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Name: Take Your Bloody Traditions And
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Chapter 1 to 2

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Chapter: 1

Title: Take Your Bloody Traditions And—

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Pairings: Harry/Draco, Harry/Ginny, others mentioned

Word Count: ~21,000

Rating: R/M

Warnings: DH spoilers (ignores epilogue), slash sex, mentions of het, profanity, weddings, fluff.

Summary: Harry and Ginny are getting married because, well, it's what everyone expects them to do. But amid the bustle of the preparations, Draco Malfoy suddenly starts courting Harry. Harry really cannot find the words to express how much this annoys him.

Author's Notes: Written for a long-ago request by ethelnorthbrook for a fic in which Draco courts Harry. This is, I think, the fluffiest thing I have ever written ever; it is as fluffy as three bunnies hopping through a cloud of cotton. Take warning.

Take Your Bloody Traditions And—

"Really, Mr. Potter." Madam Malkin's voice was so pained that Harry felt as though he had just injured a helpless Crup. "If you would stay still, then this would be done quickly enough."

Harry folded his arms and scowled at the far wall. Madam Malkin promptly jabbed him with a pin. Harry yelped and dropped his arms to his sides.

"That's better. You were ruining the line of your shoulders." The witch stepped back and frowned at him for long moments, her squint pronounced. Harry hoped resentfully that she would go blind trying to concentrate on the sparkling golden material of the robes which had been deemed right for him to get married in. She caught his glance and clucked her tongue at him. "Really, Mr. Potter," she said, and Harry was getting bloody tired of *that*, too. "Don't you want to look nice for your wedding?"

Harry bit his lips until they threatened to bleed. As a matter of fact, no, he didn't care about that anymore. The past three months had been a bustle of preparations for food, flowers, robes, invitations, pictures, compromises with the press to keep the most obtrusive reporters out of the ceremony, gifts, and God knew what else; Mrs. Weasley was handling most of the elements of the marriage because she wanted to. If Harry could have kidnapped Ginny the next morning and run off to some private mediwizard who would marry them—as Harry had heard some of them had dispensation to in some parts of Ireland—then he would have done it.

But Ginny sighed when he suggested it and pressed his hand and said, "You realize we're doing this for them more than us, right, Harry? Think how heartbroken Mum would be if we ran off. Even Dad wouldn't like it."

And she didn't mention all the *other* people who wanted to see their hero get married as a means of soothing the anxieties that still prevailed after the Battle of Hogwarts and setting life back on a normal course. Somehow, the entire wizarding world had decided, things would get better if Harry would just walk off with a bride on his arm and then have kids.

Harry had always wanted a family. He had been sure for most of the past year that he wanted to have it with Ginny. And he knew he would have to settle down and be happy after all the preparations were done. But right now, he just wanted it to be *done.*

"And there you are, Mr. Potter," said Madam Malkin, with a bob of her head that made the pins in her hair rustle. "It doesn't take long when you simply allow an artist to get on with her work undisturbed." She whisked the golden cloth away from him and chivvied him towards the door with a wave of her hand.

Harry leaped down, glad for the excuse to move after two hours of standing still. He even made it to the door in a good mood, before he remembered that there were at least six other places in Diagon Alley he had to go before he was able to return home.

With a groan, he dug out the list Hermione had made him from a pocket of his robes. Wedding robe-fitting, done. And then Mrs. Weasley wanted him to get new shoes—she objected to his getting married in trainers—and the *Daily Prophet* had only agreed not to besiege the wedding if Harry came and did an interview with them this afternoon, and there were sweets to order, and…

A familiar laugh cut across the air. Harry jerked his head up. Coming down the middle of Diagon Alley was a procession of swirling blue silk robes, bobbing white peacock plumes, and platinum-fair hair.

Harry snorted and ducked out of sight into a side alley with a faint smile. Trust Malfoy to be holding court right in the open. He certainly had recovered his spirit after his family had been spared Azkaban and anything more humiliating than house arrest. (He seemed to forget that they were largely free because of Harry's testimony, but, well, like Harry had expected *gratitude* from the Malfoys). And the house arrest only applied to his parents, leaving Malfoy free to re-establish himself.

He seemed to have decided that the way to do that was to spend his parents' money. Wild parties flowed out of the pubs in Diagon and the expensive new flat Malfoy had taken in Hogsmeade all night long. Drunken broomstick races were held from Hogwarts out across the sea to the Hebrides. Life-like Golden Snidgets Transfigured from buttons served as prizes in impromptu Quidditch matches. And Bill had told Harry with some grimness that Malfoy had rediscovered some ancient "harmless" curses from Merlin-knew-where and cast them on those of his friends and admirers who volunteered to be paid an obscene amount of Galleons for the privilege.

Perhaps the biggest sign of Malfoy's decadence was the white peacock feathers on the heads of his favorites, which he plucked from the birds in the Manor's gardens. He had abandoned dignity and reserve in the pursuit of pleasure and a riotous good time—and a good name eventually, Harry was sure. This was the best way to ensure that Malfoy became friends with the children of the people his parents might have alienated.

In the majority of Harry's moods these days, having fun sounded like a grand idea. Disguising himself with a glamour and hanging about the edge of one of the parties would be ideal. He would catch glimpses of the wild life he was leaving behind to be a staid, respectable married man.

At twenty.

Still, he didn't want to meet Malfoy wearing his own face, so he walked briskly down the side-alley. He would slip into George's shop—still hard, sometimes, to think that there would only be one face behind the counter ever again—and into the main alley behind Malfoy's carousing group.

An owl fluttered overhead. Harry tilted his head back to watch it idly; it was a snowy owl, just like Hedwig, and the flash of white feathers caught his attention even now.

He started in surprise when the owl landed on his shoulder, shifting its weight delicately to avoid pressing its claws into anything too tender, and then ducked its head and bobbed it. It had a letter clutched in its beak, with a bundle hanging off it, tied with green ribbon. Blinking, Harry took the envelope.

He wondered for a moment if the sender had instructed the owl to deliver the letter to him only when he was alone. That was thoughtful.

And maybe evil, he reminded himself, and cast several spells to test for hexes. Nothing appeared, however, so in the end he slipped out the single sheet of parchment inside and read through the message.

Dear Harry:

I hope that you don't take this amiss. I can't be sure you've ever heard of this custom, or that you'll respect it if you have. But I do take this seriously, and I've given everything its proper name so that you can look it up any time you want. Or have Granger look it up for you, which I don't say with any disrespect. I've wished I had a friend as smart as her. Gregory refuses to see what's right in front of him, what would make him happy.

I intend to Court you. Why? Because I think I can make you happy, and I know *that you can make me so. If you give this a chance, and make the proper response. And since the war, I've had enough of sitting around and waiting for what I want to come to me.*

Attached to this letter is my first gift. You'll enjoy it. And even if you choose to cut the Courtship off, you can keep it.

Draco Malfoy.

Harry stared at the letter for some time, shaking his head back and forth. The white owl took flight from his arm into the sky. Harry ran his fingers over the spiky, confident letters, both frowning and thinking deeply.

Why would Malfoy do this? Boys didn't court other boys.

