malvolio, your chamber."

The chicken coop lay behind the stables and Fred and George hovered just outside its door.

"We hope you'll feel at home," George grinned. "You've always strutted about like a rooster, and

now - why, look! - your very own brood of hens."

"That one is sweet on you. I have never seen such an amorous fowl. It must be the colour yellow that excites her so. Hmm. Feste, I wonder whether the stocks were too much."

"No, Feste," George said regretfully. "For my lord Malvolio, nothing is too much. In fact, I think we ought to consider the honey and goosefeathers."

From inside the coop came a growl of rage and a chorus of terrified squawking.

"Toby, I would have words with you." Pink in the face, Percy lurched around the corner of the building and collided with a stable boy carrying a saddle. "Take care, lad! Haste makes waste. Toby, I know you're here somewhere."

He found Ron poking a long stick through the netting of the coop and chuckling.

"My dear Sir Andrew." When he looked up, Ron's eyes were wet with laughter.

"Sir Toby, It comes to this. My funds have run dry. I have done as you said - provided a generous supply of wine and every proof of my intellect - and yet your master does nothing. You swore on your oath that I would be steward in Malvolio's place. And yet His Lordship will no longer hear my arguments. Just now, when I approached him, he called me a wittering nonce and bade me fetch his cloak. I have no prospect of a position and, unless you repay the moneys I have lent you, I will be penniless within the week."

"You must be bold, my dear Sir-"

"Bold, you say? Very well then. You and the fools owe me thirty florins between you and I would be repaid by tomorrow."

He missed the familiar look which passed between George and Fred.

"And so you shall be," George grinned. "You have my word on it. As a sign of good faith, let me fetch you a mug of ale."

"Your word? You swore to pay me before breakfast and still my -"

"The girl is to blame!" Fred declared with a dramatic clenching of fist and Percy was silent for sheer amazement. "The messenger girl. You were well on your way to promotion until she arrived but, since that day, His Lordship has been distracted. One minute he wants wine and music, the next we must draw the shutters and silence the songbirds. There is no reasoning with him. "

Percy considered a long moment.

"Yes, I have observed it." His chest protruded just a little. "She is a silly chit and not even a beauty at that. I shall tell His Lordship so. But first, we must settle the matter of payment which -"

Abruptly, George closed the door of the coop.

"You must fight her."

Percy deflated. "A girl? You would have me fight a girl?"

"Well you could hardly beat a boy," noted Ron.

"There is no other way." Fred nodded somberly and laid a hand on Percy's shoulder. "It is thusly. Malvolio is out of favour and this is your chance to unseat him. But you are sailed into the north of His Lordship's opinion. You have spoken too much and acted too little. Only a display of valour will convince him."

"And do you not think," George picked up. "That His Lordship will be grateful for the humbling of this little trollop who leads him such a merry chase?"

Percy sighed and knitted his brows together.

"I will not harm her. I have made that clear, have I not? I will be gentle with her."

Ron snickered. Fred clapped his hands.

*

The passers-by were becoming more numerous and Harry thought he must almost have reached the town when the shout came from behind him. Fred Weasley jogged up, small beads of sweat at his temples and his purple and orange cap under his arm.

"Hello Feste," Harry said uncertainly. "Are you going to the market?"

Fred was eying him shrewdly.

"My dear Viola," he said. "I bear unhappy news. You have offended Sir Andrew Aguecheek, a knight of the royal codpiece." He nodded back along the road, where Harry recognised Ron's mustard coloured garb, Hermione's prim white cap and, standing hand-on-hip in front of them, Percy. "He would challenge you."

"Him?" The derision in Harry's voice made Fred fight a smile.

"Oh yes. We have made every effort to calm him, but Sir Andrew is a demon in a rage."

"I haven't done anything to him," Harry shrugged as George joined them.

"He is offended by your dishonest attentions to Lord Olivier - no! Don't deny it. We have all seen how you dally with him, flashing your ankles and curling your lip at him with your eyes all big and bright and angry. Oh, we've seen it. And this is what your wiles lead to. You must defend yourself."

Harry almost said yes. He hadn't forgotten the mindless, anaesthetic release he had felt as he pounded Draco Malfoy into the Quidditch pitch. A fistfight might be just what he needed to quell the roiling that had plagued his gut since he walked through the castle's gates. And it was only Percy.

"I don't want to fight him," he made himself say, and realised too late he had missed the obvious defence of femininity. "Tell him I apologise."

"He will pursue you," George said in a grand voice. "He will hunt you down. He has killed men for less."

Fred suppressed a chuckle and tried a different tack. "You have nothing to fear. Truly. He'll never lay a hand on you. I doubt that he even knows which end of the sword to pick it up by, in fact it's a miracle his hands aren't bandaged today."

When Fred drew a squat sword from the sheath at his waist, Harry blanched and the word "*Expelliarmus*!" rose in his throat.

"No."

"Then I must try to calm him," George announced, but there was a wicked quirk in his mouth as he made his way back to where Percy stood, now slightly hidden behind Ron's taller form.

When Harry made to leave, he found Fred's wide shoulders blocking his path.

"Courage, Sir Andrew!" George was proclaiming in the distance, and flakes of conversation carried on the breeze. "... won't be gainsaid ... her father was squire to the King ... could swing a sword before she ever held a needle ... face her wrath ..."

"Her wrath?" Percy mouthed silently.

"Her blazing wrath."

"This is stupid," Harry muttered and raised his voice. "Sir Andrew, I will-"

Fred's large hand swooped over his mouth and silenced him.

"I withdraw my challenge," Percy proclaimed loudly. "Only a scoundrel would wish to frighten a young lady."

But George was shaking his head and Ron squeezed Percy's arm in sympathy.

"You are too late," Ron said sadly. "See how Feste has to hold her down to stall her from running at your throat? If you will not defend yourself, I fear you will be slaughtered."

"I will give her money!"

"You forget, you have none. Come, sir! Now is the time to show your true heart!"

Harry felt cold steel pressed into his hand and struggled against Fred's muscly grip.

"You need only keep him occupied," Fred whispered in his ear. "Injure him a little if you can - no more than that. Give him some tales to tell and you can be on your way."

He gave Harry a push, and the next thing Harry knew, Percy was rushing down the hill towards him, sword outstretched like a lance, and Harry could have sworn he had his eyes closed. He raised his own sword hesitantly. Its weight - so unlike the lightness of his wand - unbalanced him and he gripped the hilt with both hands. Percy's face was grim and pale as he approached.

"Stop that!" roared a deep voice from behind him. Percy dropped his sword.

A tall figure was striding up the road towards them and Harry's stomach lurched with that familiar queasy feeling. It had happened to him almost daily since the end of fifth year: a familiar tone of voice, a note of anguish hidden in a laugh, a hunted gait that so resembled Sirius it felt like he was resurrected and slain again before Harry's eyes. The man came closer, the dark hair tied back, the long legs, the angled brow. Harry's sword knocked against his ankle.

"What are you doing, Sebastian?" this flawless imitation of Sirius Black snapped at him. "I've not left you more than an hour and already you're brawling. I had thought better of you - and, saints preserve us, where did you get that dress?"

For a long time, he was unable to do anything more than scan the stranger's face, looking for differences and finding none. Then he managed:

"Not Sebastian. They call me -"

"Harry, I know," Sirius said under his breath.

Harry reeled. Was he in a dead place after all? The smell of fish on Sirius was unmistakable and rank, and he wondered if the next world was perhaps very different from what he had been told.

When he put his hand on Sirius' arm, living warmth flowed into it. Living warmth. Living Sirius. He slid his finger through a tear in the shirt and the skin he touched could not be doubted.

"It's him."

That voice spun Harry around and made him reach for his wand before he recognised the speaker. There she was. As toad-faced as ever and dressed in a soldier's uniform instead of cardigans and bows, she pursed her thin lips.

"There is no doubt. He is the one. Apprehend him." Delores Umbridge clasped her hands behind her back and nodded to her companion.

"I trust you'll come quietly. Wouldn't want to cause a scene." Jovial, blustering and Cornelius Fudge down to his lime green cap, the second soldier approached. The sword had turned slippery in Harry's grip and for a moment - the briefest moment - he wished he had never left the security of the castle.

"Let's make is easy then." Fudge gave a nervous grin. "What do you say, Antonio?"

"You are mistaken," Sirius said flatly.

Without warning, Fudge jammed his pike against Sirius' throat.

"No, no, Antonio. We are quite certain."

Harry launched himself at Fudge and knocked him to the ground, his sword clattering away uselessly. He swung two punches into the soldier's ribs before that awful sound made his blood run cold.

"Hem hem."

Slowly he raised his head to see Umbridge smiling down at him with a thick dagger pressed into Sirius' gut. Harry froze. She turned her gaze down the road, where three more soldiers murmured ominously and watched. Harry rolled back onto his haunches and straightened under her vile, victorious smile.

"If you were a man, we might have to discipline you," she said, fingers working busily as she bound Sirius' hands. "As it is, I suggest you stay out of our sight."

The muscles along Sirius' shoulders twitched with the effort of submitting. When his hands were fastened, he inspected the knots with disdain. He shuffled hesitantly and said:

"They say the cells in the guard house are none too comfortable. There will be expenses if I mean to eat. It seems I must ask you to return my purse. "

He could have had Harry's liver, kidney or heart if he had asked for it.

"Of course. Where is it?"

Sirius' mouth twisted; his words were hostile. "It hung around your neck this morning. Have you taken so little care of it?"

"I don't know what you mean," Harry said helplessly and turned his empty palm up to the sky.

The look Sirius gave him then came from his nightmares. It played endlessly, fast or maddeningly slow, silently, backed by screaming, his screaming, Neville's blubbering, sometimes distant and others so close it was just beyond the reach of his fingers, but always that same expression: Sirius' face blank with shock, except for his eyes which were edged with the first light of fear. After it lay a fall and thump of heavy cloth and the long silence.

Sirius slumped and for the first time looked like a prisoner.

"It is enough that you have spent my money recklessly. Your lie demeans us both." His eyes were black with anger. "I had thought my love deserved better of you."

Umbridge shoved him into the first steps back toward the town. The morning sun cast a black chasm of shadow behind him as he went.

Fudge's pike slammed across his chest before Harry had stumbled his first step.

"We have laws to deal with disturbers of the peace, girl," he hissed. "Be off before we arrest you."

Harry stood, hair and sweat and dirt in his eyes, as their figures dwindled in the distance. The sun climbed. Not far away, fat yellow grapes leapt off vines in their eagerness to complete the summer cycle of growth and decay and rebirth. And Sirius had been taken from him again.

*

There is a cautious space around where he stands, alone in the middle of the road with his dress streaked with dust and his head bowed. The few market-goers stare in open curiosity as they tug their goats or turn their barrows to give him a wide berth. How slender he looks, standing with his arms hanging limp and the brutal corset cinching his waist. Green and still and straight, as if he could throw down roots and join the trees which grow thick at the roadside, passive and sighing.

But Harry has mastered grief before and will do so again. It starts with a step, then he is climbing toward the town. His stride is wide and masculine with no thought left for feminine pretence. Under the shawl, he ruffles his hair in the heat. Soon he will be lost in the crowd.

Stay with me.

Wait here with me, in the dappled shade of the fig tree with the ants crawling over its trunk. The wait will not be long. Feel the breeze on your face and watch toward the east, for that is where he will come from.

There. A figure striding towards us: his step loose and easy in dark breeches, his white shirt unfastened at the neck to let the air onto his skin, his hair sticking to his brow in patches with the rising heat of early afternoon. Harry. Sebastian. He wears both names with equal discomfort now.

Fred Weasley straightens as he sees the newcomer.

"Back for more, are you lass?" he says, not kindly.

Harry pauses. Then, as he finally notes the menace in Fred's tone, sees the discarded swords and wipes his hands carefully on his shirt, he hears it for the first time.

Rhythmic and growing, drumming along the westward road.

Hoofbeats.

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Chapter: 6

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Come, stand by me.

Close your eyes. Feel the shifts in pressure as the world around you transforms itself: the lurch of gravity abandoning you, the explosion of sunlight on your shoulders and the head-spinning gush of fresh air filling out your lungs. Below you, the familiar landscape of Illyria: the draped green velvet of the plains, the buttons of rock which crown the hilltops, and seams of silver water threading them into one. The ground is very far beneath our feet.

Have you missed this?

If my grip on your hand is too eager, forgive me. This place changes when you are gone from it. The light loses its glass-edge clarity. The air itself grows dank and impatient. We continue to move, all of us, only with heavy feet. We go through the motions of our daily lives, oh yes, but aimlessly. The fruit in our mouths is like sand. The sand clogs between our toes like clay. It is your return we await, and when you come, we awaken. Your presence throws the light of purpose upon us and, suddenly, our paths are clear. The world is cast in bright colours: jubilant yellows, carnival reds and a newborn blue in the sky. We flourish.

Do you see? Your time here is precious.

Stay close to me as we descend. The story is poised, here, waiting for you. On the high road through the hills, just outside the Olivier villa, you can make out the form of a horse and rider. On the same road, not far beyond the town walls, a lone figure strides toward the sea. The scene is set. All that lacks is the breath of life which your presence provides.

Begin.

*

Draco sees his death in the path far below him.

Summer-hard and baked by the sun, the earth has all the softness of a brick in flight. It thrusts up glinting daggers of rock.

Draco clings desperately to the rearing stallion, one hand tangled in the reins and the other flailing as he struggles to get a grip in its mane and the pain strikes his thighs and his knuckles like hammer blows. The horse - his father's horse, an eighteen-hand Arabian and every inch a devil - seems to hang in the air forever as it bucks and shudders and rends the breeze with its forelegs. He squeezes his eyes closed and blindly curses the horse and the girl and his own stupid, clumsy, imprudent sense of hope that set him on this path.

Have you ever seen him look less smug? No powdered aristocrat this, but a thin-legged youth riding a man's horse, pink-faced with fury and very much afraid. In his mind is a vision of the girl in the green dress - her black lashes lowered and her lips apart and the lean strength of her throat bared for him - and it wracks him to think that death will rob him of this fragile possibility.

Would you like to see him fall?

That is an ending, perhaps. Draco, broken and bleeding, on the side of the road. Dust on his skin and blood in his mouth and his head full of Harry-in-the-green-dress. Perhaps there is a saviour come too late, whispered words of comfort, and arms - first cautious, then growing in tenderness - to die in. An ending, yes. But not our ending. Draco will not fall.

The Arabian quietens and lowers its gleaming mass of pure thoroughbred muscle. Draco, who has not ridden bareback since he was ten, slides bonelessly to the ground. With a wavering step, he makes his way back across the yard.

The stable-boy with the bloody lip and the red weal across his jaw cringes at his master's approach, and when Draco draws the whip from his belt, the boy tries to shrink into the shadowed stall behind him.

"You will mend this," Draco orders in a voice that would shake if it rose louder than a hiss, and he gestures to the scuffed saddle with its torn strap. "There is a journey I very much wish to make. If your clumsiness keeps me from it, I will make you howl."

The boy looks from the strap, frayed and broken off completely from the saddle body, to the over-bright eyes and trembling hands of his master. He gives a forlorn little nod.

Back outside, Draco - Lord Olivier and a count down to the ermine trimming on his cloak - climbs onto the railings of the stableyard to hoist his boots out of the muck. As he perches there, he winds the whip around his fingers until they are purple and numb. Surrounded by servants who trained under his father's hair-trigger temper and ruthless taste for excellence, he is used to finding himself provided with cool water or minstrels or eiderdown pillows almost before he is aware of desiring them.

He is not a man accustomed to wanting.

*

Harry looks down on a path made of light.

Great long strands of it twist themselves, sparkling, beneath his feet and bear him up. As he walks, he turns his face up to the sun, a welcome companion now that the raw burn along his shoulders and in the angle of his shirt has faded to brown. His mind is untroubled and his road runs downhill, dazzling and sunstruck and blazing white.

It is an illusion, of course. The sun at its highest point is picking out crystalline streaks in the stones which scatter the road's surface. It is only ordinary rock transfigured by chance and sunshine. But still, there is a particular lightness to Harry's step on this young afternoon. Don't you think? When was the last time you saw him eat up the miles with such a long, easy, boneless stride?

He smiles at the memory in his mind, which is of Sirius - *Antonio*, he corrects himself - taking a mended fishing net from his hesitant fingers, frowning critically at the knots, and then declaring: "Not bad," in a voice that made Harry's stomach light. "Not bad at all, Sebastian."

He stops on a stocky bridge and leans his forearms on the parapet. The glassy ribbon of water is far away and sluggish with summer. If there are times when he is bowed with the knowledge that his escape from this world will part him front Sirius also, this is not one of them.

After a morning spent in the town - where men playing dice welcomed him into their game and a girl in a yellow headscarf smiled shyly and laid down her basket of cherries to wrench his palm open and tell his fortune - he knows that, even if he still has no idea of where he is or how to get home, the answers cannot be far off. Before the commotion by the guard house and the ominous appearance of the military's crested pikes made him cautious and drove him out of the town, he had crouched in the marketplace, among the baskets of the spice merchants, rolling a cinnamon stick between his fingers as he searched for a subtle way to ask them what he wanted to know. Those men have an air of wizardry - not the staid and regimented version he is used to, but something wilder and more ancient: the magic that bred the first sphinx and filled the air with flying carpets when more northerly wizards still used their brooms for sweeping.

In time, he will question them. But for now, he is waiting for evening, when he will sit in the inn with Sirius at his side and something other than fish in his hands, and the easy talk of men will flow between them.

As he shifts the pack lightly on his shoulders and spits a cherry pip into the riverbed, Harry does not look like a man accustomed to grief.

*

Harry walks on, and where he goes, we must follow.

Stay with me. This is where reality bends itself to make unlikely roads meet and mingle.

*

Harry had not left the bridge far behind him when he heard it: a voice carrying distantly on the wind. The nasal monotone was one of a kind. Percy.

When he hurried around the bend in the road - his luminous path faded to dust and rock now - it was, indeed, his least favourite Weasley that he saw, tracking backward and forward through the grass with a great deal of extravagant feinting and the occasional lunge.

"Valorous is more the word, Toby," Percy proclaimed a little breathlessly as he nicked an imaginary shoulder. "Ha!" He smote his invisible adversary. "Be sure to use that word when you report this to His Lordship. Valorous. Tell him I fought like St George himself and would certainly have given the little tart the hiding of her life - knight's daughter or no - if I'd only had the chance to meet her face to -" Harry's pack made a conspicuous thud on the ground. "You."

Percy put the blade between them. His glance darted anxiously to where Ron was lazing on his back with his head on Hermione's thigh and trying to work a flask unobserved from his hip pocket to his lips, but no reassurance came from that quarter.

"Back for more are you, lass?" That was Fred, swaggering more than a little as he emerged from an olive grove by the road, while his twin sat on a log nearby, shading his face with a cap as uncompromisingly purple and orange as the rest of his costume. "And dressed like a man this time!"

At once, four days of constant uncertainty came back to Harry. They put steel in his voice.

"It's about time you two showed up."