But too many motives sprang to mind. Power, attention, the pleasure of duping Harry, sinister vengeance for his parents' house arrest…

Harry shook his head again and then remembered the bundle. He opened it, and as he shook it out, in grew in his hands. Evidently, opening the package undid the shrinking spell that had confined it so far.

It was a green silk cloak, magnificent, in the color that Hermione had been urging him to wear for the wedding before gold was decided on, because, she said, it just matched the color of his eyes. Harry stared at it, baffled. Malfoy ought to know that fancy clothes weren't the way to appeal to him.

Well, of course he knows that. You didn't think this was serious, did you?

Suddenly furious—probably because of the strangeness and newness the letter had hinted at, and which was now forfeit—Harry spun and Apparated on the spot.

"And then I said to Brandon—"

Harry appeared again in the midst of a whirl of laughter and applause. Colors swirled in front of his face, but they had stopped by the time that he managed to focus his eyes. He wasn't entirely sure if they had been the sparks that often appeared to him when he Apparated or simply the cloaks and robes of the garishly-dressed people around him.

They stared at him: wealthy young pure-blood men, witches so delicately beautiful that Harry thought Ginny would shine in the midst of them like a flame, a few people so pale that they might have been taken for vampires if they weren't walking in the sunlight. The circle immediately in front of Harry wore white peacock feathers.

"Stand aside," said an imperious voice.

The circle became a semi-circle, and Draco Malfoy strutted through and stood in front of Harry, head on one side. "Yes?" he asked, voice politely curious.

Harry had been abashed immediately after he Apparated, wondering if he had the right to intrude on a private celebration like this, but the sight of Malfoy made his teeth grind again. Malfoy wore a set of robes that seemed plain enough until he moved, and then they stormed with color, blue and green and purple in metallic shades. The effect was striking with his pale face and hair and eyes and feather in his hat, and Harry hated himself for noticing that it was striking.

"What do you mean by this?" he asked flatly, and thrust the letter at Malfoy. The cloak swung from the same fist. "I know it's a joke, but I can't figure out what you mean by it. Will this cloak make me disappear when I put it on? Turn me inside out?"

He expected Malfoy to glare at him hatefully and retreat, but instead he smiled and laughed softly, clasping Harry's wrist and tugging him near. Their breaths mingled in the space between them. Harry was reminded uncomfortably both of the moments he'd shared in Hogwarts corridors with Malfoy just before fights and of the few stolen times he'd been alone with Ginny in the past few months.

But he braved it out. The intention of courting him could not possibly be serious. He sneered, and Malfoy's smile grew broader and softer.

"You look beautiful no matter what," Malfoy said softly. "So long as you're angry, defiant, challenging—anything but the broken-down creature I've seen in the past few months."

"I am not *broken-down*," Harry said. He wanted to kick Malfoy, except that now they were adults and he couldn't do anything so childish. And starting a fight would either win him unwanted attention or get Malfoy sent in for a trial, or probably both. He had to settle for glaring instead. "I'm getting married to the woman I love—"

"Of course you are," Malfoy said amiably, and only the tightening of his fingers on Harry's wrist showed that he disliked the mention of Ginny. "That's why you've looked as if you're about to

vomit on a regular basis."

"It's just nerves!" Harry wanted to pull away from the hold on his wrist, but he was all too aware of what it would look to their watching audience, and to Malfoy, if he did. He contented himself with a heated whisper. "Lots of grooms get them."

"Not this kind," Malfoy said, and his voice became a persuasive whisper in return. "Don't you deserve some fun and some pleasure after ridding the world of the Dark Lord, Harry? Why should you rush into adult responsibilities right away?"

It was only persuasive because it sounded like the voice he heard in his head when he went to sleep, Harry told himself fiercely. And he knew to distrust that voice. It was the one that told him to leave Ginny. But he loved and wanted Ginny. He *did.* "I don't want the kind of fun you're having," he said. "I'd only regret it in the morning. And besides, I need someone to rescue and take care of. I want a family." There. All that was certainly true, and it ought to balance him against what Malfoy was offering.

Malfoy's smile deepened. He had a faint touch of blood to his cheeks now, which, Harry hated to admit and had to, made him look more attractive. "Courting is serious," he said. "You should look it up, really. You can still have your family and your settled life and someone to take care of. I'm sure that I could need rescuing sometimes, just to please you." His eyelashes fluttered obscenely. "I want to please you, Harry."

He had dreamed of someone speaking to him that way, too. Ginny was too shy ever to do so.

Harry ground his teeth and told himself that it would be different when they were married. Ginny had been raised with very traditional values, that was all, and she didn't want to do anything too wild before the wedding night. "You still haven't explained what the cloak does, Malfoy," he said, and thrust it roughly back at him. "Take it. I don't—"

Malfoy laid a finger over his lips. Harry was so shocked that he just stood there and allowed it. "Hush," Malfoy crooned. "You don't know what you're saying, and that upsets me. The nature of the gift will be explained when you look up Courting. As for what it does—"

He swept the cloak smoothly from Harry's hand and around his shoulders before he could object, managing to smooth a crease in the corner as he did so.

Harry gasped. The world had vanished around him, and he hung high in the sky on a particularly brilliant spring day, whilst the Snitch darted in front of him and beneath him the crowd in the Gryffindor stands cheered deliriously. The wind teased and tugged at his hair. He could feel the broom between his legs and the broom bristles scratching at his rump.

"It's been implanted with memories." Malfoy's voice came to him out of what looked like an empty patch of blue sky. "Hogwarts memories. I thought that you'd never really got to experience your childhood there the way you should have. Well, now you can. Think of any place you

regularly went in Hogwarts, and you should find yourself there."

Harry pushed the cloak off his shoulders, and found himself standing in the middle of Diagon Alley again. Malfoy's tagalongs were silent, as if the sight of Harry standing there and gaping like an idiot had impressed them.

Harry glared at Malfoy, but his grip on the cloak was tight. He had missed Hogwarts like mad since leaving after his sixth year. He'd decided not to go back for his NEWTS, but to take a year off and study for the exams privately. He had thought he wouldn't be able to stand seeing the classrooms again and remembering everyone who died.

He didn't think he could give the cloak up.

"Why are you doing this?" he whispered.

"Because I want to make you happy," Malfoy whispered into his ear, and leaned forwards as if he would steal a kiss.

Harry Apparated again, this time back to the Burrow, scatter-brained and gasping for breath for some odd reason.

"Harry! Where have you been?"

Harry just had time to fend off Hermione's charge, and then he found himself holding a woven bag filled with something that rustled and crumpled under his hands. He stared at the bag blankly, then smelled it. The scent of roses filled his nose so powerfully that he coughed, his eyes watering.

"You don't smell it," Hermione said in an aggrieved voice, and tugged him out the door. "They're hung around the house to create a web of blessing." Despite the flush on her cheeks, she smiled at Harry. "Isn't that *interesting*?"

Harry shuddered, but he was thinking of something more than the immediate present. Hermione had read up on all the wizarding wedding traditions before she started helping Mrs. Weasley; Harry suspected she wouldn't have thought herself qualified to help otherwise. Maybe she could tell him about this Courting Malfoy had mentioned, and why expensive gifts and flirtatious seduction seemed to be a part of it.

"It's interesting," he said casually, and then started to levitate a bag of rose petals towards the roof. "Can you tell me—"

"*Harry!*" Hermione stamped her foot. "You have to hang them by hand, not by magic! Or all the virtue goes out of them."

"Oh." Harry blinked and decided he wasn't about to argue with her in this mood. Instead, he

conjured a ladder from a stone—he had grown rather proud of how good he was at Transfiguration, and he had taken a high NEWT in it—and leaned it against the side of the Burrow. Hermione began tossing rose-bags to him; Harry began conjuring hooks, too, when he found out that the bags had string loops woven on the top, but no other apparent means of hanging them. "Have you ever heard of something called a Courting?" he asked at last.

"Yes." Hermione looked up, her eyes narrowed. "But why do you ask? You and Ginny are having a traditional wedding, and Courting is something else, and Harry, we *really* don't have time to change everything we've agreed on now, you're getting married in a month—"

"I know that," Harry said hastily. "But there was another customer in Madam Malkin's this morning, and she was giggling and saying that she was being Courted. I didn't know what she meant."

"You're not usually that curious, Harry." Hermione had rocked back on her heels and was still regarding him skeptically. Harry suspected Ginny might have confessed some of her own inclination to run off to Hermione.

"She seemed happy," Harry said, and let some of his bitterness slip into his voice. "Happier than I am about this bustle."

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said, her face softening. "You know that it's because Mrs. Weasley wants the best for both of you, and because you're a celebrity and your wedding would be a madhouse *anyway*—"

"I know," Harry said. "I just wish—well, never mind." Hermione's face had begun to change alarmingly. "But I'd like to know what a Courting is. Her talk about it is all I had to listen to for two solid hours, but I never got a good sense of what it *was*."

Hermione nodded absently and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "It's when someone decides to approach someone else for a—well, call it a *non-traditional* marriage," she said. "It has a special name, but I can't remember it right now—"

Harry gave a gasp of mock horror, and the next bag of rose-petals Hermione tossed at him almost knocked him off the ladder.

"But there's more than one form of marriage in the wizarding world, you know," Hermione continued. "Nowadays most people have weddings like this—"

"How do they sleep at night?" Harry muttered, causing another hook to pop out of the side of the Burrow's roof with unnecessary force.

Hermione ignored him. "And like Bill's and Fleur's. But there were also marriages made between pure-bloods for the sole purpose of having children, and for making sure that there was a legal heir from a family they could trust in the case that a man or woman who didn't want to marry

traditionally died early, and for—oh, dozens of other reasons." She smoothed her hair away from her face again, this time casting a spell so that it would hover behind her instead of getting in the way. "But the Courting led up to a union that was more flexible than either of those. It was what the partners wanted it to be. It could have sexual fidelity and legal aspects incorporated into it, but mostly it tied together two people so that they could trust each other. It was meant to make them happy."

Harry swallowed. "The girl in Madam Malkin's said something about gifts," he said as casually as he could, whilst he caught another rose-bag and hung it in place. He was glad that he'd thought to tuck the green silk cloak away again before he returned to the Burrow. "Are they part of the Courting, too?"

"Oh, yes," Hermione said. She sounded more relaxed than Harry had heard her in weeks. He suspected she liked talking and speculating about wizarding traditions more than she did actually participating in them. "The person who initiates the Courting sends one they think the recipient will like. The recipient can refuse it, and that marks the end of the Courting. Accepting it and sending a return letter says that the Courting can continue, but it doesn't constitute encouragement."

Harry was silent, thinking frantically, as he moved his ladder around the Burrow and the hanging of rose-bags continued. Did he *want* Malfoy to Court him? The green cloak was a wonderful gift, but Harry hated to think of himself bound to spread his legs for Malfoy—or whatever it was that two blokes did with each other—just because he'd received a few nice presents. And who was to say that the other gifts would be equally thoughtful?

"It sounds like bribery," he said.

"It isn't," Hermione said firmly, standing on her toes so that Harry could reach the bag she held out. She seemed to have got tired of levitating them—or, more likely, Harry thought, she'd been using her own magical strength all day and was nearly exhausted. "The person being Courted can break up the Courtship at any time, just by sending a letter saying so. The Courtship has to be willing, or it doesn't *mean* anything."

Harry nodded and swallowed. He couldn't believe he was actually considering what he was considering.

But why not? You heard Hermione; you can break it off when you like. And how quickly can Malfoy possibly Court you before the wedding? He'll doubtless give it all up when he sees that you're going to marry Ginny anyway.

Harry relaxed. Yes, he deserved a little excitement in his life. And he was interested to see what Malfoy would send next. Maybe a letter saying "Fuck off, Potter," because he was likely to demand a gift in return instead of just a letter saying that he could continue, the greedy bastard.

"That's better," Hermione said approvingly. "You're smiling again. Remember that you should be

getting married for love, Harry."

"I do remember that," Harry said quickly, and hung up the last bag. The cloak felt like a burning coal in his pocket, and he didn't want to think of Ginny's face.

I can break it off whenever I like.

He thought of Malfoy's face instead when Harry didn't fall over his feet to accept his offer, and smiled.

Composing the letter was unexpectedly difficult.

Harry had originally intended to just dash off a few lines—*Here I am, Malfoy. Court me if you dare*—but then he had begun to think that might make Malfoy decide he was refusing. Harry had no idea what had made Malfoy start this in the first place; what if he could end it with a few careless words?

He didn't want that to happen. It was something that wasn't wedding preparations, and that was so rare in his world he was willing to take risks to keep it.

He sucked the end of the quill thoughtfully and closed his eyes. The cloak was around his shoulders, and where he should have seen the backs of his eyelids, he saw instead the brilliant interior of the Gryffindor common room. Hermione sat in a chair, her eyebrows bent in a ferocious scowl, studying a book. Neville was telling stories of his slaying of Nagini to a group of wide-eyed first-years. And several boys were wrestling, and Lavender and Parvati were giggling to each other, and games of wizarding chess and Exploding Snap were in progress, and altogether it looked so much like home that it made Harry's throat ache.

All right, so I'm greedy, too. If the first gift is this good, who knows what else Malfoy might send me?

Someone knocked on the door.

Harry started up, his eyes wide. It was stupid of him to think that people would leave him alone, even in the Weasley attic. Mrs. Weasley probably had some new flowers for him to approve, or she'd decided to change the color of the wedding robes *again* and she wanted his approval for *that*—

But it was Ginny who pushed her head in through the doorway and frowned at him for a moment before saying, "Where did you get that cloak?"

"Er, wedding present," said Harry, truthfully if not honestly, and hurried forwards to embrace her. "I didn't think I'd see you tonight. Wasn't this your evening for hiding out with Fleur and the baby in Shell Cottage?"

Ginny's face softened at the mention of her niece. She'd make a wonderful mother, Harry thought, and it was his responsibility to give her that. They'd agreed that they'd get married. And when the children came, he had no doubt his regrets would fade.