What should he complain about first - the jerry-rigged wand the twins had left at the school, his near drowning in the sea, or the plain humiliation of being stranded here to feel his way blindly and alone? Or the fact that they'd waited until now - just when he was starting to feel at home in this world - to make their appearance and take him back to reality.

The twins bowed low. "At your command, my lady."

"Do you think this is funny? Yeah, really bloody hilarious, Fred-"

"Feste." This time there was quiet menace in Fred's tone. "You knew our name well enough an hour ago."

In the heat of the early afternoon, the road before and behind them empty, Harry was reminded of Warrington in the weeks after his rescue from the Vanishing Cabinet: how he had come back hollow-faced, sweating in the narrower corridors and shuddering at sudden noises, and then quietly disappeared before the end of exams.

"All right," Harry placated. "*Feste*, if you like. You still went too far. I could have been hurt."

"And you would have been, if you hadn't fled from me." The ostrich feather on the top of Percy's cap jiggled as he spoke.

"Fled?" Harry was dumbfounded. As fawning ministry official or gartered fop, Percy couldn't hold a candle to the very least of the Death Eaters he had faced. "Fled from *you* ?"

Percy coloured and his fingers strained around the sword's hilt. "If you mean to insult me - *sir* - the honourable course would be to make yourself plain. I shall then demand satisfaction."

There was a clang of metal as George struck a second blade against a rock.

"I think the lass is being plain enough. If you're determined to provoke a fight, girl, you shall have your wish."

He juggled the sword to hold it hilt-first towards Harry, who took it.

At once, it was as if the sun-warmed metal grew into him. The forward pull of its weight set his chest and shoulders in resistance, awakening the new muscles gained through days hauling fishing nets and his pack. Right down to his thighs, his body tensed, adjusting to the new mass and readying for fight. It could have been a broom he held for the first time: the promise of power was the same, the recklessness and the adrenalin of learning on his feet.

"Fine." Harry cut an arc in the air. Already he could feel how the control of it was in the balance of his steps as much as in his arms. The twins' apologies could wait until he'd seen what he could do with this and taught them not to call him "girl".

Percy threw his cap off and pushed a few sweaty curls out of his face. With one formal salute, he brought their blades together, deliberately making the edges grind. One thing you had to say for Percy, he didn't do things by halves. He wore the deep concentration of a diamond cutter as he pressed in and circled, testing his opponent's defences.

It was Percy who struck first - a sudden downward blow that echoed in Harry's elbows and knuckles as he blocked it - then took a startled half pace backward. He swung again, quick and testing, deflecting narrowly past Harry's shoulder. Already, the metal was becoming slippery in Harry's hands. The blade glinted. He remembered one evening at the end of his first year when he had turned his wand over and over in his hands, picturing it until the reality sank in: these eleven inches can kill a man.

The assault, when it came, was fierce. Percy was agile and determined, and what his blows lacked in power, they compensated for in speed and precision. The air resounded with his soft grunts of exertion as he attacked Harry from each side in turn, and Harry scrambled to parry. Then Harry perceived the rhythm in it. Percy's choreographed swordplay was more like a dance than a battle: thrust at the left shoulder then the right, lunge to the belly, low blow to the right. If he was quick enough ... Harry feinted back as Percy struck low and stretched his body to twist out of blade's path. Percy's own momentum did for him. He stumbled forward, overbalancing, and all it took was the flat of Harry's sword on the back of his knees to bring him down, tumbling onto all fours.

He laid the edge of his blade against Percy's neck. The muscle twitched beneath it.

"I concede."

Harry grinned. There was tension in his limbs like he hadn't felt for months, a nervous energy born of too much ambling up hillsides and nothing in the way of danger. Stultification had crept into him in this place. Waking from it was exhilarating.

"Anyone else?" he challenged.

Four arms grabbed him from behind.

"I think we've had enough of your lip, girl," growled one of the twins, possibly the one whose

grip was bending his collarbone like a twig while Ron scowled at him in the distance over Hermione's shoulder. "You may have reduced the lord of the manor to a tongue-tied idiot, but don't you imagine you've made us your fools as well."

"Take care, Feste," Hermione warned. "You can expect retribution from His Lordship to if you cause any damage."

It was shocking, the sound of that false name on the lips of Hermione, who of all people could be counted on for uncompromising truth whether you wanted it or not. She should be telling the twins that their joke had gone too far, that swordplay was in breach of a half dozen school rules. Unfocused dread was growing in him when Percy rose from his hands and knees and said quietly:

"Let it lie, Feste. The fight is over. We had best return before His Lordship thinks poorly on our absence, and there is also the small matter of your debts to be-"

George laughed. With a great shove between his shoulder blades, Harry went lurching forward, his arms flailing as he careened into Percy's back and sent them both crashing into the grass. Percy's bony form whipped and bucked underneath him, all chivalry forgotten as he growled and landed an elbow to Harry's jaw to send him sprawling on his stomach. Long fingers closed around Harry's throat. A shower of spittle hit on the back of his neck as Percy spluttered:

"*You* -" Percy's knee jabbed into his kidney. "-*conceited*-" Somewhere, far off, Hermione was calling out, and George was still chuckling. "-*little*-" Before Harry's eyes, the grass started to blur.

The sound of a whipcrack split the air.

"Control yourselves!" A clatter of hooves and the scud of a rider dismounting. "End this affray immediately!"

The whip sang through the air again and, with an apprehensive moan, Percy let Harry go.

"Brawling? You are a disgrace to my household, every one of you. No discipline, no breeding, no regard for propriety -"

The machine-gun slurs, Harry recognised them even before he managed to twist his head to see, through the frame of Percy's limbs, Draco Malfoy - pointy and thin-necked and malevolent as ever. As a huge dark horse with its saddle sitting crooked stamped impatiently behind him, he directed the loop of his whip at each of them in turn.

"- even the pigs have a higher sense of decorum. You, Feste, have had your last warning - you are dismissed. And I might have known that Toby Belch would be caught up in this. I am confining you to the estate. You will rise for devotions each morning at sunrise. The cellar door will be boarded up. And you, the pestilential Aguecheek - "

Percy untangled himself from Harry's limbs and stammered: "My lord, you must forgive me. The girl - I took leave of my senses, my lord! A madness was in me. I assure your lordship, I should rather cut off my own hand than bring your family's great name into infamy."

There was always a hint of deferential hunching to Percy's shoulders. Under the weight of Malfoy's silence, he drooped. But Malfoy had lost interest in his obsequience the moment his eyes alighted on Harry, sprawled in the grass, rubbing the red marks on his neck. His whip hand fell limp against his side.

"Be gone. All of you," Malfoy murmured after a long silence, then managed to bark out: "Return to the villa. No-one has permission to leave without my order. Directly, Maria! One word in disagreement and you may join Malvolio in the chicken coop."

Though she wore a look that promised intricate and bloody revenge, Hermione took Ron by the

wrist and departed. The twins doffed their caps sarcastically but did exactly as commanded, and wih that act crushed Harry last hope that they might not be part of this false, crazy world. Percy lingered, rotating his cap in his fingers like a rosary. It took one lick of the lash to make him take to his heels. The proud tip of his peacock feather settled, severed, into the dirt.

Harry had seen enough. "I'll be on my way."

Malfoy was before him in an instant, tucking the lash behind his back as he extended his free hand with its glittering rings. Suspicious of the gesture, Harry took it, but swung himself up too hastily so that Malfoy had to catch him by the elbow to stop him overbalancing. He felt the attention of that pale-eyed gaze on him, still and intent as a cat's, and he would have squirmed if there had been enough space between their bodies to do it.

"I like you dressed like that," Malfoy said in a very low voice. "I like you better."

With one whispered compliment, Harry found himself disarmed, far more effectively than the taunts he had spent six years learning to ignore. It was the shock of it. Open praise was not a thing you expected on Malfoy's lips. It had the currency of rarity, like an albino dragon or a vintage first model Cleansweep. He wanted to produce a breezy putdown that would show Malfoy immediately how the dealings between them were going to be. But more than that, he found himself curious to hear Malfoy - whose careful accent had a way of making compliments sound easy and authoritative - finding more things to like about him.

"Thank you," he mumbled, a touch truculently, in the end. He extracted his hand from Malfoy's insistent grip. "For your help. Before. Thank you."

He felt uncouth, with grass stains on his knees and elbows and his hair stiff with dust and sweat. Malfoy, however, looked deliberately crisp in his white silk breeches, and his doublet equally white with its darts of pearls running up from the waist. Even his blue cloak fell in parallel folds over his right shoulder, as if willed into neatness.

Malfoy frowned. "I see I was too late. That ungovernable oaf has hurt you."

"No. Not really. He hardly laid a - "

"Here." Malfoy put the pristine cuff of his sleeve to Harry's jaw and it came away bloody. He dabbed at it again, a gentle brush of silk across Harry's chin.

Harry stood dumbly, remembering: Malfoy's blood, dark in the webbed skin by his thumb, lodged under the quick of his fingernails; the bitter indignity of his Quidditch disqualification; Malfoy curled in a ball on the ground, gasping and spitting weakly, wetly, futilely, trying to clear his lungs to breathe; and the splatter of dry blood he had been sickened to find high up on his hairline, much later.

The wound stung as it was disturbed. Though the tilt of his mouth betrayed faint distaste, Malfoy was careful and slow as he steadied Harry's face with three fingers and touched his sleeve to the edges of the exposed flesh. If a wild Nundu had slunk up and nuzzled his hand, Harry could not have been more surprised. Malfoy seemed not to breathe with the concentration of it. These things spoke to Harry - the hushed voice, the sudden gentleness, the horse that had stalked off, forgotten - but in an undertone he could not quite catch. What he remembered was the words: *I like you dressed like that.* He willed Malfoy to repeat them as his wound slowly went numb.

Then the sun slipped behind a cloud and took the dazzle out of his eyes.

"Leave it." He shoved Malfoy's hand away, and the stained sleeved vanished into the folds of his blue cloak. "Leave it! I have to go. I'm meeting someone, back in -"

Instantly, he was looking at the Malfoy of his memory: sneering and tensed.

"How very prompt of you," Malfoy observed icily. A patch of bluebells was massacred beneath

his boots as he made space between them. "I will not hinder you. However, before you leave, one matter remains between us. A ring you had of me. It was a trifle, nothing more, but a trifle which belongs to me. If you truly intend leaving, you will return it."

His tone was a snapping of fingers. In the flourish of it, Harry heard an unstated "and ten points from Gryffindor because Granger is a Mudblood". And, instantly, the terrain was familiar once more.

"No."

"I beg your pardon."

"No. Not a chance." This much was the same: he still got a malicious thrill out of seeing Malfoy thwarted. "I'd throw your precious ring in the river - if I'd seen it in the first place, which I -"

"Don't take me for a fool." Malfoy's lips curled up to bare the sharp points of his teeth. "I saw it on your finger not two hours past. Come now. You can return the trinket, or you can find another form of recompense."

Harry laughed outright. It was the wrong thing to do. There was an ominous thump of leather as the tail of the whip hit the ground.

"You will regret that." Malfoy 's voice shook slightly. "I can take my property by force if you-"

Harry winked. "Take it."

And Malfoy came for him.

Harry gave way before him, falling back toward the long grass where he knew two swords lay forgotten. When he was close, he turned and ran. The whip sang past his ear - Malfoy was evidently well acquainted with its use - and there was a growled obscenity close behind him as a spiny bush tore at his ankles. Silver gleamed in the grass. In one stumbling step, he gripped the sword's hilt, swung himself up and span the weapon around.

Malfoy skidded wildly and pulled up a hair's breadth from slicing open his throat. He gasped for breath.

"*What are you?*" he hissed down the length of the blade.

Whichever way he leaned, the steel clung to his neck. A sword, Harry thought as he shifted its edge slightly to watch Malfoy flinch again, was more than a wand. Its threat was immediate, actual, and very bloody. The barbarism of it appealed to him. He pressed forward and down, twisting Malfoy backwards in discomfort.

"You will be punished, girl," he snarled as he bent. "Do you imagine you can draw on a nobleman with no consequence?"

Threats from Malfoy - commonplace and empty - passed Harry's ears like so much air, and yet, as the pulse rush from the sudden activity died away, he did wonder how he was going to bring this encounter to an end. Nobleman or not, Malfoy was bound to pursue a nasty revenge if he felt himself wronged. The last thing Harry wanted was trouble. Not when he was travelling with Sirius, who risked arrest by his mere presence in these parts. He had to extricate firmly, but leaving Malfoy's pride intact.

He did not expect Malfoy to make this easy.

"I could hang you for this! Foolish girl. What do you think you can achieve at swordpoint that I haven't offered you of my own free will?"

That took Harry by surprise. "I don't know. What are you offering me?"

"Far more than someone of your station ought to expect," Malfoy snapped. He eyed the blade warily as Harry allowed him to stand straight. "Was I not clear in my terms? I have offered you the name of Olivier and all the privileges it entails. Wealth. Luxury. Fine clothes, if you want them, carriages and servants. Every delicacy you can think of: sweetmeats, spices, silks, rubies and sapphires, great jewelled books lettered in gold, holy relics -"

"Books."

The noun sounded dusty and cobwebbed as it dropped from Harry's lips. Beyond the handful of trade signs in the town and the weathered Latin inscriptions carved on the churches' facades, he hadn't read a word in almost a week. A craving for parchment and ink squeezed his heart. He was here to find answers and - this much he'd learned from Hermione - when you wanted the truth, it was a book you went to.

Something in Malfoy seemed to come alive then; he stopped bucking against the blade and went still.

"My library is yours," he murmured, back in that silky, low voice that was out of place in daylight. "You need only tell me that we have a bargain, and I can send to the far corners of the world for any works you desire."

And again, Harry found himself wrong-footed. The demands, the temper, the insults - these had always been the favoured weapons in Malfoy's arsenal. But he did not negotiate. He did not persuade. Yet here he was, waiting, with a violent pulse still beating in his temple, for Harry's answer.

Up close, you could see how the way this Malfoy carried himself fooled you into missing the flaws. There was powder collecting in his pores and bald patches in the velvet of his cloak. Some of the pearls were creamy glass. All down his sides, the damp silk stuck to him, and, if his hair smelled faintly sweet, it was nothing compared to the sweat on him and the unmistakable rankness of horse and saddle.

He tried to recall whether the Malfoy he knew might have scuffed patches on his robes, and couldn't remember a time when he'd ever looked.

"All this for a ring?"

Malfoy's smirk was familiar. "The ring, you may keep. You can't be ignorant of what I expect from you." Very gently, he shrugged the metal away from his throat and leaned forward, whispering now. "I can have them copied for you, the ancient scrolls of Baghdad and Constantinople, the treasures of Florence. Anything you desire. The learning of all the ages is as good as in your hands. Now say we have a bargain."

And behind each soft syllable, the same insinuating lilt that said more than just the bare words, a bassline to the melody that sank too low for Harry's ears but vibrated in his body and made his breathing shallower, faster. *Anything you desire.* Then Malfoy's fingers brushed the back of his knuckles and he understood: what Malfoy wanted, what he was offering, and why, with a blade still in reach of his neck, he looked like a tiger about to feed.

There was shock, yes, and a twinge of disgust, but also an unwelcome pride. Malfoy - this one, like the Slytherin he knew - liked valuable things. Expensive brooms, influential connections, silk and jewels. Now Harry was one of those things, and one worth paying a high price for. Malfoy's mouth was tightened in anxiety; Harry couldn't look at his eyes.

He imagined delivering a defiant rejection: the brief moment of victory, then the long uphill walk back to the town wishing for the texture of parchment under his fingers and looking over his shoulder to see if Malfoy had sent a lynch mob after him. He tried to imagine what would

happen if he capitulated, and couldn't. He had never let himself be afraid of the unknown.

Harry let the sword fall with an anticlimactic thud into the grass.

And Malfoy kissed him.

In the broad daylight, in the middle of the road, Malfoy kissed him.

Except for the obviousness of mouths and breath pressing together, Harry almost wouldn't call it a kiss at all, this simple thing that somehow happened without a prelude of blushes and false starts and awkward bumps. Malfoy's lips were strange and dry and his eyes were closed as he brushed hesitantly at the centre of Harry's lips and, inch by inch, brought their bodies closer. He seemed to have foreknowledge of how their chins and elbows would fit together, as if this were not the first time he had pulled Harry into his arms. Smoothly, he raised himself slightly on the balls of his feet to make their lips level and Harry found his palms resting on Malfoy's shoulders.

There was cool silk against Harry's collarbone and white hair in the corner of his eyes, and Malfoy's mouth was coaxing and careful. The sun hammered on his head, so much more insistent than the sun at home. He let his lips come apart and the flick of Malfoy's tongue against his was so sudden and intimate it made him shudder.

Too quickly, the easiest kiss of his memory was over. Malfoy pulled back a fraction and watched him from under heavy-lidded eyes as his breath evened out. He sucked his lower lip meditatively into his mouth and waited. Then he smiled.

"Consider that an advance payment." His fingers were knotted in Harry's shirt, unrelenting, but gentle with the confidence that strength would not be needed. "A token of good faith." That one breathed against Harry's jaw, leaving a warm trail on his skin. "A prologue." He pulled Harry's face down to him. "Or what you will." And he kissed him again, now open-mouthed and demanding.

By the time Harry moved his feet, a column of foraging ants had made a path across them.

*

The breeze is picking up. A crow cries out and takes wing.

They're long gone, Harry and Draco, westward back toward the villa. You and I, we still have a long way to go. We have lingered too long here, with warm rock under our stomachs and the wild sage sweating scent in the heat. You have to watch the time in this place. It has its own slippery rhythm.

Quickly now. Up the hill, towards the town, the sun hot on your back and our shadows in front of us pointing the way.

In a growing babble and stench, the city walls approach. Make your way around the trodden heaps of animal leavings and pass through the gates to the turreted building just inside. You know from the shadows which hang gloomily from its high windows that this is a place of imprisonment. The guard house: its walls three feet thick and its lone dungeon penning in a man who you would swear was Sirius Black. He has given up pacing the cell, which is scarcely wider than two of his long-legged strides. He sits. His face in the murky light is grim.

A narrow alley runs between the guard house and the wall: at one end a midden of stunted cabbages left to rot, along its length the stained planks of old wine barrels strewn about like shipwreck, and Harry. Viola. Harry-Viola. He looks comical with his green skirts knotted at the top of his thighs and the white legs sticking out of them a mockery of femininity, all straight, lean muscle. His toes refuse to grip in the tiny spaces between the stones in the guard house wall. You can see, can't you, how the windows are too small to fit his shoulders through, and too high to reach? Harry can't.

Harry breathed warmly on his fingertips, where the raw flesh under torn nails was stinging. For the fifth time, he launched himself at the wall and lunged upward; for the fifth time he fell into the pile of damp planks which had been too rotten to support him.

A simple stone wall was all that stood in his way. Any number of spells could wrench it open, shatter it into tiny pebbles that wouldn't dare defy him. Solidity was only a starting point - it had taken him a good part of his first year to get his head around that. Massive cauldrons could be vanished and teacups turned into butterflies. And still, when he leaned his forehead against the wall, it was harder than ever and the cold seeped into his skull.