Suddenly, he was glad that he hadn't written a line to Malfoy so far. Risking his happiness with Ginny seemed like an incredibly stupid and petty thing to do.

Before he could tell her what he'd almost done and that he never planned to do anything as stupid again, Ginny sighed and raked a hand through her mass of hair. It hung nearly to her waist now. She'd threatened to cut it right before the wedding and march to the altar with nothing but red stubble on her scalp, but Molly had fainted, and it had taken two hours to calm the tears afterwards. Arthur had made Ginny promise not to joke about it again.

"It got—disrupted," she said. "Fleur wouldn't stop talking about wedding preparations, and then I had yet *another* fitting."

"Robes?" Harry grimaced, thinking of the two hours he'd spent in Madam Malkin's.

Ginny shook her head tragically and sat down on a broken crate. The ghoul made an ominous bumping sound from behind them. "Shoes." She gave him a sharp glance. "And Hermione says that you never picked up yours."

Harry moaned. "And I never made it to that interview, either. Reporters will be *crawling* over the house tomorrow." He dropped down next to her. "Sorry, Gin. I got—distracted. And I just wanted out of Diagon Alley before someone recognized me."

Ginny put an arm around him and leaned her head on his shoulder in silent sympathy. Harry embraced her back. She was solid and warm next to him, and if he no longer wanted her quite as passionately as he had before their affair had the sanction of the entire wizarding world, he still knew he could be happy with her.

Well, content.

Well, not unhappy most of the time, either.

But the *solidity* was the important thing, Harry hastily reassured himself. This thing he was letting himself believe he could have with Malfoy was the thinnest, most airy, insubstantial object, spun of fairy wings and moonlight. How could he risk solidity and children and a wife and the Weasleys' family gatherings for that?

"Harry," Ginny said, so softly that Harry could hardly hear her.

"Hmmm?" Harry brushed a lock of hair out of her eyes and smiled down at her. Really, he owed her for rescuing him from something desperately stupid.

Ginny tilted her head back, and her eyes were deep and brilliant in the light of the fire that Harry had lit on the hearth he'd Transfigured most of the attic wall into. "Do you wonder *who* we're doing this for? Ourselves?" Her hand crept up his chest and pressed over his heart. "Or *them*?" A jerk of her head encompassed the entire house below.

Harry swallowed, and felt as if Malfoy had Apparated into the room to smirk at him. "I wonder, of course," he said slowly. "But the correct answer is both, isn't it?"

"It's just—" Ginny moved her hands restlessly, dancing them like butterflies past his face. Harry caught her fingers and kissed them. For some reason, that made Ginny grow very still and look at him again, cocking her head slightly as if she could encompass and hold onto him with her gaze.

"Harry," she said, "if you had fallen in love with someone else and wanted to call the wedding off, you would tell me, wouldn't you?"

Harry's mouth fell open. "Gin," he said, "I'm *not* in love with anyone else! Promise! Please tell me you're not believing the rubbish that *Diamond* reports." The *Diamond* was a new paper that had sprung up in the wake of the war and which made its profits solely from reporting on rumors and news concerning Harry.

"No," Ginny said. She sounded slightly breathless. "But we're good friends before we're boyfriend and girlfriend—or bridegroom and bride. You *would* tell me?"

Harry's stomach clenched. The cloak around his shoulders seemed to grow heavier. He recalled, with extraordinary clarity when he had the girl he was going to marry in his arms, the pressure of Malfoy's fingers on his wrist, the harsh rake of his breath.

I think that I can make you happy, and I know *you can make me so.*

When had he lost that certainty with Ginny?

But she was looking up at him, so appealingly, and Harry couldn't do this to her. He wouldn't write a letter to Malfoy. Malfoy would be miffed for a while, but then doubtless he would find someone else to Court. Hermione had told him how casual those relationships created by Courting were.

Harry wanted—had to have—something else. Something serious, something he could build a future on.

"I would tell you," he said, and tightened his arms around Ginny, burying his nose in her hair. "But there's no one else, Gin. Not at all."

Ginny exhaled a sigh that seemed to come from her toes. "I didn't think so," she said.

When she left, Harry Vanished the quill and tore up the parchment, to prove to himself that he

was out of temptation's way. He stood over the conjured table when he'd finished, breathing hard and feeling virtuous.

Of course, he could still close his eyes and enjoy the intense vision of the Gryffindor common room, since this was the only gift he would ever have from Malfoy.

Then his eyes blinked open, and he stared at the far wall in confusion.

The memories implanted in the cloak had to be based on memories taken from Pensieves, or so Harry had read that evening when he'd Apparated to Grimmauld Place and sneaked a book on the subject of enchanted clothing out of the library there. And he was certain Malfoy had never been in the Gryffindor common room himself.

So who had contributed this memory for him?

Malfoy's second gift came two days later.

It was the middle of June and so of course it was hot, but Ron, bored with yet another endless lecture on the order in which they were to enter the Burrow's garden and seat themselves at the table, had conjured a miniature snowstorm the moment his mother remembered two recipes she had yet to secure and hurried off to owl Fleur's mother. Now he and Harry ran through the middle of the garden, packing snowballs and hurling them at each other. Harry, borne backwards by one in the middle of his forehead, laughed and scrambled up, drawing his wand to thicken the storm; the sun had already melted the flakes tumbling at the edges.

The white owl dived at him so neatly and swiftly that Harry thought it was another snowball at first. He ducked and weaved, but the owl pursued him and landed on his shoulder. Fluttering its wings, it clung until Harry gave up trying to get away and scowled at it.

This time, the bundle dangling off the letter was attached with a red ribbon, and it had a flash of metal like the colors in Malfoy's robes. Harry shook his head in slight bafflement as he took the letter. Malfoy had sent him *another* gift? He had thought it would take a letter from him to make the git want to continue the Courtship.

"What have you got there, mate?"

Shite. He'd forgotten about Ron. Harry started and smiled hastily, and the owl sank its claws into his shoulders to show him it was displeased with this behavior. Harry had an excuse to yelp, then. "Bloody wedding gift," he said. "There's some girl who was in Madam Malkin's the other day and thought it was her duty to 'offer me felicitations.'" He rolled his eyes and made himself detach the bundle and hold it up, even though he was really longing to go away and examine it privately. "And here it is."

Ron tore away the red ribbon and laughed at the object revealed: a ring made of twisted silver wire. "She has bad taste," he said, pointing to a single green stone in the top. "I bet that's green

glass, and not an emerald."

Harry swallowed down his objection and offered what felt like a traitorous smile instead. "I'd rather read the letter alone," he said. "God knows what she'll say, and Ginny doesn't have anything to worry about, but sometimes she acts like she does."

"Yes," Ron said, eyes unexpectedly direct. "I'd noticed that, too." He leaned forwards, his gaze searching. "Look, mate, if you were unhappy, you'd *say* something, right? I mean, it's not as if you have to marry Ginny. Only, you started this awfully fast."

"Ron." Harry pretended to swat him playfully on the side of the head. "I can't go back now."

"Yes, you could." Ron blinked at him and tilted his head. "It's *your* wedding."

It stopped belonging to me the moment thousands of wizards and witches decided to make it their hope for the future, Harry thought grimly, but managed to give Ron an earnest glance. "Ronald Bilius Weasley, I really do want to marry your sister."

Ron shuddered dramatically. "Ugh, not you, too. It's bad enough when Hermione says my name like that." Then he grinned and shook Harry's hand with pretend affability. "Welcome to the family."

"Thanks." Harry clapped Ron on the shoulder. And, proving that fate did favor him sometimes, Mrs. Weasley yelled from inside the house.

"Ron! I need you to come here and cast a translation charm."

Ron winced and marched into the house with the expression of a soldier going to his doom. Harry, his fingers trembling with cold and not anything else, ripped the envelope open and nearly severed the letter inside. It was two sheets of parchment this time.

Dear Harry:

I'm sure that you must be wondering why I'm contacting you again, when you were so ill-bred as to reply to my last letter and gift with silence. Well, I consider your facing me in Diagon Alley and not giving me a positive refusal as encouragement enough to continue. I know that I have a stubborn mate and one who'll need a lot of wooing.

How many times have you ever been wanted solely for yourself, and not for the scar that decorates your forehead or that beauty you wear all ignorant of its existence? And don't tell me the Weasley chit counts. She was in love with you before she ever saw you. It's the Boy-Who-Lived she wants to marry, and not Harry Potter.

Harry scowled at the letter and thought seriously about ripping it up. Malfoy was allowed to target Harry all he liked, but Harry thought Ginny should be exempt from his general

prattishness.

I think the experience can't be common. Well, I want you for yourself. I want you for the anger that made you beat me up on the Quidditch Pitch and come after me in the corridors when you had nothing better to do with your time. I want you for the stubbornness that made you defy Umbridge to her face—which wasn't the smartest thing you could have done; I don't know if I ever told you that—and catch and keep hold of the Snitch when you had a broken arm. I want you with your face pale and flushed, for your fingers that are so clumsy I think sometimes you messed up potions for the pleasure of scrubbing them clean again, for your killing grace on a broom. I want you for all the things you are, and for the things I've heard hinted at but never seen except from a distance: a laugh, a genuine smile, your tears.

Harry knew he was a bit flushed by the end of that paragraph, and he cleared his throat. "You have fucking weird taste, Malfoy," he whispered, because there was always the chance that Mrs. Weasley or one of the innumerable Weasley cousins and aunts who were in and out of the Burrow to help with the wedding would creep up behind him just then.

And I want you to see me for what I am, and want me, too. You're not there yet, but you will be if I'm allowed to continue my Courtship.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Keep dreaming."

I have two gifts for you this time. One is the ring. Put it on, and it has a memory charm that will interact with your deepest mind, the buried subconscious we usually can't access past the time we're infants. Since it's you, Harry, I'll drop all the magical theory language and say that the ring will allow you to remember your parents.

Harry was certain he had stopped breathing. He stared at the letter helplessly, then at the twisted silver ring. This time, he could see that the twist had a pattern to it, and that the emerald was the eye of a snake.

And the second is an invitation to one of those nighttime flights you may have heard about. We start from the Astronomy Tower at midnight. Bring your broom and your courage. You'll need both.

Draco Malfoy.

There was a fire on top of the Astronomy Tower.

Harry, who had Apparated to the outskirts of Hogsmeade, stood looking at it for long moments before he swung one leg over his new Moonbrush broom and began to fly towards it.

The countryside slid beneath him, dark except for an occasional silver flash when the moonlight caught the water of the lake. Harry could see nodding shifts of gray and black where the Forbidden Forest tossed. He looped and circled lower, and a howl that sounded remarkably like a

werewolf's rose out of the trees to meet him, even though it wasn't a full moon. Harry shivered and pulled himself higher.

He was grateful he had thought to bring Quidditch gear; the robes would protect him from the cold, and the gloves would protect his hands. Harry had absolutely no idea what route Malfoy intended to fly, or how fast, or how long it would take.

It occurred to him, dimly, that he must have been mad to sneak out of the Burrow and leave no better clue to his whereabouts than a vaguely-worded note. He didn't know if he would be back by morning. He should have written another letter to Malfoy and insisted on a short flight.

But that would have been wrong.

Harry didn't question the impulse. (He was doing a lot of that lately). He only knew it would have been. He leaned forwards on his broom and urged it faster.

As he came closer and began to spiral up, he realized there wasn't actually a fire burning on top of the Astronomy Tower; instead, a complicated glamour had been put up to create the illusion of light and heat. Harry hovered beyond the parapets and tossed his cloak back so that Malfoy could see his face. The glamour's light ought to be bright enough for that. It was certainly bright enough for him to see Malfoy standing, not, as he had expected, in the middle of a circle of sycophants, but alone, one foot firmly planted, one arm and one leg slung around a broom. He saw Harry and smiled. The light caught like real flames in his hair, in his eyes, in the clean white shirt he wore and the stunning purple robes. Harry caught his breath, and Malfoy's smile deepened.

Annoyed to realize that he had given exactly the reaction Malfoy wanted and expected, Harry cleared his throat gruffly. "Why am I here?" he asked.

"To receive my third gift," Malfoy said. His voice was smooth and deep, and the way his eyes seemed to burn as he gazed at Harry—with firelight, it had to be with that—was positively uncanny. "How did you enjoy the first two?"

Harry swallowed and closed his fist around the ring on the index finger of his right hand. He couldn't admit to Malfoy what the memories of his parents cradling him and cooking and singing silly songs to him and giving him a practice wand had meant to him.

"It's all right," said Malfoy, his voice descending into the croon that he had used the last time they were together. "You don't need to tell me. I can see it in your eyes. I'm sure I'll see much more than that there, and you'll have been the one to show me."

Harry flinched, stung by the proprietary smugness in his voice. "I haven't agreed to the Courtship by anything more than acceptance of your gifts," he said flatly. "What makes you so sure that you'll win me?"

That gave Malfoy pause, but not the way he had intended. Instead, Malfoy simply seemed to be searching for the best way to phrase his answer.

"Because you're you," he said at last, "and I'm me."

Harry sneered at him and pushed his broom back a little so that he hovered just off the edge of the Tower. "A simple answer, Malfoy. Almost *Gryffindor*. I'd have thought that you'd prefer something more sophisticated."

"I've learned to appreciate some Gryffindors," Malfoy said, with a bright smile. Harry's eyes narrowed, and he started to demand who the giver of that memory of the Gryffindor common room had been, but Malfoy leaped onto his broom and was hovering in front of him in a neat, quick movement. Harry found his breath speeding up again, his eyes squinting as if he could tame the bewildering blur that was Malfoy with a simple stare.

"I propose a race," Malfoy whispered, his breath fogging between them, "to the first islands of the Hebrides. Winner's forfeit."

Harry's blood stirred. God, he had forgotten what it felt like to do something wild and daring and reckless because he *wanted* to, and not because it would make for good publicity or because it was needed for the wedding.

Nevertheless, he wasn't quite addled enough to forget something essential. "I don't know the way."