If there was no sneaking around the back, he would have to force his way through the front door. He would choose the sturdiest of these broken planks. No. There was a sword, perhaps, lying in the grass still, back along the road. If his threats were bold enough, the guards might never test his ability to wield it. No. Too far, too uncertain. All he had was one silver ring. He would bargain Sirius's release, and if they wouldn't bargain he would seize a pike, or a knife, or a chair, and luck would favour him, as it almost always had.

His heart was racing already as he rounded the corner into the street. There was only one guard at the door of the guard house, and as he turned to reply to an unseen voice inside, Harry marked how the pike swayed loosely in one hand.

"... six months since the last flogging. Most of the town'll turn up, and they'll get a spectacle all right. This one won't go quietly. Laid out three men when we tried to put him in the cell this morning. Of course, if they hang him -"

Harry quickened his pace and balled up his fists.

Someone whistled.

It stopped him dead. There was no mistaking that whistle; it said the same thing down the ages: *I'll have you.* He whipped around and saw, from a shadowed doorway, a red-faced man looking

up from his work, his gaze fixed on Harry's thighs and the light from his forge glinting off his grin. Harry looked down at his bare legs and felt the heat rise in his face. He scrabbled at the knot in his skirts to pull them free. It was only his legs, he told himself, everyone had legs. But the whistle and the grin suggested he'd exposed much more. It was like Snape cracking open his head and rifling through his memories: violating. Helplessness became resentment; resentment became fury.

The guard was watching him with interest - leering openly.

"Vincenzo!" the guard called over his shoulder. "This is your sort of tart. Come and have a look."

His chances of a quiet approach were wrecked. Market goers and a passing priest stared in unspoken judgment. Three more guards appeared, laughed and muttered loudly to each other. Harry was colouring, despite himself. A hand clutched his buttock.

"Give us another peep, love," the blacksmith was smirking when Harry drove his fist into his sternum and, with the advantage of complete and utter surprise, doubled him up. The guards' chuckling died. Their weapons hovered, as if they were unsure whether to apprehend him or sit back and watch the show. The blacksmith gasped up from where he'd sunk to one knee, his mouth still opening and closing in disbelief. He had shoulder muscles as thick as Harry's thighs.

Harry had a fair idea of how women were treated here; what became of men who disguised themselves as women, he didn't care to find out. Though his limbs strained with the indignity of it, he made himself back away. There were shouts behind him as he reached the square and slipped into the crowd.

Wedged in behind one of the buttresses of the town walls, with the scraps and bones, the rubble and the neverending stink, Harry sank down into the shadow and waited for his pursuit to lose interest. Above him, the wall and the guard house were prised apart by a narrow ribbon of sky. Every so often, a gull sailed across it. For someone bred in a cupboard, he'd quickly got used to having fresh air and space around him. From the bottom of the castle's orchard, on the windward side where even the fig trees had to be coaxed out of the ground and grew sparse, you could look out over your own vast kingdom of sea. He'd done it, for hours on end, pulling the heads off

poppies and grass stalks as Ginny lay on her stomach nearby and read those poems about love.

Ginny could get Sirius out of that cell. She was a duchess. He ripped a patch of moss from the stone. And she didn't care a jot about him, except as a means to make that lecherous Malfoy answer her letters. He could imagine what she would do if her told her about Sirius. Her eyes big and dark with anxiety, she would spend a moment in quiet consideration, her hand tangling in her amber necklace and tugging it until it bit into the sides of her throat and he had to fight the urge to reach out and restrain her fingers. Then, with a solemn crease between her brows, she would say: "That's all very well, Viola, but do find my lord Olivier's complexion to be more like to ivory or to alabaster?".

Oh no. He would rather eat his way through the guard house wall then go back to face her indifference.

When the bell on Santa Maria sounded evening prayer and the guardhouse door thudded shut, Harry was still working furiously at a plan. Fire, disguise, stolen knives - he'd even considered whether the cabbage leaves around him could be used as a weapon, but every plan ended with him in a room with a number of well-armed guards and no wand. And if it came to that, he was going to lose Sirius again.

He'd been making life-and-death decisions since he was eleven. You'd think it would get easier. There was a rotten looking moon in the sky by the time he found himself once more on the seaward road.

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"The one about the greased turnip."

"No."

"The one about the two crabs and the fisherman's cap."

"No."

Hermione left off her stitching to glare at the twins, who lounged with their boots on the table and their caps on their bellies. In the humid silence of the kitchen, you could hear the rats abseiling into the larder while the cats licked themselves contentedly under the bench.

"The one that goes 'Hey Nonny Nonny'."

"No!!" This time even Percy joined the cry of objection from where he loitered in the shadows in the corner.

"That one's absolutely filthy," Hermione scolded.

Ron glared mutinously into his wine. "Well I think it's funny."

Fred whistled while George sang:

"*With a hey nonny no and a hey nonny nonny*

Fourteen pints and my goat looked bonny

With a hey nonny nonny and a hey nonny -"

"No more!" Percy menaced them with a mop handle. "I am bruised, my honour is bruised, and I am in no humour to be oppressed with lewd songs about goats."

"We can't procure a goat of your own now," Fred teased, "but Mistress Mary may oblige. She was free enough with Sir Toby all his afternoon, so I hear."

Ron hid a sly grin and straightened his trousers. An apple shot past George's ear and knocked a copper pot clattering off the shelf. He swung his legs down and retreated towards the door before Hermione could aim a melon.

"And you still owe me twelve florins," added Percy in a voice that presaged disappointment.

"To summarise then," Ron grumbled. "We have no ale, barely a thimbleful of wine, no money, no sport, and no prospect of getting any until his high-and-mightiness tires of his little tart and turns his mind to the household expenses."

George nudged the door open invitingly.

"We have one thing. We have Malvolio locked in a chicken coop."

It took only a few moments of furious thumping on the coop's wall to wake him.

"I didn't - what's the - my -" They heard a shuffle of straw as Snape pulled himself up. "You thugs! You barbarians! You block-headed vandals! How dare you wake me!"

The twins' grins gleamed in the dark as Fred leaned in to the two-inch gap where the loose latch

let the door hang open.

"Malvolio?" he whispered. "Malvolio! Tis I, your own beloved, your Draco."

Snape let out a long, hissing breath. "Beloved? I think not. Your judgement was sorely wanting this morning, leaving me to the hands of these ruffians. It would shame your father to see it. Oh you may liberate me now, my reckless young lord, but do not expect my forgiveness."

Fred put his hand on his heart.

"Sweet Malvolio, your manly wrath inflames my mind like Anatolian wine, til I would break down this cruel door and make our wedding bed on broken eggs."

There was a silence from inside, and from outside too, though it took several hands over mouths and fiercely bitten tongues to make it so. Snape only growled: "Your soft words come too late. Open this door at once!"

Fred resumed: "My sallow prince, be soothed. If hard I seemed, twas grief that you declared yourself so late. The secret you have kept denied us both a thousand hours of wild and sticky lust."

"The door, foolish boy! Do you mean to release me at all? Your demeanour has changed greatly from this morning's coldness. I wonder if you are in your right senses now. I fear you are fickle and not to be trusted."

Fred gave a dramatic sigh.

"This token make I now: if you but kneel and put your lips to where this door doth ope, and if you keep your eyes shut blind throughout, I take my oath that you shall kiss my cheek."

The sound of swallowing could be heard from inside, then a dry sounding voice. "Very well. That first. Then you will see to my release."

George banged his forehead against a support beam to hold the laughter back as they heard the clatter of Snape manoeuvring the stocks to wedge his lips into the door's gap. Silently, Fred unbuckled his trousers. The smacking sound could not be mistaken.

"My most tender lord," Snape murmured drunkenly, "soft and untainted, your cheek. Pale and luminous and as smooth as a ... as a ... "

One eye prised open suspiciously.

Snape gagged.

Then he split the air with an almighty howl of rage.

*

The cry of a beast distracted Harry from his study. In a pool of candle-light, the hard-earned books lay stacked on the table in front of him. Without turning to look, he knew that Malfoy still rested recumbent on a pile of silk cushions that put Harry in mind of the princess and the pea, chipping fragments of mortar from the wall and tossing them into the huge brass urn by the fireplace. Doors and windows were fastened against the darkness. After three nights sleeping in the open summer air, Harry found it stifling.

the wytche may be knowne by its familiar which signifys a spirit in the forme of a beast

Every clunk of mortar on brass reminded him: Malfoy had kissed him. Twice, and then again in the stables with the strut of a coach pressing into his back, until he had wrenched his face away and gasped something about books and promises. It was Malfoy who had kissed him. Even if his name was something else here, even if the force of his single-minded attention made Harry feel like he was standing constantly under a spotlight, he would always be Malfoy. Harry threw a filthy look at the goblet of wine which stood, almost empty, at his elbow. It was getting harder and harder, in this place, to be sure of things like responsibility and consequences.

For instance, he had not forgotten that, back in the town at an inn called the Elephant, Sirius was most likely watching the doorway, waiting for Harry to come through it, perhaps giving way to the first needles of anxiety. He would explain, later, and Sirius would understand, because Sirius - his Sirius, and Antonio too - would want Harry to be here, where there were books that could help him. He repeated it to himself: Sirius would always want what was best for Harry.

Malfoy gave an eloquent sigh of boredom.

isolation does not spede the wytches work and she is wont to gather a coven about her personne

Without charms on them, the candles gave a skittish light that made the unpunctuated text even harder to distinguish. Now Malfoy was breaking his concentration by humming snatches of ballads, almost - but not quite - under his breath. *In delay there lies no plenty.* He took another sip of wine. The scent of rosewater was still on his hands, from the basin he'd been given to wash the dust and sweat off him, cautiously, while Malfoy had words with a page boy about his horse and at least did him the courtesy of pretending not to watch.

may send forth her spirite in the form of a raven or a cat

All afternoon and all evening, as the light contracted to a wavering circle around the writing

desk, he had read. Religious tomes. Sonnets. Geographical texts mapping unrecognisable continents whose wriggling coastlines trailed off mid-peninsula where knowledge ended and the realm of monsters began. Harry knew little of Muggle history beyond where it intersected with the magical world and the snippets he'd gleaned from the dust jackets of Uncle Vernon's glossy books on famous military campaigns.

Was this history as it should be? Was it any place that had ever existed?

"A Treatyse on Wytches and Warlockes" lay before him, full of misguided facts about witches and not a single clue as to where or how he might find one.

through magick and lyes and the transmision of plague the wytche seekes to further her masteres desyres

The bloodthirstiness of the text shocked him. Witch burnings, which had seemed theoretical in first year History of Magic, were horribly plausible in this world where even the priests wore rosemary for luck and literacy was a skill considered marginally less useful than juggling. A few pages on, the blackest fruits of the Muggle mind loomed out at him: the thumbscrews, the scold's bridle and the wheel. Wearily, he closed the cover.

Behind him, the sounds of Malfoy's distraction had trailed off.

"Shall I take it," Malfoy asked quietly, "that you have had your fill of my library for one evening?"

The chair was unforgivingly hard, his eyes were tired, and his limbs throbbed from the strain of swordplay and wrestling. He rubbed at the ache in his neck and sighed:

"For now."

Sprawled on his dais of cushions, Malfoy raised himself on one elbow. He was a picture of indolence, with his feet bare and his hair tousled and his jaw imprinted with the line of a seam. Even his rumpled clothes hung artfully, draping away to bare his right shoulder and a ripple of muscle and hip bone around his middle, almost as if ... Harry turned back to the desk. Of course fabric didn't hang like that, not unless you meant it to. What else had Malfoy done for the last half hour but pose himself for that very moment? Harry would not succumb to flattery. He gulped a generous swig of wine, but it failed to wash away the image of Malfoy inclining his body backward to make gravity flex the muscle across his stomach.

He took another gulp to dull the recollection that there was a reckoning to be made.

Malfoy eased himself up onto the corner of the writing desk and let his ankle knock against the legs of Harry's chair. One by one, he slipped the rings from his fingers and laid them on the desk. Harry watched, thinking of how Professor Trelawney would have held the huge stones up to her eye and spun unlikely fortunes out of their flaws. He tried not to remember how, when Malfoy had left the room to have the wine brought, he had found the solitude eerie and unsettling and had read the same sentence over and over uselessly as he waited for the soft snick of the handle turning.

"I should have realised sooner, of course." Malfoy spoke lazily, his voice slurring and stripped of its practised drawl. "I should have realised from the moment I saw you."

"Realised what?"

"What you are."

Harry's stomach turned to stone. He knew. Somehow, Malfoy knew, and it was all over. A few more words and this whole hallucinatory world would come unravelling. Malfoy would be Malfoy again, and they would resume the rituals of their enmity - the sneers and the cold shoulders.

"And what am I?" he demanded in a brittle voice.

Malfoy laughed softly. "Entirely unfitting to be my wife." He reached out and ran the back of his fingernail over the point of Harry's collarbone, and down. "The way you carry yourself should have been a warning. I have a weakness for -"

Harry snatched his wrist and held it, even then not quite sure of his purpose.

"What are you doing?" The tendons under Malfoy's skin went taut as wire and his voice had its edges again: clipped and polished like a weapon. "I will not allow you to go back on our bargain. You will submit to me, or I -"

"Stop it!" The chair screeched as Harry rose to his feet. "No more threats!"

The candelabra tottered and the shadows lurched. Long ago, Harry had edged open the shutters to find that his escape was as simple as a one-storey drop; he knew the threat of force was empty. But the idea of submitting went against his every instinct. He would not be ordered. Not when Malfoy was showing himself to be surprisingly subtle in the art of slow persuasion.

"Is that how you usually get what you want? You lure people into your library and then you try and force them into ... *that*?"

Malfoy was preternaturally still and pale.

"I have hardly been inundated with company of that sort," he bit out stiffly. "How could it be otherwise when my father was six months in dying, coughing and seeing visions and calling for

me night and day? For six months I didn't leave these estates. Then there was the mourning - twelve months, which would scarcely honour a cloth merchant or a simple clergyman, let alone my father. Do you imagine I would insult his memory by bringing lovers here?"

Damn him, Harry thought, for complicating this with grief. He had seen the pale-eyed portraits of Lucius Malfoy spreading their malevolence over the staircase and along the hall. It hadn't occurred to him to see his ghost as a rival for Malfoy's attention. It hadn't occurred to him that having a rival could wrench his ribs a notch tighter.

Malfoy's face was cast down now, as if trying to sink into the shadow made by the light behind him. No, you couldn't call him beautiful, not even in candlelight. His features were too pinched, his lips too starved looking. But his skin, where the veins showed blue as it stretched thinnest over his wrists and neck had the quality of eggshell or raw silk or old marble: its texture begged to be touched.

Harry ran his fingers over the line of Malfoy's cheekbone. A shaky breath condensed on his skin as Malfoy turned his face into Harry's hand and closed his teeth around the mound of his thumb. Idly he bit, then cruelly, running the tip of his tongue over the wound he made. And it struck Harry for the first time that, for all Malfoy's sound and fury, the control of this was completely and utterly his own. Books be damned, he could be out of that window and back on the road with Sirius in an instant. But if he left, he would take with him a yawning curiosity. Here was Draco Malfoy, perfume on his throat and, you could see from this close, a thin rim of kohl lining his eyelids, and all his pride in ruins as he offered himself up to Harry's touch. The wine warmed his belly when he thought about it.

A pale stretch of flesh, from Malfoy's jugular along to the tip of his shoulder, lay bare where he had shrugged the shirt off it, granting a glimpse of lean bicep. That moved him dangerously. Hadn't he spent three days finding his gaze drawn to the same muscles across Sirius' arms and shoulders as he lifted his pack or hauled his catch? More than ever Harry was aware of the tenuous hold of the silk on Malfoy's torso and the warmth and the tension rising from him.

"No more half measures," Malfoy murmured into his palm, his eyes veiled by lashes and shadow. "Tell me plainly. What do you mean to do?"

Harry found he had already decided.

He dipped his fingertips in the wine and snuffed out the three candles. Blindly, he laid his hands on Malfoy's shoulders, where the muscle resisted hard beneath the deceptive frailty of silk. There was smoke in the air from the candles' last gasp, wine going sour on his tongue and his fingers, and sweet rosewater rising from Malfoy's neck.

Reduced to touch and smell, the world around him was not what it was.

For a moment, he steadied himself against the body in front of him. Then he sought out Draco Malfoy's mouth in the darkness and kissed him.

*

end

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Chapter: 7

br>

The marble-breasted tyrant

"... a wreck past hope he was:

His life I gave him and did thereto add

My love, without retention or restraint"

Antonio V(i)

This sunrise is where the ending begins.

Let me take your hand. Today is a day for farewells. For meetings, yes, and for surprises; for reunions and revelations, sacrifices and tests of faith, but also for a parting of ways. Yet. if my grip on your fingers becomes tight, know that it is not only grief. There is expectation also: the air is thick with it. For the endpoint is what gives shape to the journey. It is the closing co-ordinates of the arc, by which all the clumsy acts preceding it navigate their place and take on meaning and order. The ending is where we find our purpose. Alas that the price of this discovery should be the loss of so much else.

Time is short.

And so.

From the balcony of the Olivier villa, look down. The magnificence of the northern plain is muted in the twilight, but here and there you can make out a silver-grey sweep of crop fields, the river glinting faintly as it lumbers seaward, and the smudges of woodland folding darkly down out of the hills. The clouds spilt like cream over the eastern mountains are edged in orange and getting brighter. A scattering of stars burns obstinately over the ocean. With each moment they fade.

Early morning is a time for serene contemplation.

Or so you would think. Not here. The low parts of the Olivier estate are still drowned in darkness when the cows stir and make their first gentle demands to be milked. The youngest of the goats, spring-new and silly, tumble on the rocky slopes and draw sleepy reprimands from their mothers, while the quartet of roosters false-starts the dawn once again and its clamour makes the spiders in the darkest cobwebbed corners of the villa pull their eight feet over their ears and scowl. There is a shuffling - a tremendous shuffling and silent grumbling in the stuffy rooms behind the kitchens and under the stairs as the lower household draws on coats and shawls against the chill to begin its day.

It is a day like any other.

Yet for Harry, as he awakes - behind us, in the corner room that overlooks the rose garden - the world is new and unexpected. There will be no ritual to guide his way.

And so Harry wakes ... No. Not Harry but Sebastian. To your eyes, he is Harry; there is no denying the scar, nor the fleeting hint of vulnerability he communicates even in sleep. Yet in his mind, as he shakes off dreams of bursting sails, of the sea's tireless swell, of sardines silver and slippery as darts in the hull, he could wake to either name. He stirs in his sleep. Watch with me as Harry-Sebastian sighs, rubs an itch at his temple against the blanket, and opens his eyes.

There was a shapeless feeling of benevolence and a delicious fatigue in his limbs. The exhaustion he knew from hard Quidditch practices when all his muscles were loose with fatigue and his reflexes - exhilaratingly awake - were sensitised to the slightest tremor in the wind, leaving no room in his mind for any thoughts beyond movement and speed. Distantly, he knew that the bony ankle digging into his shinbone - jagged as quartz even with two blankets and a layer of clothing between them - belonged to Draco Malfoy. All night, a bit of him had held back from sleep to remember who was lying beside him. Malfoy's presence had come into his dreams - his feverish tossing and turning echoed in the waves. He slept peacefully now, with his knuckles making Harry's skin warm where they rested against the back of his neck. The rest of Harry, curled in the bed's corner on top of the covers in search of coolness and peace, was out of reach to him. Harry wondered if perhaps it was too much of a concession the way he'd let Malfoy stretch down the centre of the small bed and claim it all. But then he had the feeling that, if found the right way to ask, he could have Malfoy sleeping on the floor.

Beneath the window, feeble light marked out a finely carved bureau scattered with possessions: a jewelled silver cross as tall as a cauldron, a book, a pair of vicious looking spurs, coins; and on the wall beside this a crested tapestry and a portrait whose patrician profile Harry recognised even in the dimness. But also a strand of rosemary jutted stiffly off the side of the desk; there was a torn stocking, a yellow apple bitten once and then discarded. Casual mess among the history and treasures. Harry had not prepared himself for that.

As he removed Malfoy's hand carefully from his neck and stretched out beside him, he was still unsure whether he intended the sleeper to wake. Pallid in the half-light, Malfoy gave the impression that slumber itself was a trial and a bore. It was not a mood Harry wanted to wake him in. Not when, if he closed his eyes, he could call to mind a very different Malfoy of the night before, who had reached for Harry's wrist in the darkness to lead him blind through the debris of his room. Perhaps it was all the defensive angles of his face that were to blame. It was only when you couldn't see Malfoy that you could believe there might be gentleness in him.

Harry closed his eyes, listening for the faint whine in Malfoy's breathing, and waited for the regret to claim him.

In the growing light, bold yellow was chasing the grey out of the drapery above the bed. The smell of baking crept in the open window and sounds of life rustled up from below.

*

Not so far away - how far? How far will the sound of a big bronze bell carry when struck at the top of a tower? The span of a hillside, a valley, a little further? Well then, about two bronze-bell-lengths away, another Harry sleeps. A twin. A doppelganger. A magical mirror-self alike in every respect ... and yet not. These days in Illyria have shaped them both.

One, whom the waves of fortune tossed on Sirius' shore, stepped into a man's shoes and has walked a man's hard road, bent under fishing nets and his pack's new weight. The warmth of Sirius' approval, like the sun, has driven out the shadows so that you can no longer make out the

circles of grief around his eyes. His arms are brown and strong and eager to grasp new challenges. Like swordplay. Like sailing. Like being Draco Malfoy's lover.

The other Harry has led a gentler life. Gentler and more testing. The green dress which turns his eyes from remarkable into speech-stealing seems to him like convict stripes. It is a one-man prison which hugs the lines of his body and constricts him into outward displays of girlishness: quietness, obedience, helplessness. Oh he fights it - he is Harry; he does - but in a world where he has washed up friendless and anonymous, there are limits to his rebellion.

In a stuffy room behind the kitchens, no more than a cranny in the grandeur of the Duchess Orsino's great castle, Viola - this feminine Harry - lies face down on his bed with his green skirts flung about him. Motionless except for the slow rise and fall of breathing, he looks like the shipwreck detritus he was when you first saw him.

If he woke now, he might find himself a happier path to his ending.

But such sentiment is not for us. Come back with me. Let him sleep.

*

Veering slightly to the shadowed side of the corridor to obscure the fact that his shoes were lost and the silk shirt he wore was not his own, Harry-Sebastian slipped down the stairs, unnoticed in the morning bustle, and into the gardens. Beyond the rows of cypress, by the edge of the precipice, he stopped. The first sunlight drifted over the horizon and settled in his hair, coating the side of his face.

This washed-out sensation, the slight dizziness, the half-disbelieving drag and lurch as his mind caught up to what his body has just experienced, all this was wearily familiar. How many times before had he woken to the clunk of Madam Pomfrey's sturdy heels on the infirmary floor, dreading the seep of consciousness which would allow him to localise the throb of pain through his body and slowly piece together the memory of what brought him there. Waking had always

been a process of corruption as it all came back to him: the latest betrayal, the deaths and wounds, the knowledge of how much he had lost and how many greater and harder sacrifices would be necessary before he could rest. Today, though, it was different. This time, as he traced the scars of recent history on his skin - the daisy chain of bruises Malfoy's grip had imprinted around his upper arm, the cracks in his raw and swollen lips - each memory came to him like a gift. The corners of his lips turned up wryly. *I did that?* Somehow, he still couldn't locate his sense of regret.

His mood took him uphill, where the seaward running ridge threw up a rocky rise before turning down again. From the top, he could look back on the Olivier estate's formal gardens where, tossed as casually as autumn leaves among the rosebeds, the statues held court, their bare marble forms armed with discus or lyre and each one paying homage to masculinity and to youth. He tried to picture the reclining hermaphrodite guarding the Honeydukes passage in place of the One-Eyed Witch. But, like so many things he had seen and done here, it would be unthinkable in the world he had come from.

He sat on the broken blocks of a long-forgotten altar which gave the impression of being slowly devoured by the earth beneath it. As the air warmed and the blowflies got to work, he closed his eyes and let the night past replay itself in his muscles. The memories were sharp and stirring. Each touch still felt as crisp against his skin as the first sting of snowflakes.

As he lay back beneath the tide of colour flooding into the sky, his smile grew bemused. Something had changed overnight. Or had the air always smelled so tantalisingly, so flirtatiously, so disarmingly, of oranges?

*

Meander with me along the road towards the sea, towards the castle, towards the other Harry. Slow your pace. Make your steps loose, like mine. The other Harry will not wake for some time. See, there is no cause for impatience, not when the short-lived dew is still scattered like diamonds in the fresh spider webs and in the dillweed.

Time is slippery, isn't it? With your fingers entwined with mine, you slip through the hours as

smooth and sleek as a kingfisher diving. The morning is ripe now. Your hair is hot with the sun. We are not so far from noon and - look - we have arrived.

*

"Well hang me if she's any different from other women under her velvet skirts!"

The pile of crumpled green linen stirred, a low groan emerged, and the two dust-encrusted feet poking out from beneath it gave a twitch. Harry pressed his face into the scratchy surface of the mattress. The chambermaids' distant voices were pulling at his mind like meathooks and dragging it out of slumber.

"That's the truth, and my lord Olivier shall discover it this morning if our mistress has her way. Perhaps he should want to compare. I wouldn't mind Lord Olivier exploring my skirts."

"You wouldn't mind anyone exploring in your skirts," answered the older voice pertly. "More expeditions have been mounted into your petticoats than the New World and the whole of Cathay."

There was an audible wink in the voice that answered. "And I'll warrant my lord Olivier knows how to find the North Sea Passage."

Behind the laughter came the faint rumbling of wheels outside. Harry's head jerked up off the bed, red rims around his eyes and his right cheek scraped by the straw. He didn't know what time he had stumbled back into the castle last night after the gruelling walk from the town, cursing and turning his ankles in rabbit holes as he tried to find his way by moonlight, but it had been too late to wake Ginny and risk making her curt with him when he was about to plead for Sirius' life. It seemed like seconds ago that he had laid his head down. And now the sound of the carriage proclaimed that Ginny was leaving and condemning him to failing Sirius again.

He fended himself off walls as he stumbled out of the little room. In the kitchen he halted but it was useless: no slicking of water could control his hair which hung like a foreign thing in his face, stiff and bulky with dust. Wrestling it beneath the torn green shawl, he tugged his bodice and the camouflaging scarf back into place where his bare chest was showing.

The carriage was moving through the gates when he saw it. He hitched his skirts around his knees and sprinted after it. When he ripped open the door, the wheels not quite stopped, the rebuke froze on Ginny's lips.

"Viola," she observed a little breathlessly. "You have returned to us."

A single glance told him that it was not surprise that made her breathless. She sat stiff and straight to ease the tightness of her corset, and she was either dangerously constricted or wearing too much rouge. Possibly both. There was no doubting her intended audience.

"You can't leave." Harry's voice was hoarse with fatigue, untutored, masculine and, for the first time, his own. "Come back inside."

With horror, he noticed the filthy state of the hand he was holding out to her. Though he curled the dirtiest fingernails inward, he didn't let it fall.

"I will no longer play the fool for him," Ginny said, and took a few skittering breaths as if she was re-learning the art of respiration. "I mean to have a forthright answer from my lord Olivier and I mean to have it today. You shall accompany me." As usual, her tone presumed obedience. "Come now, Viola. Step up and take your seat. Curio was wise. Company will be a welcome distraction."

The journey would take him a step closer to the town and to Sirius. It would give him time to convince her. Ginny moved the folds of her gown aside to make room for him: pale blue silk, the colour of thyme flowers. The cut of it was demure, he noted with satisfaction. On the narrow seat

their elbows pressed together and thick in the air was the scent she wore - a lily fragrance applied so generously that the aroma of it washing off her skin made him feel a little drunk - and as the coach jogged over ruts and rocks, the cobweb of silver thread and crystal beads at her neck jingled. It was barely a day he had been away. There was no reason why being back in her presence should make his palms moist. But every time he struggled with the right words to broach the topic of Sirius, she would turn to the window so that the two loose curls which hung from the intricate loops and jewelled combs of her coiffure swept over her bare shoulders and distracted him.

As the hasty carriage ate up the time he had with her, he forced himself to picture it: Sirius standing on the scaffold with his hands bound behind him and the tendons in his throat going tight against the cut of the noose.

"You have to -"

"I think you-

Their voices clashed, and Harry was surprised to find that he was the one who had stopped speaking.

"I think you would counsel me against this course," said Ginny. He looked at her blankly. "You have been candid with me when no others dared. You have cast aside the proper courtesies of your position and I have allowed it for friendship's sake. There is something in you, Viola, that defies all regulation. So speak your mind."

What came to Harry's mind was that she was wearing too much powder. It collected in her pores and in the crease between her brows and he wanted to wipe it away, along with the kohl and the rouge and the too-strong perfume. What Harry thought was that, whether she went to him glittering with diamonds or clean and plain as a nun, Malfoy would see soon enough how her determination could be used against her, and with quiet contempt and knowing hands he would bend her to his will.

She took Harry's hand between both of hers and his fingertips curled in her palm. "It is you who have shamed me into this boldness. What a pitiful creature I had become when you arrived, turning my mood to his whim like he was the moon itself - and I a duchess with the governance of all these lands as far as the mountains! Then you walked out of the rubble of a shipwreck. You, with your faded skirts and your torn slippers, standing in my hall as haughty as Cleopatra herself and demanding sanctuary."

She lifted his hand and kissed the back of it, as if his nails weren't overgrown and stained with black arcs of dirt, as if the silk of her glove wasn't losing its smoothness with the dust and the sweat. Her lips were dry.

"I bless the day you came to us, Viola." And her breath slipped between his fingers as her voice grew faint: "I could stop the carriage here. You could tell me stories and take the pins from my hair again. I need not face his verdict, not yet."

Outside, the passing landscape slowed as they tilted up into the last rise before the Olivier villa and Harry found his voice.

"Then don't."

As she turned, her cheek hot against his knuckles, he felt a sudden weightless surge, like leaning out over a chasm, and he knew he was going to tell her.

But there was a shout from the coachman above and the carriage rocked to a halt. With a small, steeling sigh, Ginny gathered her skirts and eased open the door to descend.

"My lord," she was smiling, a little stiffly, as Harry followed.

Where he stood at the top of the rise with the villa and all his estates spread out behind him, it was as if Draco Malfoy were centred in the frame of a portrait whose background was specially composed to illustrate his magnificence. And yet, even in the moment his eyes skated past Ginny to watch Harry struggling with his skirts on the long step to the earth, Harry saw that he was bare of his usual jewels with a crest of matted hair sticking up at the back of his head. Something very like a smile seemed to lurk in the corners of his lips.

"You do not keep promise with me." It was Harry whom he addressed, and if was possible for a voice alone to commit acts of gross indecency his had just perpetrated a hanging offence. "You force me to seek you out. And so, like a dutiful servant, here I am, ready to hear your command."

Harry, who had censored every detail of Malfoy's pursuit of him from his reports to Ginny, found his mouth dry. He cast his gaze into the dirt, surly already. "My mistress came to speak with you. I have nothing to say."

"Indeed," Ginny cut in severely. "You forget yourself, my lord."

Malfoy turned to her like she was a long-forgotten, mouldering meal, and his deep, protracted bow had more than an edge of insult.

"Your Grace," he said with practised smoothness. "What would you ask of me that I have not denied you twenty times before? I pray you, speak quickly. Your entreaties to me are like howling after music, never more so than today."

There was a startled pause, long enough for anger to darken Ginny's cheeks.

"Sir, can you not be civil?"

"Madam, can you not be gone?"

Malfoy must have regretted words of exasperation immediately. His lips parted and closed again, as if hoping a retraction would find its own way out. Behind him, Hermione appeared over the rise, captured the situation at a glance and slid inconspicuously into the shade of a tree.

Strictly measured, Ginny and Malfoy were of a height, but his indolent slouch took an inch off his stature and her formal coiffure and the indignant stiffness of her back gave the impression of looking down.

"My lord." The chill in her words reminded him that her superiority was not only in height, and the fierce light made the beads at her throat blinding. "I have made every effort to believe in your virtues. No-one has searched them out as devotedly as I. No-one has been more determined to see your wickedness as daring, the foul rot in you as worldliness."

With a faltering smile, Malfoy turned to the carriage horses, making a show of straightening their bridles and stroking their necks. Despite the unconscious ease of his hands in their coats, they sensed something in him that made them stiffen.

With each word, Ginny grew in conviction. "Your cruelty defies reason and exceeds all endurance. And yet I believe I can repay you in kind. For I have guessed now where you have bestowed your affections. I know whose melody you prefer to my howling."

The horse jerked away from Malfoy's grip and he muttered an obscenity. Harry pulled the folds of his shawl over his reddening ears. There was no call for guilt. At worst, he had been curious and flattered by Malfoy's attention. He had never sought it, not deliberately. From the corner of his eye he saw Hermione's gaze on him and gave the shawl another tug.

Ginny clasped her hands behind her back.

"You will not have Viola," she said evenly - and Harry did not miss the flicker of triumph in it. "She is dearer to me than anyone. She will not see you again. Now, Viola, let us be on our way."

Astonishingly, her eyes sparkled with mischief as she strode back toward the carriage. Her haughtiness seemed to slip into play-acting. How like the Weasleys, Harry thought. It was easy to miss the extraordinary resilience in them until you saw them in adversity.

His heart was suddenly lighter. In this victorious mood, she could be persuaded to help him. He was dearer to her than anyone. For him, she would see Sirius reprieved. Already he was picturing the moment he would ask her, as she leaned back in the carriage, pulling the combs out of her hair and teasing the ringlets free.

He had scarcely turned when Malfoy was at his side, his hand damp and warm through Harry's sleeve.

"You have my protection," Malfoy hissed urgently. "I have given you every proof of this. There is no cause for you to fear her displeasure."

How he snarled when he pronounced the word 'her'. Harry shrugged off the touch.

"Where are you going?" Malfoy's pitch rose and this time his grip was violent. "Stay here. Take up the honour I have offered you. Tell her - for heaven's sake, tell her what I am to you!"

There was sweat on his brow and a feverish quickness in his movements, and Harry was not so virtuous that he could fail to appreciate the sight of Malfoy in distress. Gently, Harry disengaged the thin fingers and held them.

"What you are to me? How can I find the words for that?" he whispered, and waited for the first glimmer of smugness to return to Malfoy's eyes. Then he cast the hand away and raised his

voice. "A trial. An annoyance. A canker, a blister, a boil, a vicious and pitiful leech. That's what you are to me." He inclined his head in a mocking imitation of a bow. "My lord."

The newest of the goats had a way of swaying on their twig-thin legs as if they doubted their ability to hold. For an instant, Malfoy seemed to teeter in the same way. Then the sneer twisted his face, a solid structure to hold him together.

Ginny's foot was on the step of the carriage when Malfoy wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and spoke, quietly enough to conceal the hoarse notes in his voice. "You are the spirit of charity, Your Grace, to offer sanctuary to my discarded lover."

And she paused, just long enough for doubt to get the better of her.

"Lover?" she demanded, curious.

"And this is the least of her secrets."

"That's not how it was!" Harry recognised his own voice and felt the blood rushing into his face.

As she lowered her foot back to the ground, he knew he should have stayed silent. He had meant to tell her. A handful of moments ago he had been on the point of telling her. Now, the way Malfoy would say it, his girlish disguise was going to sound like a violation.

One gloved hand still retaining its hold on the carriage door, Ginny observed: "You would not make this scandalous claim without proof."

"Don't listen to him." Harry protested, but this time she did not even acknowledge him.

Malfoy smiled a slow, thin smile like a crack spreading through glass.

"Maria." He called over his shoulder to where Hermione was trying to sink into the elusive shadows. He called again.

"My lord," Hermione acknowledged him warily as she came forward.

"You must help us discover the truth, Maria. Answer honestly and say only what you know of your own knowledge." Malfoy lingered, clearly relishing the task of composing his next sentence. "Did I last night entertain this ... person in my private chambers?"

Hermione looked at Harry evenly. "You did."

"Until what hour?"

"Not long after dawn. Or so one of the kitchenmaids reported. I saw nothing with my own eyes." As Malfoy let the satisfaction spread out on his face, she went on hurriedly. "My lord, there are guards attending -"

"It will wait." He silenced her with a flick of his hand.

Harry concentrated on peeling away his arms, which had crossed instinctively over the place where his breasts weren't, to make them lie still by his side. There had been no hesitation in Hermione's voice. None. One possibility was that Hermione had lost the moral core of herself and become a barefaced liar. The other possibility made him dizzy when he considered it. Muddle-headed and tired though he had been as he stumbled home last night, he could not have

forgotten a meeting with Malfoy. He was sure of it.

"And thus, Your Grace," Malfoy purred. "If you must have so vulgar a thing as proof, I lay it before you."

"Yes," Ginny said in a distant voice, and then with certainty: "Yes, so you have."

It was simply done, the way she cut herself free of Harry and cast him out of her household. She gave him one nod, insultingly curt, remarked "Good day, Viola. I do not expect our paths to cross again", and pulled the carriage door closed behind her. The clatter of wheels swallowed up Harry's clumsy protestations and left him coughing in the dust.

When his anger had spent itself, the hateful green shawl and the scarf were torn off and crumpled on the grass and he could feel his face shiny with exertion. Behind him, Malfoy was laughing the sort of laugh that aimed for the heart.

"My lord," Hermione prompted, now impatiently. "There is business awaiting you at home. The guards have apprehended the fugitive Antonio who waylaid and damaged your father's ship, The Phoenix. He was taken in a brawl on the high road and awaits your judgment."

Harry groaned softly. Never mind the strange name, there could only be one man she meant. "I know him," he sighed, each word as heavy as a log to heave out of his mouth. "You have to help him."

"You," Malfoy said in a deadly voice and rounded on him, "can hold your treacherous tongue."