"So, you'll have to follow and depend on me." Malfoy's breath was coming in pants now; one of his gloved hands trembled on the shaft of his broom as if he wanted to reach out and touch Harry. "I rather like that."

And before Harry could complain about the challenge or his wording, he was gone, fleeting over the side of the Tower and rising again like a swallow in flight.

Harry whipped his head around and followed instantly. He didn't have to think about it; the instinct of a hundred Quidditch practices was in him, around him. He couldn't forget what his muscles remembered.

Malfoy was far ahead already, a figure arrowing straight to the north, his hair flashing like a banner in the moonlight. His white shirt flashed to complement it. Harry laughed smugly and accelerated. *He can't lose me looking like that. If he was smart, he would have covered his head and worn a different color.*

He saw the small, pale beacon of Malfoy's face turned back to look at him, and almost thought he saw a smile. It made him wonder, suddenly, if Malfoy hadn't meant to lose him at all.

Frowning fiercely, Harry ducked and wove under Malfoy, then came up keeping parallel with

him. What Malfoy said was quite true. He would have to follow the git most of the way, sheltering in his shadow as it were, and only pull ahead when he was sure of the destination and that he could reach it on his own. It was exasperating, but Harry was determined to win anyway.

With Malfoy, he always won.

Malfoy turned to look at him, and his face was brilliant and unearthly. A golden glow still played over it, and when he glanced over his shoulder for a moment, Harry realized the floating glamour had accompanied them.

He growled in displeasure and pushed himself harder as Malfoy began to spiral and turn and swoop, performing evasive maneuvers. Did the idiot think Harry needed light on a night like this? It was mostly clear save for the tattered clouds streaking across the moon, and the wind past them was brisk but not a gale. A perfect night for flying.

Malfoy lured me up here because of that, a flash of insight as unexpected and unwelcome as the one about Malfoy's smile came to Harry. He gritted his teeth and pushed himself faster still. Malfoy had turned west now, and Harry could see the land changing beneath them, growing wilder and darker, sloping more steeply.

Up here was the wind, and the sky, and the stars.

Malfoy flew beside him like a dragon, like a bird, like a boy on a broom. The starlight caught on his face and chased his hair and chiseled his features. Now and then he tossed his head back, mouth open, drinking the wind or laughing soundlessly. Harry almost lost his breath in watching him.

The land beneath them became sea, and a part of Harry remembered the race and that they must be close to the islands. But he didn't care, because he couldn't keep his eyes from Malfoy. He was so—

Beautiful?

Harry wanted to resist the word, but it was the only one that fit. He shivered and licked his lips. Malfoy, turning his head yet again, seemed to catch the gesture. A slow, dangerous smile touched *his* lips, and he inclined his head as if bowing Harry into a dance or a duel.

Then he veered away and dropped like a stone to the sea.

Harry followed without thought. Of course he needed Malfoy to find the islands, but even if they had been over the Quidditch Pitch and he knew this was only a maneuver designed to distract him from the Snitch, he didn't think he could have resisted. His body flexed with Malfoy's; he moved his legs as Malfoy did, he gripped the broom harder when he did, and their brush rushed in and out of their lungs in concert.

Malfoy led him low enough for foam to lash his boots and salt to spring up and cling to his lips. They rode over a patch of what appeared to be moonlight, and it broke apart and wheeled around them, complaining in loud voices; it was a flock of gulls, asleep on the water. Harry laughed, and heard Malfoy laughing beside him, hoarse and hysterical and wrought with joy for the beauty of the ride and the night.

Malfoy rose, then, in a straight and spectacular sweep that would have been appropriate for a triumphant climb to the top of the sky after retrieving the Snitch, and Harry hurried; he had to be at his side. The golden and the white light played across him, and his purple robes seemed the color of the midnight blue sky now. Harry was breathing hard, unsure whether the half-formed sounds that trembled in his mouth were curses or sobs.

Malfoy swung, and angled, and Harry was there with him, flying side by side, like a mated pair of dragons Harry had seen flying when he visited Charlie in Romania, grace and elegance and power joined.

He never wanted it to end. He knew it must. But he only wanted to fly on and on, over the sea and across the sky, with Malfoy.

And then the flight stopped. Malfoy turned his broom towards Harry and arched his eyebrow. Harry, breathing hard, said the first thing that entered his head, though the words were blurred given his split lip and his wind-burned throat. "Why did you stop?"

"Now *that*," Malfoy said softly, "is what I like to hear." He raised his voice. "We reached the islands. The race is over, Harry."

Harry blinked, and glanced down. Just beneath Malfoy's heels hung a low dome of rock and soil. Maybe something more, but with the darkness so thick—the golden glamour was hovering to the side now, throwing its light on them instead of on the water—Harry couldn't be sure what.

He licked his lips and looked up. "A forfeit," he said blankly; his mind still danced in the dream he and Malfoy had created between them as they rode through heaven. "You won, so you can claim a forfeit."

"I can," Malfoy said, his voice utterly pure and confident. "And it's something I have no intention of waiting any longer to claim. Come *here*, Harry."

Harry drew near him without a pause, without a thought. It seemed the broom and not his body that carried him closer. And then he was leaning in, and Malfoy was wrapping one arm around his shoulders and the other around his waist, almost hauling him off the Moonbrush as they kissed.

Oh.

Harry had thought he knew what kissing was like. He had snogged Ginny often. He knew about

parted lips and darting tongues and hungry groans. He knew about the way someone else could fit into his arms when he sought it long enough; Ginny seemed shy most of the time, ducking away, but now and then she would yield to his passion.

He discovered very quickly that he knew nothing about kissing when one's lips were cracked and covered with salt and tasting of brine, or when the other person pressed into him with a savage force that made their brooms creak, or when the tide of desire that poured into his mouth was not merely his own.

Oh.

Harry was shaking badly when they parted. Malfoy ran a hand over his neck and up to his hair, and Harry had to close his eyes against the expression on the other boy's face. He couldn't even resent the simple possessiveness of the gesture.

"Tell me, Harry," Malfoy said, his voice low and hypnotic as the rush of the waves on the island's shore, "do you grant me permission to continue Courting you?"

And Harry, in thrall to the sea and the sky and the stars and the seduction, could only whisper *Yes.*

The next morning, Harry opened his eyes and sat straight up in bed. His fingers closed hard around the ring he'd taken off and put on the table, and then he turned and stared at the cloak draped across the back of his chair. Ron's snoring from the bed next to him practically shook the walls, but that made no difference to his busily racing mind.

He wanted to splutter with indignation. *Malfoy's giving me gifts and Courting me and—and* kissing *me, and what am I doing? Just sitting here and taking it like a girl! He's probably bragging to his friends about how easy this all is, that I'm so starved for attention I'll smile at him dreamily when he makes the least move—*

Harry sprang to his feet, fuming. He should have understood the Courting in this light before. It was a *competition*, just like everything else between them always had been. Malfoy might not see it that way, but he would despise Harry if he simply went on contributing and trying to woo him and Harry sat there like a passive object.