"You have to help him." Though Harry felt like a crab bidding the ocean itself to be still, sheer bloodyminded determination was rising in him. No matter what his name, this man Antonio wore Sirius' face and had rescued him from a swordfight he could not have won. In this place there

were no Death-Eater plots to unravel, no great destinies pressing down on him, nor even the everyday concerns of NEWTS and Quidditch strategy. If the only thing he could do was save Sirius from the gallows, then damned if he was going to let this chance at redemption slip through his fingers. His voice hardened. "He's a good man. You can't let them hang him."

The retort formed on Malfoy's lips like a bubble, then deflated. His quiet laugh gave way to silence. The road before them and behind was empty and hazy with heat.

"You presume too much on our encounter," said the count. "Consider your position. Compromised, disgraced, and now abandoned by your patron. Friendless and alone in a strange land. If I am your only ally, I should think you are the very definition of helplessness." His hand shot out to grip Harry's elbow and his breath was hot in Harry's ear. "If you wish to save your friend from the gallows, I suggest you begin with an apology for your conduct this morning and pray that I can find it in my heart to allow you to beg."

The cut of his fingernails into Harry's flesh suggested that the sort of apology he had in mind was not going to be gentle. But Harry had learned hard lessons about pride and its consequences and with each moment his determination grew.

"I'm sorry," he said in a very flat voice. "Do you hear me? I'm sorry."

Malfoy's whole body seemed to smirk, right down to the fingertips which finally released him.

"That is no more than the barest beginning of what you owe me. Maria, bid the guards wait upon us. I shall return presently. And have the hangman prepare the tools of his trade. They may yet be needed." With that, he set off into the trees, throwing over his shoulder: "You. Accompany me."

It was impossible to stop the calculations ticking over in Harry's head: if he ran, could he get back to Sirius before Hermione did? If he snatched a weapon from one of the suits of armour in the villa, how many guards would he have to defeat with it, and in any case was Sirius in any condition to outrun a pursuit? If he hit Malfoy over the head with a rock and left him there, who

could pardon Sirius in his stead - Snape or Hermione or Ron? But he pushed these thoughts away and watched Hermione disappear towards the villa. This was not a time for recklessness. He had a chance that would not come again.

He caught up with Malfoy as the last of the trees gave onto a cleared shelf overlooking the estate's gardens, a sun-struck place which bore the ruins of an ancient sanctuary.

"Tell me," Malfoy began as he chose a suitable foundation stone and leaned on it. "This man Antonio. A brigand, a pirate and a common thief. What is he to you?"

There were broken blocks, columns and fragments of carvings all around; Harry picked his way over them gingerly in his bare feet. "He did me a good turn yesterday. He didn't have to. I'm in his debt."

Malfoy watched Harry's difficulty with pleasure. "I can imagine the sort of good turn a sailor might do for someone like you." He grabbed a fistful of Harry's dress and dragged him forward, and those sharp fingers clutching his waist were less forgiving than the corset struts. "Perhaps you have a taste for brutality after all."

When Malfoy leaned in, appreciatively following the scent of Ginny's perfume which had clung to his hands and shoulder, Harry could feel the breath in his hair, delicate and hot. It was only the repetition of Sirius' name in his mind that stopped him from striking. In any other time and place, Malfoy would be cowed and bleeding by now. They both knew it. The knowledge glinted in Malfoy's eyes.

"You have to release him."

Malfoy sighed theatrically.

"What patience I have bestowed upon you." His finger traced Harry's cheekbone. "I have courted you when I might have commanded. I have indulged your hesitance and allowed you to withhold what I should have taken by right. And you repay me with duplicity."

"I've never -" Before he could protest, Malfoy's hand was over his mouth and the salty taste of his fingers was on Harry's tongue.

"There will be no more indulgence, my little counterfeit. You needn't visit that scowl upon me. Let me make your situation plain. I expect you to humour me in every respect, and in good grace, unless you wish your friend to hang for his crimes." His grip on Harry's chin was rough. "Come now. You are a playactor of the highest order. If you can fool the world with a ragged dress and a maidenly blush then surely you can pretend you are as violently besotted with me as your shameless duchess. Go on. Lay down your pride and convince me."

Pliant as a plank of wood, Harry bent until his lips were at the base of Malfoy's neck. White skin flushed in the heat, with a curved hollow behind the tendon and the faint acid smell of sweat rising from it. His mind was full of the memory of Ginny, of the night he had unwound her hair in the close air of her chamber, her skin warm under his fingers and the heavy length of her hair spilling down the front of his dress. Malfoy's collarbone rose out of his flesh like a blade. There was no comparison.

"Release him first," he bit out, and felt Malfoy repress a shudder at the movement of his mouth. "After that, we can continue this in private, in a more fitting place."

Malfoy threaded his fingers into Harry's hair. "Here." His command was cold. "Now. And if you persist with this procrastination I shall have your pirate whipped in the meantime."

Harry splayed his hands over the stone at Malfoy's hips and dug his fingers in. His heart thumped with the effort of quelling the instincts that urged him to fight. After Sirius was safe he could look to revenge. For now, he would comply. It would be like that first time flying. If he didn't think about what he was doing or how, it would come to him naturally.

He found the tenderest part of Malfoy's throat, just under his jaw, and pressed his mouth over it, hard. Malfoy's grip jerked in his hair and he wrapped his hand around the far side of Malfoy's neck to hold him still as he teased him with gentle breath and the barest touch of his lips. The heavy pulse beat up against him. He drove his mouth into Malfoy's flesh and sucked and bit until that heartbeat was a frantic rattle and helpless breaths were tumbling out of Malfoy's mouth.

Harry straightened. He had never heard Malfoy so silent. Where his mouth had been was a scorched looking oval of skin with a trench of tooth marks cut around it, though from Malfoy's grip on his shoulders he couldn't tell whether he meant to tear him limb from limb or pull him back for more. The taste in his mouth was bitter, but from his fingers still rose the scent of Ginny's perfume, faintly. Her carriage would be rattling through the castle gates now, past the wall he'd sat on to watch her picking cornflowers, past the path to the orchards down which she'd accompanied him recklessly unshod to sit in the sun and pry from him half-true stories about giants and Lethifolds. Perhaps just now she was even suffering the first pangs of doubt over her hasty judgment.

The anger rose in him. He wrenched at the front of Malfoy's shirt and brought their mouths together, feeling the sudden nervousness in Malfoy but also the shiver of arousal. To the sound of tearing silk, he closed his eyes.

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Chapter: 8

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Chapter 8 - When the fool delivers the madman

Trip no further pretty sweeting

Journeys end in lovers meeting

As every wise man's son doth know.

Feste II(iii)

As Harry laid aside the sorry scraps of his self respect and tore his fingernails in the front of Malfoy's shirt, the last thing he thought to wish for was Percy Weasley staggering into the clearing with his face the colour of custard and his much abused peacock feathered hat staunching a wound on his forehead.

Yet Fate is fickle, and Fortune does not always wear her crown.

"For the love of God, your help!" Percy cried as he crashed through the bushes. "He has broke my head across and has given Sir Toby a bloody coxcomb too!"

"What is this clamour?" Malfoy demanded as icily as he could with the scant breath that Harry had left him.

"The girl, the messenger girl, she set upon us! In truth, she was provoked - it was Sir Toby pushed me to it, and him escaped with barely a scratch! She is a devil, this girl of yours. Oh, I had rather than forty pound I were at home!"

"This girl?" Malfoy took Harry's shoulders and spun him around to hold him forward like a shield. "Is this the girl you mean?"

Percy looked quizzically at his bloodied cap, then at Harry with his wet and bruised lips and his eyes still flashing anger. He gulped. "I had rather than fifty pound I were at home."

"'S that you, Aguecheek?" It was Ron's voice, slurring from nearby. "Lily-livered rogue! Valorable in the face of danger, you say? Ha! Put the girl in trousers and watch you flee like a dog! A dog, I say- why how now my lord! How is't with you?" He slumped contentedly onto a fallen pillar and peered suspiciously at Harry.

Malfoy's lip curled. "You are vilely drunk, cousin."

Ron grinned. "I should hope so, after all that ale!"

"You are a disgrace."

"Nay, my lord. I am but a humble fellow who woke up to find himself betrothed to Mistress Maria. Alas, from my wedding day I'll envy the monks their merriment."

"Who began this affray?" Malfoy scowled. "And who was it gave this knight his wound? Certainly not you. You could scarcely see your sword to - to - *oh*."

The sight that stole Malfoy's voice was Harry, who jogged through the trees, sword dangling from his grasp, borrowed silk on his back and his skin bright and alive with exertion.

"There you are." Harry-Sebastian threw Malfoy an easy grin as he stuck the sword into the turf and brushed the damp hair back from his face. "I let you sleep. I guess you're not used to early mornings."

Malfoy's mouth hung open. For sheer shock, perhaps. Or was it the surprising intimacy of seeing his one-night lover unblushingly dressed in his own clothes? Or simply the fact that the newcomer had immediately chosen Malfoy as the centre of his attention, fashioning with his private words a space between the two of them from which the others were excluded.

Harry-Sebastian continued, "I'm sorry if I've upset your friends. They've been spoiling for a fight since-" Then as he nodded towards Percy, his gaze skittered past his twin and stopped dead.

There was a moment as their eyes met, Harry in the green dress and Harry in the borrowed shirt, when the air around them seemed to warp and fizz with improbability. In the silence, you could believe you heard the beating wings of the white butterflies that dipped between the grass blades slowing down to an occasional thud, then climbing again as normality reasserted itself. In each of their minds was astonishment, then curiosity, and behind it the sour taste of suspicion.

Someone swallowed hard. Malfoy murmured: "Most wonderful!" and unconsciously gripped the pediment behind him for support.

Ron had tilted his head sideways as if that might make more sense of the view. "Perhaps there's something to be said for sobriety," he admitted.

"Most wonderful," repeated Malfoy. "One face, one voice, and two persons."

It was hardest, perhaps, for Harry-Sebastian who found himself looking at the ghost of his mother with her dress hanging awkwardly off one shoulder and her striking green eyes examining him.

"It's witchcraft!" Percy was the first to master his tongue. "If there has been fraud or deceit or unnatural conjuring you will certainly answer for it!"

They laughed, the lookalikes, and it one laugh they shared, with the same falling pitch and the same thread of bitterness running through it. If they were both remembering their last Transfiguration lesson and the disconcerting weight of Fred and George's wand as it cast its fateful spell, neither could think of how to say it.

Harry-Sebastian stepped closer to his sword. "How did you come to this place?" he asked cautiously.

His twin straightened his dress and gave him a hard look. "How did you?"

They glared at each other across the silence.

"And one obstinate temper," Malfoy observed in an undertone.

"Shipwreck," Harry-Sebastian finally, watching the minute flickers in his twin's gaze which revealed he was testing the broken blocks at their feet, weighing them up in his mind to see which ones might make a weapon. "Eight days ago. A fisherman pulled me out of the water and looked after me. Even if you could get them off the ground, they're too big to throw far. You're better off making a grab for the sword. How fast can you run in that dress?"

Harry-Viola shrugged. "As fast as I need to. I washed up on the beach, on the headland under the castle. Eight days ago exactly. I suppose you know how to use that sword, do you?"

Harry-Sebastian ran his fingers over the hilt. "Quick learner. It's like riding a ... never mind." He shot a quick glance at the puzzled onlookers. "And before the shipwreck. Where did you come from?"

"You first."

Ron chuckled. "This is the most wretched reunion I've ever seen. It seems, your lordship, that here is a family to equal yours for joy and warm feeling."

Turning from one to the other with an increasingly displeased expression, Malfoy was too preoccupied to reprimand him.

"This is no family of mine," Harry-Sebastian said dismissively. "I don't have a sister and my parents are dead."

"Really?" retorted Harry-Viola. "So are mine. Lily and James. Murdered. Godric's Hollow. Yours?"

"You're lying," Harry-Sebastian growled, wrenching his sword from the grass and advancing.

"Enough!" came Malfoy's startled cry.

"Am I?" his twin countered unflinchingly as the blade-point settled over his heart.

Harry-Sebastian had known as soon as his hand was on the hilt that he couldn't do it. Each passing second made it more ridiculous, standing there glaring at his own eyes and his own stubbornly clenched mouth with the sword holding them apart. His stomach was already turning at the thought of drawing blood. An orange butterfly swooped between them riding a gentle current of summer air. In its wake, on a sun-drenched hillside on a fragrant afternoon, the killing weapon in his hand seemed unreal and silly.

"Enough," Malfoy repeated firmly. "Sebastian."

He lowered the sword. It was impossible to say which of the two was more relieved. His twin's face was pink with the heat and exertion, and the scar on his forehead stood out more whitely than ever. His gaze caught on it, fascinated. He reached up and ran his finger over it lightly. "Does it hurt?"

Harry-Viola let out a long breath. "Not here," he answered. "Not at all." There was no-one else he would have allowed to touch him like this. The intimacy of it made him blush. He coughed. "And no dreams either."

"Me neither. I guess it's too far away from-" The name, unthought by either of them for several days, fell like a clouding of the sun, and each of them read the spasm of grief which passed across the other's face. Harry-Sebastian cast the sword away. "I don't understand," he said quietly. "What are you?"

"Shall we say ... your brother," suggested Harry-Viola. Percy crossed himself furiously as Malfoy lost himself in a knowing smile. "It's a very long story."

It was Percy who cut to the heart of the matter. "Of course," he crowed. "If there is a question of gender, the duel we fought was invalid and I am victorious by default."

Then Harry-Viola remembered. "The duel. Sirius - He's here. They call him Antonio. He's-"

"Waiting for me at the Elephant," Harry-Sebastian recalled guiltily.

"-been arrested. They're going to hang him."

In an instant, Malfoy was between them, pulling Harry-Sebastian away. "That's absurd. There is

no cause for panic. I am not unreasonable. If this pirate is your friend, he shall have clemency."

His words were not quite soft enough.

"Oh shall he?" Harry-Viola demanded darkly.

Malfoy's smile was terse. "Naturally. Was it ever in doubt? Come with me now and we shall see to it." And before the matter could be re-opened, he guided Harry-Sebastian back towards the road.

Through the haze of slanted sunlight and the slow dislocation of drunkenness, Ron watched them all go: the lord of the manor with an anxious hand on the young swordsman's sleeve, and the messenger girl - this most unlikely twin - making angry, mannish strides beneath the green skirts, and three paces behind them all, Sir Andrew Aguecheek still scrubbing anxiously at the spots of blood on his cap.

Finally alone in the clearing, Ron leaned back against the weathered pillar and heaved a hearty sigh.

"An apple cleft in two ..." he mused under his breath, then more surely: "An apple cleft in two is not more twin than these two creatures."

The sound of it carried authoritatively. He snickered and shared a sly wink with a toppled goddess.

"And I'll warrant his lordship means to take a bite of both."

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Hurry now! Do hurry, for though we can bend time, we never escape its governance completely. You will not want to miss this. The hillside, the lazy air, the nodding sunflowers: leave them. Summer will come again. This moment is slipping from us already. Quickly now!

Observe. The entrance hall of the Olivier villa, cavernous and quiet, watched over by stiff portraits of Lucius Malfoy and his long-dead Countess. Four of the town's guards lounge against the walls. In a corner, Sirius slumps uncomfortably with his hands bound behind him and a great welt flowering across the side of his face. The one who stands over him - you know her even in man's costume by the fleshy, amphibian face and the eyes minute with malice to be Dolores Umbridge - shakes the ache out of her knuckles and clasps her hands behind her back as she hears footsteps on the stairs outside. The way they stride in from the brightness outside, with Lord Olivier all in white and the long sword in the hands of the youth beside him hurtling a lance of reflected light across the dim chamber, already there is something in them that speaks of retribution and Umbridge wets her lips in anticipation.

The footsteps hush and the soldiers begin to stir.

"Wretched boy!" Sirius growled as he saw the newcomers, and ripped his elbows open on the stone as he pushed his way up the wall. "A traitor, a turncoat, a liar and a coward! If my hands were free you'd feel them on your throat. And here, not content with robbery you come to gloat over my punishment as well. I hope you choke on your victory, my young Judas. I hope you choke on it."

The point of his sword made a jarring scrape on the floor as Harry-Sebastian blinked against the indoor gloom. "There's a reason I didn't meet you at the Elephant," he said falteringly. "I guess it's too much to expect that you might ask me before you start calling me a liar."

Sirius hissed quietly between his teeth and fixed him with a lethal glare.

Umbridge, too, was eyeing Harry-Sebastian with interest. "Robbed, you say?" Her fingers caressed the knife sheathed at her hip. "We must bring the boy to some implements of persuasion and see if we can coax the truth out of him. I think we might begin with the Iron Maiden: I can see that gentler methods will be wasted on him."

"Over my dead body!" Sirius roared as he rushed at her, wrenching his shoulders vainly against the shackles. A pike and a heavy boot felled him long before he reached her and his chinbone clacked sickeningly on the stone. There was an echo as he tumbled down - two voices nearby calling his name. As the sparks of light cleared, through the humiliation of helplessness and the taste of blood in his mouth, he saw a curtain of stained green linen swing before him. As he looked up along it, something caught in his throat. Breathing heavily, he allowed the green-robed imposter to help him to his feet.

"What is this?" Sirius demanded, the confusion coming out as accusation. "Have you made division of yourself? Which is Sebastian?"

"He is," Harry-Viola said. He cleaned Sirius' bleeding chin with his sleeve and turned him around to work on his bindings. "We met on the road yesterday. You thought I was your Sebastian, I think. You intervened in a duel and gave me a strange speech about money."

"This?" cried Harry-Sebastian in disbelief. He grappled with the unfamiliar silk shirt and pulled a hessian pouch from beneath it. "Is this what you wanted?" He held the bundle before Sirius' eyes and slipped its twine cord around his neck. "Did you think I would lose it without fighting to the last drop of my blood?"

Sirius wore a bewildered grin and staggered a little as his arms were freed.

"My boy," he murmured deeply, and Harry-Sebastian hugged him in the rough, easy way he had learned from Sirius himself. Even after all these days away from the water, a faint scent of fish still lingered in his clothes and he closed his eyes and let it into his lungs.

"Be there two crimes or only one." It was Umbridge who interrupted, gracing Malfoy with a thin smile. "A punishment is surely necessary, my lord."

Malfoy turned his scowl from the prisoner to the guard. "What should I care?"

"I would not wish to trouble you. Only, when your most gracious father was lord of -"

He interrupted her curtly: "Those days are gone." He kept his gaze fixed on the doorway, the one corner of the room where his father's cool gaze would not look back at him, and considered. "Antonio - notable pirate and salt-water thief. Your crimes against my family -"

With two quick steps, Harry-Sebastian was at his side, one hand claiming the inside of Malfoy's elbow and tilting him closer as he leaned in to murmur in his ear. Only the sputter of breath could be heard. That and - faintly, if you concentrated, if you knew to listen for it - the words "anything I desire".

The young count's jaw tightened and he snapped, "I am well aware of the terms of our bargain."

There was more whispering, delicate consonants slipping from Harry's mouth into Malfoy's ear. If the whisperer leaned in too close, if his lips must have brushed against skin, there was no objection. In fact, it looked almost as if the young count was fighting a smile. Harry paused, his grip on the count's elbow becoming gentle, and he smiled. Brushing aside the fine hair that was irritating his nose, he whispered a final few syllables which made Malfoy break away with the colour rising around his collar.

"Very well," Malfoy said quietly. "But I shall hold you to that."

Harry gave an easy shrug and a smile that made his eyes dark. It was Malfoy who looked away.

"Antonio." With one deep breath, the lord of the manor tried to resume the mantle of his authority. "Your crimes against my family are grave and your life would be a fitting penalty." He shot one last communicative glance at Harry-Sebastian. "However. You have shown yourself honourable in your rescue of this young man from the sea and I understand you have been a loyal and selfless friend to him in his trials. The quality of mercy is ... over-rated. Nonetheless, I declare your years in exile to be sufficient punishment for your crime. You are pardoned."

Sirius slumped dumbly. From behind him came a tiny cough. It repeated.

"Perhaps your lordship does not appreciate the magnitude of this man's crimes." Umbridge, the same smile fixed on her face. "There are innocent citizens to be protected. The criminal mind draws others to it."

There might have been a magnetic pull in Harry-Sebastian's lips the way Malfoy leaned into them. More whispering. This time he laughed - a sudden, reckless sound in the solemn hallway and the portraits seemed to sneer down from the walls at the intrusion.

"You have performed a loyal service for me this day," he told Umbridge gravely. "I should like to make you a gift in gratitude."

Even in a gruff soldier's uniform, Umbridge could manage a girlish simper. "Your lordship is too generous."

"Perhaps. In the old sanctuary above my estate there lie a number of sculptures. One of them, I suspect, is Justice. Tis a godhead in your very image. Somewhat crumbled, only a little stained with lichen. Madam, I should like you to place it near the watch house to commemorate your services today."

Umbridge gave a smile. A small cough. Another smile. "I am honoured, deeply honoured, of

course. But I'm afraid we shall have to trouble your lordship for a horse and cart."

"Oh, we keep no horses here," Malfoy assured her innocently. "Something so weighty as Justice, surely, is worth the trouble of carrying yourself. Tis no more than ten feet tall and you have four men of the law to assist you. Come now. Who is protecting the township while you dally here? I will detain you no longer."

If a viper could smile it would have resembled Umbridge as she backed out of the room, hissing under her breath at her luckless soldiers as she went.

Malfoy spared one distasteful glance for the recently reprieved Sirius, who was still wearing a dumbstruck smile as Harry-Sebastian and his twin fussed over him awkwardly and rubbed the circulation back into his hands.

"A feast," Malfoy declared. "I will have a feast today, as soon as the table can be prepared. There will be wine and music and every delicacy that can be prepared in short time. We shall celebrate the reunion of these two brothers. Feste - where is the fool? Reinstate him to my service and have him sing. Take word to Her Grace, I will have her presence at dinner. Her household as well, and the mayor, the priests - whom does one invite to these occasions? Maria will take charge of the invitations."

Hermione pulled a pencil from the depths of her skirt and scouted around for some paper.

"And tell Her Grace nothing of this afternoon's revelations," Malfoy added archly. "Let us observe her surprise."

The feast's guests of honour, who were talking over the top of each other in their rush to explain the confusion of the last two days to Sirius and to each other, gave no indication of having heard a word of this. When Malfoy laid his hand flat over the small of Harry-Sebastian's back, feeling the flesh firm and warm through silk, no objection was made. Only Harry-Sebastian was close enough to see the short, quick breaths escaping between Malfoy's lips and the reckless pulse that

vibrated under his collarbone. But he didn't turn to look.

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You close your eyes to blink and when you open them you are in hell.

The air is thick with smoke, dust swirls, and the heat strikes the side of your body like a mace. The sweat rises in your hair as quick as rainfall - will you choke or will you faint, your poor body is trying to do both at once - and the soot is gritty and foul in your mouth.

Welcome to the Olivier kitchens in all their glory. Perhaps it is only the firmness of my grip that stays you from seeking the door, yet linger a little, I beg you. Close your eyes to keep out the sting of the ash. Let the subtler sensations of the kitchens seduce you.

The workaday smells of cooking, these you know already: the ancient sheep meat, the feathers, the spices, the stench of blood. But there are new aromas - can't you taste them in your mouth? A pig has been brought from the village and the air is sticky with the fat of it where it roasts succulently alongside the deer and the young calf. Bread and cakes are in the oven and the hot yeasty smell puts a clench of homesickness in your heart, a yearning for a rustic childhood you never had. There is fruit also - great pots of peach, pear and quince bubbling in honey and sweet wine, and the too-sweetness of it is tempered by the fragrance of cardamom and cloves. The spice merchants in the town are counting their silver. This is a meal for which no expense has been spared.

And listen. All about is a clatter as pots are drawn from shelves and cupboards leaving everywhere a fine mist of dust, for they are dank with disuse: it is almost fifteen years since the old countess died and the young master had shown every sign of inheriting his father's distaste for company. Polishing rags fly and bit by bit they coax the gleam out of tarnished copper.

Above the clash of metal and the wheeze of the bellows rises a higher note also - a sound little heard in this place this last year, and before that only in furtive tones. The kitchens, from the

darkest corner of the scullery to the great chimney of the roasting oven, are raucous with laughter. It rises and bursts forth, and something of the flavour of it is mingling with the spices in the pots and the ale in the servants' mugs. Later - much later- stories will be told of a castle whose whole household, under an evil spell, slumbered for one hundred years before rescue came. This is the house they will be remembering, and these the servants, who slowly are casting off the rites of mourning and turning their voices to their old songs of merriment which still sit half-remembered in their throats.

And at the centre of this storm of activity, amid the musicians' pealing galliard and all the eddies of laughter and Feste the fool juggling melons (badly) in the doorway, sits Draco: the young count, the lord of the estate and the twelve-month orphan. Less composed than he is accustomed to presenting himself - note, for instance, the gash of torn stitching along his left shoulder, or the thickly laid powder which doesn't quite hide the purple bruise under his jaw - still there is an excitement in the way he holds himself forward just now, a bright anticipation in his eye.

Take your seat - here beside me, at the foot of the table where the music and the conversation are loudest - and observe.

The pageboy bowed and retreated at his command.

"Let none of you speak," Malfoy instructed and cast his eye gravely along the row of guests to either side of him, from Sir Toby's weary glance into his ale to the nervous half-smile of the town's new curate. "We shall see what Her Grace the Duchess makes of her messenger girl now."

He reserved a particularly wolfish grin for Harry-Viola, who sat at his left hand. At his right hand Harry-Sebastian frowned.

So perfectly alike were the two that Harry-Viola had to keep his gaze averted from his twin to avoid the vertiginous lurch that swept over him each their eyes met and suddenly he was outside his body looking in. And yet a persistent observation would reveal the differences their opposite genders had wrought on them. Though Harry-Viola was now dressed in nondescript brown breeches and a cream-coloured shirt that strained a little where it was accustomed to Malfoy's narrower waist, though the only physical souvenir of his femininity was the length of green crepe

he wore tied at his neck, yet still the grip of the corset was upon him in the way he sat straight enough to put the table-legs to shame and in the unconsciously furtive crossing of his arms. In unthinking contrast, Harry-Sebastian sprawled slightly against his chair's unfamiliar stiffness, giving with his expression of impatience and the nonchalant drape of his dirty-nailed hands on the tabletop the impression that at any moment he might turn his face away, without apology or embarrassment, to spit.

And so they sat as Ginny, flanked by McGonagall on one side and Trelawney on the other, marched into the room, her expression fierce enough to make Feste back away and Dumbledore nod his players to a halt. Silence fell - as did three airborne melons, one after the other with an uncomfortable silence between their splatters - as the Duchess noted the assembly of feasters and included them all in her displeasure.

"To what purpose am I summoned?" She rounded on Malfoy instantly, who reflected her gaze. "A matter of importance requires my presence, your errand boy informs me, and it cannot await my convenience. But no more than this can he disclose. He turns his face to the ground and flinches from my questions in mortal terror. I trust, my lord, that nothing less than death or plague or the second coming would embolden you to such incivility."

No answer came, save for Malfoy's enigmatic smile.

"Which is it?" Ginny snapped.

Though not exactly unkempt, she was groomed carelessly now, with her ringlets shaken out and lashed into an unravelling plait at her back. There was a hoarse, harsh thread in her voice and what might have been a red rim around her eyes. Anyone but Malfoy - leaning back with a version of Harry at either hand and intoxicated more with the tension than with the wine - might have feared her a little. Her gaze flitted around the table and returned with ice in it.

"Where is Viola?" she demanded. "What mischief have you worked upon her? Speak!"

Malfoy took a sip of his wine and let the silence draw out. "You will not see Viola again."

"If you have brought her to grief," she articulated grimly as she approached the table, reached across it and snatched the glass from his hands. "If you have done her the slightest harm, neither your rank nor your overstated charms will protect you."

Dark pools of wine splattered across the tabletop and, finally, Malfoy flinched.

"Save your threats," Harry-Sebastian said quietly at the same moment Harry-Viola stood up.

Ginny looked from one to the other and laid the glass down unsteadily. The only sound in the room was the grinding of its rim as it tipped and rolled, backwards and forward, along the wood.

"Monstrous!" Trelawney trilled as recognition sank in. "This is a reprehensible deception! Shame on you all!"

But Ginny remained silent. As she studied Harry-Viola with her hand tangled unconsciously in her necklace, many around the table looked on sympathetically, wondering how the flatness of his ribs and straightness of his hips could have deceived them so completely. No girl, not even the kitchen attendants with arms grown thick from the pestle and the cleaver, had such an angle where the spread of shoulderblades tapered into ribs. Nor was Ginny the only one to note how the black curl of his eyelashes and the reflective effect of the green crepe around his neck still left upon him a beauty that was not entirely masculine.

Let her study him all she wished, Harry would not falter. He felt like he was breathing properly for the first time in weeks, and it wasn't only the change of clothes that caused it.

"Well go on then," he invited. "Call me a liar. Or a fraud, a traitor - any names you like. It won't be the first hasty judgment you've made today."

Her quiet scrutiny made him uncomfortable and if the table hadn't lain between them he might have shaken her.

"I've never told you any lies except my name." Didn't it ring out convincingly in his natural voice, and wasn't it almost true. "I told you I was shipwrecked and lost, and that was true. I promised I'd work for you, and I did. This morning I told you I'd never laid a finger on your beloved Lord Olivier."

Her raised eyebrows challenged him.

"And he didn't," his twin cut in swiftly with a proprietorial hand on the arm of the young count's chair. Malfoy shifted uncomfortably, eyeing his distant wineglass, as Harry-Sebastian dipped one finger off the arm of the chair to stroke at his sleeve.

"No, he didn't," Malfoy admitted finally with his eyes averted.

In the doorway, servants hovered and whispered and the aroma of the approaching feast was stealing insistently into the room. "Pheasant," declared one guest in an undertone and his companion murmured agreement. For the first time, Ginny took in the size of the gathering and the set of the table.

"If I have misjudged you," she began formally, "then you have my apologies. And yet tell me, Viola - that name is false, isn't it, Viola? I've never known your name. What then should I call you?"

Last time he had heard that question, with his head still dizzy from sunlight and his skin itchy with salt, he had scrambled for an answer. This time, he didn't have to think. "Harry," he said. "Just Harry."

His twin's cough of indignation was lost in the gluttonous sigh that went up as the first of the platters appeared in the doorway.

"The kitchens are ready," Hermione announced. Malfoy glanced once more at the drama in which he himself could play no more than a peripheral part and nodded. The musicians struck up again and the feast commenced.

Though cavernous, the dining hall was long and thin, and the noise bounced around in it like a box full of bees. Tongues loosened with wine and abundance - and the knowledge that they would not be asked to pay for it - the guests' chatter was loud and easy. Those with long-held grievances against the count and his family had politely hung them up at the door along with their travelling cloaks. In the whole room, the only thing strained was the table-legs.

Harry had seen no want of food over the last five years - the Hogwarts dinner table rarely allowed empty space between the platters and tureens and jugs of pumpkin juice. But this was something different. As the dishes emerged from the kitchens on great silver platters, their aromas preceded them like unearthly heralds: whole chickens, baked ducks, rabbit pie and the calf so bulky it took two grown men to bear it. This was not the placid fare he was used to. The empty eye sockets of the lamb's head stared back at him.

When he raised a cutlet of venison to his mouth and bit down, the taste flowed over his tongue. Hot and sweet and bloody. He let his breath carry the taste of it through his throat, down into his lungs, and he bit again. As he sucked the juices from his fingers, the memory of using a fork seemed so entirely nonsensical that he laughed.

"Who could think of going home?" the mayor was chortling, two seats to his left, as he helped himself to another serve of pheasant pie. "I could eat until daybreak. Who can say when we may see a feast to rival this one?"

Beside him, the town's doctor belched heartily and sopped up the last of his gravy with bread.

"To the most generous host in the kingdom!" he bellowed and took up his glass. The toast went up around the table.

Malfoy coloured. "More wine!" he cried to the pageboy behind him. "And if the supply runs low again, sent to the village for more! Malvolio will see to ..."

When the master of the house fell silent, so did many conversations around him.

"What has become of Malvolio?" he asked suddenly. "Maria! What has become of my steward?"

Hermione looked up guiltily from where Ron was whispering in her ear, his face almost hidden by her loose hair.

"He remains ... much distract."

"Distract?"

"Mad," Ron clarified happily. "Quite mad. He's violently besotted with you."

Malfoy gave a shrug as if to remark that it was hardly surprising.

"And he believes you return the sentiment."

This time Malfoy choked on his wine. "Bring him here. We shall question him and set this right."

It was some minutes before Fred and George returned, supporting a rather worse-for-wear Severus Snape between them. Apart from the scraps of straw and feathers that stuck to his clothing and the unrepentant blare of the yellow stockings, his neck and wrists were still encased in the stocks.

"I regret to inform it appears I've misplaced the key," George reported solemnly as if there wasn't a key shaped bulge in his breast pocket. "But then what can you expect of a fools and rabble and base carousers?"

Snape might have protested at this point if it weren't for the fact that someone had thoughtfully inserted an apple in his mouth. Malfoy dislodged it gently.

"Good Malvolio-"

"You!" Snape accused in a voice deep and hoarse with two days' abuse. "You should hang your head in shame."

Malfoy drew himself up straighter. "Take care, sir. If you have a grievance, you may state it plainly."

There was a fierce black light in Snape's eyes. "What need of grand speeches when the instrument of your betrayal is here in my pocket? Go ahead, my lord. Take it. May you blush to revisit your forked-tongued words."

Malfoy retrieved the battered sheet of paper and cast his eye over the text, as Harry-Sebastian reading over his shoulder grew wide-eyed.

"A love letter? I didn't write this," Malfoy protested, and it was not to Snape that he spoke. The joins of the stocks creaked in anger. "Though the hand is like to mine."

He was not the first to notice that Ron was giggling. It was the sort of giggle that spread to people who had no need to understand the joke.

"This is your doing?" Malfoy concluded dubiously over the rising laughter and sighed. "Very well. Someone take him outside and whip him."

Hermione laid down her glass with a clatter before the laughter had died on Ron's lips. "I wrote the letter."

"Of course you did." Malfoy leaned back in his chair, supremely satisfied. "Why?"

She had to hesitate a moment to remember. "Sport," she said. "But not only that. Your steward is wont to think himself above his fellows. He uses his authority to press personal grievances with no care for fairness. A lesson in humility was no more than he deserved."

Snape's eyes burned and his words came out like cannonballs. "This is all falsehood."

Malfoy considered. "Not entirely. Still, this duplicity must be punished. Someone take her outside and - enough!" He threw Harry-Sebastian's hand from his elbow and scowled. "Will you object to this too? I may not even regulate my household without your leave? As you will then. Maria, since it appears I shall be judged the worst sort of tyrant if I dare chastise you, this is your penalty. I hear idle talk of a romance between yourself and the upstanding Sir Toby Belch. You will marry him. Tomorrow. That should be sufficient punishment for both of you."

"*Spineless*." Snape's low growl carried through the room.

As Malfoy plucked a roasted fig from the platter of hare and toyed with it, his voice sounded like it was clinging by its fingertips to calm. "Come now, Malvolio. You have been a loyal and loving servant, as you were to my father before me. Your place is at the head of my household. I will not have bad feeling between us."

With finger and thumb, he held out the fruit. Snape turned his glare on it, where it hovered invitingly before his lips. No cat sniffed unfamiliar food more suspiciously than he did now. A drop of juice ran down his master's thumb, following the raised vein at his wrist, and then fell. Snape bit. The flesh tore and melted in his mouth; the tiny seeds crunched like dry bone.

"Tell me there will be an end to this ridiculous feud," Malfoy coaxed as he pressed the moist remnant of the fruit into the steward's mouth. Snape swallowed hungrily but the tendons in his neck still strained.

"I will have revenge."

"No," Malfoy murmured, leaning closer. There was sweet juice on his fingers, and he offered the tips of them against Snape's lower lip. "You shall have *satisfaction,* my friend. Satisfaction. On condition that first we have peace."

Snape took one slender finger into his mouth much as a fish might taste a hook. Despite his superiority in height and undiminished hauteur, he seemed captive to its pull as he sucked it clean. When no reprimand came, he closed his lips around a second finger and then the thumb.

"Peace?" Malfoy insisted, making no move to retrieve his hand.

Snape gave a jerk of his head that might almost be a nod.

"Then play on!" And at Malfoy's command, the musicians struck up.

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In the dancing and resumption of conversation that followed, Harry-Sebastian finally found a chance to tug lightly on his twin's sleeve and lead him into the hallway. Out here, the music had a muffled sound and the air was easier to breathe.

They turned to each other, as kitchen maids balancing tottering piles of platters passed them in the corridor, and shrugged at the enormity of what had to be said now that they had their first moment alone.

"So you're ..." Harry-Viola left the conclusion hanging.

"No," Harry-Sebastian corrected, perhaps a bit more sharply than was necessary. "You are."

There was a sullen silence as it became obvious that this line of argument was unlikely to be fruitful.

"Don't suppose you know how this happened."

"No idea. Last thing I remember is Transfiguration and -

"That bloody wand. What did it do? If we were splinched, we'd be missing bits. I'm not missing anything. You?"

"No."

Another cautious silence fell.

"So you've moved in here then," Harry-Viola summarised with a gesture of disdain that encompassed the building and its occupants. "Made your peace with Malfoy and started playing with swords."

His twin grabbed at a drumstick on a passing platter, bit it casually and replaced it on another. "Not only that. I learned to sail. I walked thirty miles through the mountains with Antonio - with Sirius. I know how to cure sardines. What have you been doing?"

"Trying to find a way out of here. I looked around the town. And around the castle."

"You seem to have made quite an impression there," Harry-Sebastian's mouth turned unkindly. "I really thought Ginny was going to slap you before. She looks like she could do it, too. Still, I can see why you've stayed there so long. That dress does impressive things to her-"

"Don't start!" Harry-Viola felt the colour rising in him and loosened the scarf at his neck. "I'm not interested in ... that."