I'm not a passive object, damn it. I'm not a virgin—

And that caused Harry to squirm mentally for a moment, because, well, he *was.*

But Malfoy doesn't know that, he reminded himself triumphantly, and slid the ring onto his finger and the cloak over his shoulders, so that they wouldn't be here if anyone woke up whilst he was gone. Harry didn't know if they would create visions for anyone other than him, but he saw no reason to take the chance, either. *I'm going to prove I'm better at this than he is. I'm going to buy him a gift that he'll never forget and send it with a really flattering letter! Then he'll be the one*

fumbling and blushing and not knowing how to meet my eyes the next time he sees me.

And it would soothe the niggle of guilt in Harry's conscience, too. Malfoy had said Harry could make him happy, but it was hard to see how that would happen if Harry selfishly accepted his attentions and did nothing else.

Grinning madly, Harry ran out of the Burrow and Apparated to Diagon Alley.

"And you're sure?" The owner of the Magical Menagerie gazed at Harry searchingly. "This pet isn't for everyone. It'll take someone who can spoil him and make sure he always has plenty of companionship, food, and attention."

Harry liked the look in the man's eyes. He was obviously wondering whether Harry, in the midst of being famous and getting married, would have the time, and that showed that he wasn't willing to let his animals go to just anyone. "I'm sure," he said firmly, and gazed at the creature in front of him again.

It arched its back at him and sniffed his hand, as if deciding whether or not he was good enough to touch it. For the most part, it looked like a cat, but its coat was a shimmering white down that had more than a hint of feathers, and wings like a bat's rose from the center of its back. Its tail darted and lashed like a snake's. Harry had asked what it was crossed with; the owner had muttered "a number of things" in a way that reminded Harry of Hagrid, and then hastily pointed out its brilliant blue eyes and sharp, hooked claws. "It can be trained to defend anyone against anything," he told Harry.

"And he isn't deaf, is he?" Harry asked. "I've heard white cats with blue eyes are."

"He's not a *cat*," said the owner, his voice stiff with offended pride. "He's a Wingmalkin. And no, he isn't deaf; he hears extremely well. See?" he added, as the cat arched its back and hissed soundlessly at Harry. "And once he's offered a bond with his new owner, he's extraordinarily loyal. He'll offer attention for the attention he receives, and he's capable of sensing his owner's moods and knowing when he might need help or cheering up."

Harry smiled. It was what the advert had said, and he was glad to find that the Wingmalkin apparently lived up to its reputation. "How does the owner bond with him?" he asked, letting his hand hover above the cat's wings. That won him another hiss.

"Um." The owner darted a glance around the shop, and the Wingmalkin bared his teeth.

"Ah," Harry said, understanding perfectly why the owner didn't want to name the condition aloud. Probably, you had to offer the creature blood, and blood magic was still illegal. "That's fine, then. I'll be sure to send the information when I send him. Do you have a secure cage and a list of instructions for caring for him?"

The owner blinked twice. "He's—a gift?"

"Yes," Harry said.

"Rather expensive for a gift."

Harry sighed in annoyance. Behind those eyes now was a glitter of the greedy curiosity the wizarding world insisted on inflicting him with. "Expensive enough that I didn't expect to be asked this many questions," he said pointedly.

Of course the owner colored, and after that Harry was away with a cage containing the Wingmalkin and a list of various fishes, meats, and raw and bloody organs he could eat. The cat tried to claw him from inside the cage, stalking moodily back and forth. Its eyes spat fire and its ears were laid flat to the side of its head.

"You and Draco should get along just fine," Harry muttered, and Apparated to Grimmauld Place. It was the only place he could be sure of staying undisturbed whilst he wrote the letter he needed to write to Draco.

Dear Draco:

And that was a new beginning, Harry thought, pausing, to write *Draco* instead of *Malfoy.* His fingers tingled as if he'd dipped them in ice water. He licked his lips, and shifted in the chair, and thought of what Ginny would say if she could see him now.

And abruptly it was as if the entire glass of ice water had been upended over his head.

Ginny.

Harry laid down the quill and stood up, turning away from the table and pacing back and forth across the study. The Wingmalkin, secure in its cage on the other side of the room, let out a long, low growl that Harry would have expected to come from a full-grown lion, not that tiny thing. He turned around and stared at it helplessly.

I can't betray Ginny. But—but the gift's already bought, and I have to send it to Draco somehow. Maybe I should say that I can't see this continuing much longer, but I have to send it. It certainly can't stay here, and it's not mine. It's his.

Harry wondered for a moment when he was considering a gift Malfoy's when Malfoy had no idea Harry had even bought it yet, but then he shrugged impatiently. He just *did*, and he knew better than to argue with his instincts.

It has to go. And I refuse to send along a bare letter blandly suggesting that I'm glad he bought me presents. I have to—have to send him something to let him know what the ride above the waves last night meant to me.

Inspired, Harry sat down at the table again. Surely he could write a good letter, and one that wouldn't betray Ginny either, if he just kept it to the night ride and didn't talk about the other confusing feelings running around his head. He ought to be smart enough for that.

He was. The moment he dipped the quill in ink and started writing again, the words poured forth onto the page.

I bought you this Wingmalkin as a thank you for the gifts that you've bought me so far, and because I thought it would be a companion for you. God knows that you have enough of them, but most of them are probably with you for your money and your parties. The owner of the Magical Menagerie promised me that this *companion returns loyalty for loyalty, spoiling for spoiling. And knowing how much money you have and how lonely you probably are if you chose to Court* me*, I thought you would have plenty of everything to give him.*

Harry looked up to grin at the Wingmalkin. It lashed its tail against the cage bars in answer, then turned to look over its shoulder with an injured stare. Apparently, it thought the bars should jump out of the way when it wanted to move.

He seems steady enough, but he doesn't like me. He hisses when someone tries to touch his back, unless he's already sniffed their hand and personally approved him. He glares something fierce with those bright eyes of his. I think that you'll suit each other perfectly.

I wanted to say thank you. I still don't know what made you decide on the cloak and the ring and the ride, but they were wonderful. I've almost lost my mind in the last few weeks, with so many wedding preparations going on around me. I feel like I'm being herded into a cage.

Mrs. Weasley says it's just nerves and they'll settle when I'm married, but so many things have to happen before that does. I can't tell you how many hours of preparations we've been through already, and it's still a month off, or almost. I've lost track of time more easily since you started Courting me.

And sometimes I think that Ginny doesn't really want to get married either, but she doesn't want to disappoint her family even more. She already mentioned cutting her hair and her mother fainted.

How could I be responsible for that? For disappointing the first family in the wizarding world that ever took me in? For disappointing everyone who's looking forwards to a celebration of something wonderful and life-affirming, the first grand occasion we've had since the death of Voldemort? (The re-opening of Hogwarts and the first anniversary weren't grand enough, I think. For some people, they only meant that they were thinking again about the place and the day where their families had died.)

Harry's quill slowed. He wasn't writing about Draco; he was pouring out his feelings instead, exactly as if Draco had showed up on his step with a bottle of Firewhisky and a sympathetic ear.