Harry-Sebastian's mouth had a mocking curve he might have picked up from the count himself. "You think I don't know *exactly* what you're interested in?"

There was a long moment of silence as the ramifications of that occurred to them both. Then from not far away came Malfoy's voice irritably speaking Sebastian's name.

"Look, I've tried every spell, every password I can think of." Harry-Viola put aside his antagonism and illustrated his frustration with fretting hands. "The spell that got me here - got *us* here if you like - I've tried it backwards and forwards, I've spoken it under the full moon, but I can't for the life of me work out how to get out of this place."

His twin laughed. "It must look very different from where I'm standing."

"What do you mean?"

Harry-Sebastian shrugged. "Doesn't any of this seem familiar to you? Twins and shipwrecks and boys dressed as girls? I didn't realise until I saw how Ginny looked at you before, the shock on her face, like something out of a pantomime. Reminded me of that play - don't you remember? The Smeltings/St Winifred's end-of-term play. Dudders played a soldier. The girl with the red wig had a lisp. Pus-face Polkiss kept saying "*Come*, sir" and leering."

Harry-Viola frowned. "I remember bits. But none of it made sense. I never got who ended up with ... wasn't it the girl twin who ended up with the older guy. There was a priest and a wedding ... that would be ... " He stopped dead. "What exactly have you done with Malfoy?"

The smirk on his twin's face, like the shirt, might have been borrowed.

Harry-Viola soothed: "Look, it's okay. You couldn't help it. I know what he's like, all those threats and the wandering hands."

The smirk intensified. "Actually, I don't think you know what he's like. Not at all." Catching the widening in his companion's eyes, he looked over his shoulder to see Lord Olivier himself sauntering through the doorway, smiling as he saw them.

Harry-Viola whispered urgently, "What about this play? We must be near -"

"Shh!" his twin cut him off angrily, hissing. "When it happens, it happens."

And then Malfoy was upon them, proclaiming "They're playing lavolta and it strikes me that I have never seen you dance," and guiding them back into the dining hall.

The racket in the room - music, clatter of feet, laughter and raised voices - hurt Harry-Sebastian's ears. It was all wrong. This time of evening was for kneeling in the sand alongside Sirius, picking the nets clean in the last of the light and listening to stories. He thought longingly of the night just passed: a mug of wine, a book, and Malfoy's quiet presence on the cushions behind him.

An elbow jolted into him and he turned just in time to catch the snarl which twisted his twin's mouth as he jerked himself free of Malfoy's grip and stalked away.

Harry-Sebastian detained the count with a firm grip on his arm as his suspicions took shape. "Tell me. What were you two doing up in the sanctuary when I arrived? How did your shirt get torn?"

"Nothing," Malfoy answered too quickly, taken off guard. "I don't recall." With shadows on his face from the torchlight behind him, he had never more resembled the Slytherin prefect who snickered and pointed in Potions lessons. Now he seemed to be weighing the silence to gauge whether his answer had been sufficient. He surrendered suddenly to Harry's grip and, with one small step, crossed the line between polite distance and deliberate intimacy.

"It was nothing," he repeated, quietly determined as he worked himself between Harry-Sebastian's arms. For all his assumed languor, he still had his Seeker's reflexes. He waited for the exact moment when Harry opened his mouth to argue and then he kissed him.

The kiss, by Malfoy's usual standards, was brief and chaste. But it left Harry flushed with confusion, his arms full of manipulative aristocrat and a crowd of spectators looking on. All day he'd put off the thought that he needed time to think. About how far he was prepared to let Malfoy take this. About whether things he did under a false name in a world he didn't believe in could have consequences that were real. And, most practically, about the method of it: whether he intended to take control or make Malfoy work to persuade him past the limit concessions he had made the night before. Now there was a hush in the nearby conversations and from behind came a drunken cheer of encouragement. The strategy of it appeared to have been taken out of his hands.

Malfoy was looking more than usually pleased with himself as he reached for Harry and kissed him again, this time with the sort of thoroughness that made onlookers turn away and launch sudden conversations about the weather. Harry had two choices available to him and he did not intend to back away. Instead, he closed his ears to the scandalised muttering and set about reacquainting himself with the fundamental paradox of Draco Malfoy: provided you were doing precisely as he wished, he could make himself as pliable and sweet as butter warming on a window sill. Right now, he was squirming slightly against the touch of Harry's hands on his hips as he wound his arms around Harry's shoulders. It was almost girlish the way he moved, with his smooth hair and slender limbs and the extravagance of silk and perfume. But he kissed Harry with a man's mouth: hard and unapologetic.

"There," said Malfoy, whispering with breath that belonged to both of them, and nipping gently at Harry's swollen lower lip. "Consider your question answered. We need not speak of him again."

And just as suddenly he disentangled their limbs and sauntered away through the sea of shoulders and backs which his guests turned to him. A wake of hissing and mumbling followed him. At the door the curate threw him one expressive glance of disgust as he left with the mayor and most of the guildsmen. Malfoy's brittle laughter seemed to hang over the room long after they had gone.

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The drink was abundant, the firelight bright and Dumbledore's musicians played spiritedly enough to make the dead get up and dance. It did not take long for the guests to succumb to merriment once more.

Sirius, who had taken down a slender scimitar from its clasps on the wall, was tossing it from hand to hand with the glow of reminiscence in his eyes. With a chuckle, he fastened Percy's hesitant fingers around the hilt and guided him through the back-handed slashing of an imaginary throat.

"Achilles himself would have faltered if he'd fought with that in his eyes," he scoffed as he snatched the sorry remains of Percy's cap and tossed it into the fire. "Come on lad, show me some spirit!"

Dragging his mortified gaze from the sparking peacock feather, Percy tightened his grip and swung again, ripping a great whoosh of sound from the air and following through viciously with an invisible dagger in his left hand.

"Not bad," Sirius grinned and gave his new protégé's shoulder a long squeeze of approval. "Not bad at all."

Percy bent over his blade to inspect an apparent flaw in the joinery and did not look up for quite some time.

Ron had never looked so happy. A smile was on his lips, a rosy glow lit up his face and a rim of ale froth surrounded his mouth as he leaned his cheek against Hermione's left breast. She sighed deeply and stroked his hair. Romance was in the eye of the beholder, and she chose not to behold the trickle of ale-flavoured drool that sat ominously at the corner of his mouth. When she laid her hand across his throat, she could feel the rumble of his snore and, beneath it, the sluggish and contented rhythm of his heart.

"A terrible waste," Professor McGonagall was observing to Professor Trelawney, and if her voice

carried loudly to the corner behind her where the steward was delicately removing his yellow stockings, this was no more than co-incidence. "Her Grace will no longer deign to have the portrait in her sight. It will have to be burned. A pity. Tis a good likeness. Young Lord Olivier has such a delicate tournure of calf and the chiton does flatter him."

"Good ladies." Even after the evening's privations, it seemed Snape could still force his mouth into the distant cousin of a smile. "It would be uncharitable of me to refrain from mentioning that I may be in a position to assist you. Come, let me pour you some wine while we converse."

McGonagall raised one critical eyebrow. "Wine? Do you mean to tell me the cellars here hold nothing stronger?"

"Nothing. Except the former Count's prized collection of aged port which is ..." As their eyes locked, the sound of Malfoy's voice rose above the music and faded. "Entirely at your disposal."

Professor Trelawney tugged her bodice a half-inch lower as she watched him leave. "I do have a weakness for the colour yellow," she murmured. Where a pessimist might see a man rank with barn dust and the stench of foul, in her mind's eye she could picture the moment he would upend the pitcher to send water streaming through his hair, smooth and silvery where it clung to his chest.

McGonagall's fancies were altogether less complex. A good deal of fine port and later, perhaps, a dance.

Harry-Viola gave up. The painting had nothing more to offer. He had been studying it for the last ten minutes and still couldn't see any purpose beyond the illustration of some particularly gruesome ways to die. It was the story of a saint, no doubt, who had preached his unfashionable gospel with failing conviction as his heathen audience jeered and sharpened their pokers. He turned back to the room.

Taking off that dress had transfigured him. It had turned him into a leper, or a foreigner, possibly

both. The men of the town had taken to addressing him with a parody of ebullience - a slap on the back, a guffawed "Well that was a spectacle!" - before they backed away warily as if the urge to wear a green dress might be contagious. Even Professor Trelawney had broken off part way through her commentary on the eligible bachelors in the room with a startled "Oh, but of course ..." and excused herself. Ron alone, with his drunken lack of affectation, appeared untroubled by the change. But Ron had spent a great part of the evening conversing with an empty suit of armour which, to judge by his reaction, told the bawdiest jokes in the kingdom.

As expected, nobody noticed as Harry slipped out into the hallway. Though the space was empty, it seemed crowded with the noise of the revelry inside and the competing din from the servants' celebration in the kitchens. He headed in the opposite direction, seeking quiet.

He had almost passed through the entrance hall when a flicker of movement caught his eye. Ginny. She was standing on the landing of the grand staircase with the marble bust of Draco Malfoy in front of her and all the portraits of his pointy-faced ancestors looming down from the wall like a sky full of malign stars. Harry could find no words strong enough to voice his disgust. When he'd first met her, ringing out bold words about music, food and love, there had been something reckless and good in her obstinate belief that love was simply a matter of persistence. Her faith - the very *idea* of pure faith, which was as rare as Runespoor eggs in the world he knew - had drawn him to her. Bit by bit, it had infected him too. He'd grown fretful, felt his heart skip a beat for no reason in a room she had just left, found himself pacing impatiently in the times they weren't together.

But this, this was no kind of faith. In the face of today's events, it was stupidity gross enough to bring a blush even to Fudge's cheeks. He drew a long breath to speak his mind.

She stepped back.

At first he thought it must be a trick of the light. But, no, the marble Malfoy had been remodelled. With flour and water and judicious use of chicken feathers, he had gained a full beard, ponderous eyebrows and a mottled complexion which, Harry thought, better reflected the state of his heart. The dripping paste formed a stalactite beneath his pointy chin.

As he climbed the stairs Ginny turned to him and shrugged. "Alas, I am no artist," her lips twitched. "Do you think I've captured the soul of him?"

The profanity of her vandalism astounded him. This was the funeral pyre of the last of her idolatry. She blinked quickly with the effort of not laughing out loud. "Not quite," he frowned very seriously and, with a quick tweak, puckered the dough at the corner of Malfoy's thin mouth so that his expression turned down sourly. "There."

Beside him, the empty chamber pot on Lucius Malfoy's head was a definite improvement. Ginny wiped her fingers on the plinth and looked upon her work in satisfaction. The quiet and the darkness seemed to grow. Her smile faded. The beads at her wrist were jingling as she twisted her hand in her skirt and he could hear the delicate sound as she swallowed. That dress had made all the difference. To stand so close to her in a man's clothes was a sexual act. He retreated down a step.

"Harry, tell me," she said quickly, and stopped. When she bent to place the bowl of feathers and flour on the step, the distant torchlight threw emphatic shadows under her eyelashes and lips, and around the curve of her breasts. "Tell me. When you were Viola, were there not moments you feared being discovered?"

Her voice was warm with excitement. It drew him back to the easier days when she had laid her head in the skirts of the green dress and scoffed at his stories.

"Every day," he told her. "It was better when I didn't have to say anything. And I could never get the walking right, so I spent as much time as could sitting down. There was one morning Valentine burst into my room before I was dressed."

"What did you do?"

"I had to knock over a candlestick to distract her." Ginny laughed. "I nearly set fire to the bed. She told me I was the clumsiest girl in christendom and even an armless cripple would have no

use for me as a wife."

She laughed again - her laugh he remembered chorused with Fred's and George's, Ron's or Dean's, never on its own. It was the same laugh as her brothers', a little higher, a little rounder, possessing none of the musical curlicues that most women so artfully strove for. In the silence of the staircase, he listened to the echo of it. Under the cover of merriment, she had eased down a step closer and he found he couldn't think of a single thing to say.

"What would you think," she asked softly. "If I said I envy you? If I said I should like to dress up in breeches and doublet and find myself shipwrecked on a foreign shore. Pretend to be what I'm not."

Across the height advantage created by the stair between them, she reached down and ran her fingers over the remnant of green linen tied at his neck. Her eyes were very bright. "Is that the only difference between men and women - the cut of the clothes we wear? Are you still Viola, or aren't you?"

Her hand slipped onto his shoulder and the realisation hit him suddenly that she had no intention of removing it. As her thumb rubbed over the bare skin at the base of his neck, the heat surged down through his chest and into his belly.

"No," he mumbled. "Yes."

And before he could master his tongue to tell her that, so long as she stayed right where she was, he would make himself whichever or whatever pleased her best, she had kissed him. Fleetingly. The sort of kiss that allowed a casual retreat. His lips tingled as the touch of her disappeared. Where her hair had brushed against him, thin lines stung his skin like lash marks. She was observing him obliquely as she pulled her lower lip between her teeth.

Breaking free of his control, his hands found her waist and pulled her back to him. Willingly she came, steadying herself on his shoulders as their mouths bumped together. If their second kiss

was messy, it was also the sort of kiss that laid aside all defences. There was no shame in the way she leaned down into him and opened her mouth into his.

This was the moment of all his fantasies: his arms full of the luxurious length of her hair and those tactile cascades of silk, but beneath it her body was hard and strong as it strained in his grip. He laid his hand flat over her back and felt the flexing of her shoulder blades as she pulled him tighter against her body. There was no art to her kiss, not like Malfoy's calculated seduction. It was simple, a bit too eager, a bit too wet, but utterly lacking in subterfuge. When she had had enough of the taste of his mouth, she stopped. Though she drew back very slightly, her arms were still looped over his shoulders.

Harry ventured an uncertain smile.

She laughed again, and kissed his mouth hungrily, and murmured with her face pressed against his hair, "You have rescued me from sin and damnation!" He could feel the laughter clenching her ribs; there was a hysterical note in it. "Every night you were in my dreams, with your deep voice and your clever hands, and every morning you made me wake up ashamed. I needed marriage more than ever to escape the unholy passion you put in me. The things I did with you! I couldn't tell you even now the things you whispered to me in my sleep."

He took a guess at what one of those things might have been and breathed it into her ear.

"Now you can tell me that," her eyes sparkled wickedly as one finger trailed into the angle of his shirt. "Now that you're no longer my maidservant. Say it again."

He did so. Then he did what he'd spent ten days dreaming of and ran his hands from the constrained clench of her waist up along her sides until his thumbs were pressed into the pert flesh of her breasts. She watched him with her lips slightly parted and laid her hands over his wrists.

"I've not forgotten what you said. No man could replace me in your heart. It was a riddle then, a

nuisance." She touched a finger tenderly to his pouting lip. "Will you say it again, now that your secret is known?"

It was almost too much, the liberties she was allowing him, the faint mist of her perfume, the desire in her breath and the silk that slid beneath his fingers. It was only the fear of this moment ending, which dug between his ribs like a blade, that kept him from delirium. "If it pleases you."

When she had kissed him once more, lazily and with an experimental roughness, she slipped out of his arms and climbed away from him. "Well then?" As she disappeared at the top of the stair, there was no mistaking the invitation in the smile she gave him.

For a long moment, Harry couldn't make his legs move. Then, as he took his first jerky step, there came a roaring in his ears. Either the wind outside had picked up or the blood in his veins was in flood.

*

Harry-Sebastian was listening to one of Sirius' tall tales - of bare-breasted mermaids who bore no resemblance to the dignified creatures Harry himself had met - when he felt it, like a change in the air pressure, like the sun slipping behind a cloud. When he looked around, Malfoy was no longer in

the room.

"The chiefest peril of the mermaid is her deadly siren song," Percy was proclaiming pompously at his elbow. "Of course," he added with a rush of sincerity that brought a blush to his own cheek and to Sirius', "I expect you've mastered far greater perils than a few mermaids in your adventures."

Harry couldn't fight it. He'd become so used to Malfoy's presence - pushing and provoking and

throwing out impossible demands like confetti - that his absence seemed to leave a shadow in the room. It itched, the nagging curiosity as to what the capricious young count might be doing, and with whom.

In the end he found Malfoy easily enough. On the balcony outside his bedroom he was stretched out with his legs along the balustrade and his back against a pillar. With barely a shimmer of starlight breaking through the clouds, he might have been undetectable except that he was humming absent-mindedly under his breath. *Sweet and twenty ... sweet and twenty.*

"There you are." He spoke without turning and his edge of reproach made Harry instantly bad tempered.

"What do you mean?" He crossed his arms and leaned in the door frame. "You don't even know which one I am. We're both the same to you."

Malfoy laughed softly. "Really? Do you imagine any of God's creatures has studied you more closely than I have? I could tell you apart from a single word. A single footstep."

The stillness of the night was working on Harry. Out here he was finally free of the noise and the curious stares and the guildsmen who showed him miniatures of cow-eyed daughters wearing fat jewels around their necks like bells. With the familiar salt in the air and the fluttering of the cypress leaves he felt himself giving way to calm. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he could just make out the pale strands of Malfoy's clothes catching the light as he shifted. White breeches tailored by expensive fingers to fit like a second skin, and the silk shirt which had slipped off one shoulder in pretended nonchalance.

"Or a single kiss," Malfoy murmured.

A gust of wind put an urgent flutter in the branches - or was it the heaving of the distant sea? - and just as quickly was gone.

"All right then," Harry challenged as he made his way forward. "Which one am I?"

Malfoy was already leaning down from his perch to meet him. Their mouths came together smoothly, wetly. Had it been little more than a day since the first time they had done this? It felt like longer. How else could he know without thinking that if he put the heel of his hand just by Malfoy's chin, his fingers would reach exactly to the hollow behind Malfoy's ear with his thumb resting over the cheekbone? How else could he know that touching him in this way would cause Malfoy to moan softly and kiss him with redoubled fierceness?

In the space of one night - one quick and curious night - the ridge of Malfoy's jaw had become as familiar under his palm as broom handle or wand ever was. Beneath his skin he was as jagged and unyielding as the thrust of rock that held them up above the plain, but the wet heat of his mouth opened up, as always, to Harry's advance.

Their first kisses had been combative and clumsy. In scattered moments through the night, Harry had come back to himself without warning, feeling like a visitor inside his own body with his ungoverned fingers straining to force themselves beneath Malfoy's waistband and Malfoy's tongue hot and fat in his mouth. Malfoy seemed to take these moments of hesitation in his stride, running the tip of his tongue over Harry's palm that had clamped over his mouth and drawing lazy, insistent patterns that worked their way down Harry's nerves and into his stomach. Sometimes Malfoy hissed impatiently and gave a scowl that was palpable even in the dark. Sometimes the hiss threatened to form the first syllable of a name, only to bury itself in Harry's skin and vanish.

Whatever he did, Malfoy strove to provoke. How many times had Harry simmered under that triumphant laugh each time Malfoy goaded him into roughness? Harry, who proved to have the advantage in upper body strength, found he could pin Malfoy beneath him thrashing angrily like a landed tuna fish until the fight went out of him and became a slow rocking of hips that made Harry's blood hot. But Malfoy, with his long legs and talent for the unexpected, was no easy conquest. Harry bore the tooth marks and bruises to prove it.

The fierceness was going out of their embrace, a sure sign that Malfoy had his mind on something more.

"Sebastian," he pronounced, trailing his finger down Harry's windpipe. His voice grew musing. "Sebastian who made me a solemn promise today. A promise I intend to remember."

Harry's hand still rested flat over the bottom of Malfoy's ribcage, just beneath his shirt, where he could feel the strain of his twisted posture, each intimate movement of muscle. He jerked his hand away and straightened the silk. "You've been away from your guests a long time."

Malfoy's voice was as cold and pointed as a blade-tip as he swung his legs around. "Have I?"

The silence pressed in on them. The breeze had died, the salty tang fallen from the air and the owls and foxes gone quiet. Harry strained his ears to catch the sounds from the feast below, but there was nothing. Would he get any warning before this world spat him back to the one in which he belonged, or would it simply vanish in yet another devastatingly unprepared moment?

Malfoy slipped off the balustrade, taking care to make contact with every available inch of Harry on the way down, and stepped away.

"What you will," he was biting out when Harry caught the back of his shirt and restrained him.

"No," Harry whispered, with an edge of urgency he hadn't intended. He pressed himself against Malfoy's back and wound his arms around the narrow span of his waist where the muscle flexed as it tried to repel him and press into him both at once.

The struggle between pique and desire was conclusively decided when Harry bent down to lay his lips against Malfoy's neck. Above all the many places Malfoy liked to be touched, this one most effectively reduced him to murmurs and broken entreaties. Harry, whose body after diligent exploration had yielded up precisely two places it liked to be touched, was fast developing a fascination for it. He trailed the point of his tongue gently up Malfoy's tendon and worked his

lips into the hollow where his jaw met his throat.

Malfoy struggled free, but it was only to tear the shirt over his head and lean back with liquid ease against the length of Harry. As Harry's hands hovered uncertainly, the bars of Malfoy's ribcage seemed to him like the looms he'd seen in the town. Until the next cargo of flax reached the ports, they would sit idle in the sheds, their complex mechanisms inviting a deft touch that Harry would never know how to give. Malfoy arched back onto his shoulder, opening up his throat invitingly, and Harry still wasn't sure how to touch him. There was hot breath against Harry's ear and then the first ministrations of Malfoy's lips.

That mouth, it was that mouth which had been his undoing in the night before. Malfoy's hands, clawing and always just a bit too eager, he had no difficulty brushing away. But when his coaxing, shameless lips traced the same path, Harry could barely find the will to breathe, let alone speak a refusal. Right now, Malfoy's mouth was grazing Harry's ear and whispering a rather astonishing request.

"Where do you learn these things!" Harry snapped and pushed him away, unbalanced by the feeling that he was losing control of what happened between them.

Unconcerned, Malfoy turned and ran his fingertips down Harry's sternum. "Where does anyone receive their education?" His index finger pushed playfully at Harry's navel through his clothes. "I had a lover."

Harry stiffened. "How-" Calculating the months back from their meeting, through the year since the old count's death and the months of illness before that, his lips curled in disgust. "You were ... You couldn't! Who?"

Though Malfoy seemed a little surprised, he answered matter-of-factly and hooked his fingers over the top of Harry's breeches. "He was a captain in the town guard whom my father consulted on matters of defence. He trained in Venice. Served eight years in Candia. From time to time he taught me archery, a little swordplay." He shrugged. "And this."

Harry was shrinking away from his touch.

"There's no cause for envy," Malfoy frowned as he pressed closer. "You have no rival. Unless ... Surely you're not -"

Apparently he found Harry's expression eloquent enough, for he did not wait for a response. With a pale flash of bared teeth, he turned back towards the bedroom.

"Spare me your pious distaste," he spat as he went. "I do not answer to commonplace castaways for the health of my immortal soul." There was a thump and a muffled cry as his foot collected something in the dark and, from inside, his voice rose venomously: "Particularly not castaways who comport themselves with as little thought for virtue as you did last night."

The air was still and judgmental. From inside he could feel Malfoy's silence as he waited and watched to see what Harry would do. It wasn't only Malfoy who wondered. He leaned his elbows on the balustrade and let his body hunch over it.

A wet and chilly breeze eddied around in the grass cover and rose up high above him. Although the view on all sides was murky, he knew what lay before him: the sweeping slope down to the plains, and then out to the coastline where he had first retched a lung-full of seawater and turned his head to see Sirius kneeling in the sand beside him. As the faint scent from the climbing roses drifted up to him now, it was hard to believe that his first thoughts upon waking in this place had been of death. The brutal shift of location had felt like a Portkey: it was Cedric Diggory's dead wrist he'd thought of first, limp as wet cloth, then the wheeling rage as Dumbledore had wrenched him away from the Ministry building and his last link to Sirius.

With this in his mind and his mouth cramped with too much salt, he had opened his eyes to a light so dazzling it was as if the sky itself and all the air below were knitted from threads of glass.

He seemed a stranger now, that ten-day-younger Harry with his morbid thoughts and his shadow in front of him long and fat with the burdens he bore. The same Harry who had pushed aside Sirius' fishheads-and-barley broth and wished for the pallid familiarity of mashed potato. Not for the first time, Harry wondered where his rage had gone. If he tried, he could replicate the turns of speech and the shape of his body, fists curled and jaw tight and his whole chest like a brick. But there was something cleansing about the salt in the air that forced itself into his veins, and he could not hold onto his anger. It slipped away from him, like shallow waves and wet sand receding between his toes.

So Malfoy had had a lover. Maybe more than one, if he cared to ask.

If he let it speak, the nagging voice he'd been smothering in some dark cellar of his mind for the last thirty six hours, he knew it would say there was a difference between a Malfoy who liked Harry and a Malfoy who liked men, and that this difference altered the meaning of everything Harry had done with him. He started to hum under his breath, a sure way to keep the voice at bay. He went through the things he knew. He was not Harry Potter. He was a fisherman's apprentice whose worldly possessions slung easily over one shoulder and whose breeches were fastened with a makeshift piece of twine. He was the object of Malfoy's desire, an obsession that made the young count spiteful and tender by turns and left him open to the scorn of his peers. He was in a world that, one way or another, had to end. He was curious. And, without the heat he drew from Malfoy's body, he was cold.

Inside, Malfoy would be waiting - most likely draped across the end of his bed like a preening Siamese in a pose that would be foolish and meaningless until the moment when Harry returned to see it. His fingers closed around the curve of marble. It was no substitute for flesh.

On the ground floor, the lights in the kitchen were put out and the last faint yellow squares in the courtyard vanished. There was a new briskness in the breeze, high and unforgiving. It was a force for cleansing, for sweeping away.

Malfoy was waiting.

And time was short.

Inside, he shoved the doors closed until they stuck fast, as if they might hold back not only the daylight but all the days to come after that, the whisper of common sense and the gravitational pull of reality reasserting itself. He drove his shoulder against them until the wood creaked, then he groped around for the jewelled cross and wedged it into the handle to hold them.

The darkness was complete. In two steps, he had forgotten the room's layout and faltered.

"Where are you?"

There was no answer. His eyes tried to break open the gloom. His stomach was pressing up into his lungs. Surely Malfoy couldn't pick now of all times to lose his faith.

"Draco?" That word sounded terribly naked, hanging in the silence. "Draco, where are you?"

A half-step forward brought his knee against the corner of a chest. He swore.

Finally there was a laugh in the darkness, gentle despite the satisfaction in it. With a swish of silk-stockinged feet Malfoy's hand was in his. It was like holding a small snake, nimble and smooth against the fisherman's scars that marked his own skin, but Harry gripped tight and reeled Malfoy in towards him. Malfoy made no resistance, not until Harry's grip settled on the vulnerable flesh just above his hipbones. A gasp. A shiver that wasn't entirely arousal. It was deceptive how Malfoy recoiled from the first touch that promised anything more intimate than a kiss. He'd felt that tremor of cowardice enough times to know that just beyond it lay clumsy-mouthed abandon.

Running one hand down from the shoulder, Harry sought Malfoy's free hand. The unexpected sharpness made him flinch. Malfoy was clutching one of his strands of rosemary. The scent of it spilled into the air as Harry dislodged his fingers one by one. It was a fresh smell and clean. It

took him back to the hillsides he'd strode up with Sirius ten paces in front of him; to the open air and the undemanding companionship of the road. Rosemary was for remembrance. Malfoy had told him that. He slid the twig into his pocket and pulled Malfoy into his arms.

He bent to kiss Malfoy's shoulder, on the bare flesh and on the ridges of bone. For a few moments, Malfoy squirmed uncomfortably, as if trying to find an angle from which their embrace might seem less personal, less invasive. But Harry persisted, laying his hands flat over the moving sculpture of Malfoy's spine as the short, broken breaths fell onto the top of his head. That same muscle that flinched under his mouth perhaps wrapped its other end around a blunt plane of shoulder blade, touched another tendon that tugged between Malfoy's ribs. Strand by strand, this warp and weft of straining sinew threaded his body together. The absence of light had erased Malfoy's angular beauty and left him animal, elemental. A complex knot of muscle and bone for Harry to unravel.

He dragged his teeth lightly over the base of Malfoy's neck, as gently as peeling the skin from a peach as it released its fragrance and clung flirtatiously to the fruit beneath. He let the pulse run up into his jaw and did it again, slower. That was all it took. With a groan that seemed wrenched from him, Malfoy wound his hands into Harry's hair and made his last surrender.

Outside, the breeze whipped and dived and swept in the storm.

*

One storey below, by the fireplace in the great hall, the twins had left off drinking for singing, to little gain. It was the sort of song whose ending seemed always to be imminent but never quite arrived. The lines not only went round in circles, they attempted figures-of-eight.

"Trip no further pretty sweeting

Journeys end in lovers meeting

Every wise man's son doth quote

Meetings end in journeys greeting

Hear my lover sweetly bleating

Wise man's journey ends in goat.

What is love? Tis not hereafter,

Find it in the barn and pasture.

Love has tail and beard and horns.

Come and kiss me sweet and twenty

Keep your fame and wealth and plenty

Love is better left unshorn."

And present mirth had present laughter. And present ale had predictable effect. George slid contentedly down the wall and into the land of nod. Fred fell forward into a bowl of egg custard. The song slipped away gratefully. And, finally, softly, inevitably, the curtain of silence fell down upon the hall.

*

A room in the villa, it makes no different which. The darkness is making its first slow steps of retreat. And Harry, for the last time, is waking.

At his side, another figure, it makes no difference which, is sleeping still, one hand flung up onto the pillow and curled against Harry's neck.

Harry lets his eyes fall closed. He has a lover. He *is* a lover. And that transforms him. More than the fancy clothes, the funny turns of speech, the new colour in his skin, this remakes him. He holds his hand up in the gloom. It looks the same.

When his lover stirs in sleep and presses closer against Harry's hip, Harry burns. Where he feels it is that old familiar place, the chamber in his chest that has ached each time he has thought of Voldemort's victory and all the things it would destroy, of good wizards enslaved, of families bereaved and the extinguishment of hope. Today, this place in his heart has a face. Not only a face but a mouth that has been gentle beneath his, lithe and fearless hands, and eyes that are at their most beautiful when he turns to find them fixed on him with their curious, searching intensity. This slender body beside him is like a lightning rod for all the fleet and primitive impulses he has never been able to name. If Voldemort walked through the door this instant, Harry thinks he could strike him down with a word.

He counts them again, the four fingers and thumb. Square nails, slightly spaded fingertips. This is not the same hand.

As he bends to touch his lips to the white-skinned shoulder, he is thinking of the square kites which the scruffy children outside the town walls dragged behind them as they ran and screeched. That's how he feels. Anchored, yes, in a way that is new to him, but also dipping and skittering and buffeted by breeze. He is too happy to be still.

He slips off the bed, moving carefully so as not to wake the sleeper, and dresses.

Out in the gardens, the sodden ground retreats under his feet and even though the rain has

stopped for breath, the air is still thick and wet. As he walks towards the voices in the distance, he fancies that he hears his name called - his own name - but the sound is so high above him that it has to be the branches bending under the wind.

He finds Feste and Feste on the narrow platform of land between the cypress courtyard and the precipice. Through the thinning mist, he can just make out the lighter grey of the ocean and, beyond it, a tinge of violet along the horizon. The twins do not appear to have slept, not really. With their mugs filled and their voices gently hoarse with long work, they are winding their way through their tune from the feast. Acknowledging Harry with a sombre nod, they leave off the old refrain and begin anew:

"When that I was and a little tiny boy,

With a hey ho, the wind and the rain,

A foolish thing was but a toy.

And the rain it raineth every day."

It is a few moments before sunrise. Surely the timing of it is more than fortuitous. The coldness he feels is not only caused by the wet air. When he hears his own twin's footsteps behind him, his doubts become certainty. This is a curtaincall. A swansong. These words are the spell that brings everything to an end. The song is four verses old and a blade of orange runs across the edge of the sky. He feels for his twin's wrist as the singers' voices turn slow and melancholy and split into a harmony that floats over the empty courtyard and down toward the plain where it meets the spreading light.

"... and we'll strive to please you every day."

Liquid gold begins to bleed over the horizon, first in a fine point and then flooding outwards. Then the first spear of the sunlight strikes out at the sky and everything around him dissolves into light. Helpless and spinning, he presses his feet down but there is nothing beneath them. Up

and down become one and his white-blinded eyes are useless as he grapples with the air. A shudder goes through his limbs, the impact of two soft bodies colliding, and he feels the awful pull of gravity grabbing at him once more.

*

Silence.

A young man, lying face down with his black hair obscuring his face. Sprawled and unconscious; storm-tossed. He stirs on the grey floor of the Transfiguration classroom.

Hermione is on her knees beside him in an instant, shaking his shoulder and calling.

"Harry?" The sound still seems to come from a very long way off. "Harry!"

As Harry comes round, his vision is murky and grey. He slowly becomes aware of the insidious cold of the stone under his right side and a few hushed voices not far away. Hermione rescues his glasses from beneath the desk, mends them with a flick and a whisper and hands them back to him. They feel cold on his skin, but the world that squeezes back into focus within their circumference is the world he knows. The classroom looms above him and the twins' wand lies innocently a few inches from his hand. He closes his fingers around it and he closes his eyes.

"Well, Potter," McGonagall is saying. "We lost you for a few moments there." She turns briskly to the students gathered around him. "Let this be a lesson in concentration. As the rest of you will recall, the words of the spell are *dedite noctem*. What Potter uttered, if it meant anything at all, would be-"

"Twelfth night," Harry breathes.

"Indeed."

Ron takes a fistful of his jumper and helps pull him to his feet, where he sways slightly and pulls his robes tighter around himself. His right ear and shoulder throb where he must have landed on them. On the floor where he had fallen, a strand of rosemary lies. The professor regards him severely.

"Where did you get this?"

"Picked it."

"On the school grounds?"

Harry shrugs.

"Let me have that wand, Potter." She turns it over on her palm, then swishes and flicks: "*Leviosa!*" The goldfish bowl shoots up through the ceiling leaving a clean-cut tunnel and a shower of shattered masonry. McGonagall drops the wand quickly onto her desk.

"Professor Flitwick will need to have a look at this. Are you certain you're feeling quite well?"

Harry slips the rosemary into his pocket and grins hesitantly. "Yes, Professor. Never better."

As he resumes his seat, the quill fits into his hand like it had never left. He twirls it to make the feather scratch his skin. But the fingers that grip it, sure and tight as a piece of rigging, look out

of place.

"Where did you get that wand?" Hermione whispers across the aisle, and Harry finds himself smiling as he mouths, "Twins".

She shakes her head. "Typical! There's a reason why unstable wand cores are illegal. It could have killed you. I expect it's Nundu whiskers or some untested hybrid. You're lucky you didn't turn the whole school into a mushroom!"

"You all right, mate?" Ron asks quietly and Harry nods. He has to concentrate hard to detect it, but somewhere nearby is the faintest scent of ale.

The lesson continues as Lavender takes her turn. On the desktop is a dimly remembered carving of a Thestral, all sharp lines and fearsome muscle. The twins' song is still in his ears: *Sweet and twenty ... lies no plenty ... sweet and twenty.* Harry traces his quill tip idly over it. With a few careful strokes and a willing imagination, the downturned wing becomes a smudgy figure, lean and straight, which stands by the horse's flank with a hand on its neck. The beast seems to calm a little. Harry smiles.

*

Forgive me. I don't want to do it. Don't want to tell it. Every word now is a snapping strand in the rope that holds us suspended in this world. In the chasm below lies our ending and I cannot, *will not,* let you go.

But I must. Onward now, for without an ending we cannot trace our journey and see where we have been. The journey matters - oh yes, a story is no story without a journey and telling is only another way of travelling. But the journey is not the only thing. The destination is paramount. Only from this high point can we look back and see the pattern in our steps.

Climb the stairs with me, then, slipping unseen between groups of students carrying their piles of books. Time slips by us as we move through the darkening corridors. By the time we reach the door to the owlery, the torches have all sprung into life and the air is chilly with night.

Inside, the silence is marred only by the birds shifting and scratching on their perches. Wait with me. There is no warmth but here where our elbows come together. The darkness deepens. Now and then, one more bird slips out for the hunt.

There it is. The door slowly opens and closes. Harry struggles to pick out Hedwig in the gloom, but when she alights on his wrist he murmurs "Sorry, girl. You're too obvious."

She is turned to the wall in pique as he ties the small scroll to the leg of a badly groomed barn owl with anonymous brown plumage.

What he whispers to the owl is lost in Hedwig's hoot of reprimand, but you can see how his right hand is still grasping the edge of the parchment tightly and leaving a sweaty mark. There is colour high in his cheeks as his gaze lingers on the scroll. Grave doubt is etched on his forehead. Then he nods to himself and strokes the bird's back gratefully. In a flutter of robes, he turns and hurries from the room.

And where the letter goes, and the expression of astonishment or disgust on the recipient's face when it arrives, those stories are for the future. Their reality is yet to come. Now is not the time to tell them.

*

There is one last story to unfold.

You. Me. A room full of night. The soft beat of owl wings.

Your cheek is warm beneath my lips. We have left traces upon each other, you and I, this story. The salt crystals still cling to your skin, tiny diamonds deep in your pores, and in the ends of your hair is the fragrance of climbing rose. Perhaps only I can detect it. Outwardly you appear the same, but the acts of telling and listening leave their marks. Like the spring floods slowly changing the face of the mountainside. It isn't only the story that matters.

And me? Understand if I hold you too tightly; be gentle if I tremble. I am only afraid of this parting. My heart is heavy with the loss of you. Do you blame me?

Give me your hand now. This is the last time I will ask it.

Here.

Take this one silvery owl feather - the colour of sand under moonlight, of sea under cloud, of a morning sky too early to disclose its intentions. Thread the feather into your buttonhole. Take this memento. Take my blessings.

Now go safely on your way.

Do you call this an ending?

Or is it, perhaps, a beginning.

What you will.

*

end

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