He thought about crossing out most of the sentences and starting again, then decided against it. This letter was already long enough as it was, and Harry didn't have much more parchment in the house; it had all gone for wedding invitations. Draco would probably be curious enough if he saw all the scratches on the paper to try and decipher the words Harry had marked out, whilst if Harry left them uncovered, he would hurry through them to reach the praise of himself.

I never said how much you've improved on a broom. Maybe flying in a race instead of in a match improves you. Or maybe you've got a lot of practice during those nighttime rides I've been hearing about in the past year.

I don't know much about those rides, because I've tried to avoid reading the newspapers since the war. Nothing like a bad analogy in an article about Celestina Warbeck to make you realize that half the Daily Prophet *has you on its mind.*

I've just realized I don't know that much about you, in general. What do you like? Do you enjoy the company of all the people who flock around you, or is it mostly about political connections? Or maybe you want someone to laugh at. Now that I'm not in front of you all the time, you must need a substitute joke target.

I tried to think of what else you'd want for a gift—maybe your parents released from house arrest—but my lack of knowledge put paid to that. And anyway, I think you're having more fun acting on your own and spending all their Galleons. So I got you a friend that ought to appeal to you no matter what. Even if you do have lots of real human friends, they can't give you the kind of loyalty an animal can.

Harry paused, and swallowed. The quill had led him, almost insensibly, to the part of the letter he didn't want to write. But Draco had been brave enough to send him a beautiful, eloquent, complimentary letter, when having not the slightest idea how Harry would react to that. Harry owed him no less than the same.

I never thought blokes were beautiful. After seeing you on the broom, I can't think why.

But that was all wrong. Harry left it, though, because it was better than the next several thoughts that pelted through his head. Then he tried again.

I've missed you, too. I always knew where I stood, with you. I never had the sense that I was going to disappoint you or risk my standing with you, because to you I was already a disappointment. So it left me free to fight and argue and even to pity you, sometimes. It was a less complicated emotion than I felt for anyone else.

And *that* didn't sound very complimentary. Harry bit the end of the quill and finally threw his hands up, splattering his face with ink. There was a reason he hadn't written Ginny any love letters. He was horrid at them.

I don't know anything about spending the rest of my life with you, and Hermione said people in

Courtships don't usually do that, anyway. It's more casual. And I'm getting married, and you'll probably get tired of this game. But I wanted to let you know that I do appreciate it, and if I was going to let someone who wasn't Ginny Court me, and if I was going to let a bloke have sex with me, you'd be my first choice.

Harry Potter.

Harry dried the ink with a muttered charm and hastily sealed it in an envelope. He knew he would rip it up if he paused to look at it. "Kreacher!" he shouted.

The elf appeared and gave a low bow, though he looked askance at the Wingmalkin's cage. Harry handed him the letter.

"Take that and the cat to Malfoy Manor, please," he said firmly. "Give them only to Draco Malfoy and no one else, do you understand?"

Kreacher stared at him with quivering ears. "Master Harry is Courting the Malfoy boy?" he whispered.

"Um," said Harry. *The one being Courted can't Court back, can he?* "Just deliver the letter and the cat, please," he said weakly.

Kreacher, wearing a truly frightening grin, bowed and vanished. Harry sighed and went to face the consequences of his actions at the Burrow.

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Chapter: 2

"And you still don't have your *shoes*, Harry!"

Harry winced a bit as his future mother-in-law wailed this last right into his face. He had learned more than he liked to know over the last few months about Mrs. Weasley's lung capacity.

He hoped that wasn't something Ginny had inherited.

"I'm sorry," he said, staring at his trainers. He didn't see why he *couldn't* get married in those, in fact, since the trailing hem of the long golden robes would conceal them, but he knew better than to say that around Mrs. Weasley. "It slipped my mind the other day after I spent so long in Madam Malkin's."

He wondered why he didn't mention seeing Malfoy in Diagon Alley. He could have. He could

have said that seeing Draco made him sick to his stomach, so that he had to Apparate back to the Burrow immediately.

But it would have been a lie.

And the bloody thing was, he felt worse about lying and saying Draco was horrid than he did about concealing the Courtship from the Weasleys.

It's casual. I can break it off whenever I like. It's more like Malfoy and I establishing a mutual admiration society, anyway. We trade a few gifts, reconcile a few old disputes, and then move on with our lives. My marriage is for the good of the wizarding world. I always knew that. At the very least, it'll distract the Prophet *from that fear-mongering about escaped Death Eaters.*

Malfoy should want me to get married, in fact. It'll take pressure and attention off his parents for a while.

Harry heaved a sigh of relief as his conscience stopped whispering to him and then looked up in alarm as he realized that Mrs. Weasley was in the middle of an emphatic sentence.

"…just have to go with Ginny this afternoon, that's all."

"What?" Harry asked stupidly.

"*What*?"

Harry whirled around. Ginny stood on the steps that led up to her bedroom, her hand wrapped around the railing and her face white and still. She was looking back and forth between her mother and Harry as if she thought it was Harry's fault they were in this situation.

Well, maybe it was, Harry thought mutinously, and stared at his feet again. *But it was Malfoy's fault, too.*

"Harry will go with you this afternoon when you get your shoes fitted, Ginny," said Mrs. Weasley, with a firm nod of her head. She looked delighted with herself, the way she had all along when she managed to solve some problem by tying together two wedding chores. "He can have his feet measured whilst Master Cobbler's trying to coax you into slippers."

Ginny stared a moment longer. Then she clenched her jaw and nodded, sweeping down the stairs. Harry was still blinking as she walked past him, grabbed his arm, and tugged him out the door. Harry yelped and stumbled, running to keep up. Mrs. Weasley watched them go with a pleased smile—she always looked that way when they touched one another, as if she expected grandchildren the month after the wedding—but then she vanished up the stairs at a run, yelling for Hermione.

On the lawn, Ginny whirled around to face him. Harry jumped out of reach. It looked as if he

might have the chance to test the yelling skills she'd inherited from her mother after all.

"Thank you *so* bloody much," Ginny said, but in a soft voice. Her withering glare made up for it, though.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry said in a cautious voice. He rubbed his arm, and winced. Her grip had been *strong.* He was certain he would find finger-shaped bruises if he looked under the cloth. He wasn't weak enough to actually look, of course. "They're just boots."

Ginny opened her mouth, then pursed her lips so hard that Harry thought she would split them. "Oh, never mind," she said. "Sometimes you wouldn't see the obvious if it drew a wand on you." She held out her arm, and tapped her foot when Harry stood there. "Well, come on. The sooner we go to Diagon Alley, the sooner we can get this ridiculous matter of your carelessness settled."

Harry wasn't sure he trusted her to Side-Along Apparate him in that mood, but he was also not suicidal enough to argue. He meekly offered his arm, and Ginny hooked hers around it and roughly vanished with him.

Harry sighed and stared down at his feet, clad in gleaming dragonhide boots that the owner of Francine's Fabulous Footwear had assured him were all the rage this season, even to be married in. Harry didn't care about them, except that he hoped they would keep Mrs. Weasley from destroying him in a rage. He cared that it had been two *bloody* hours and yet Ginny hadn't come out of the back of the shop.

Harry regarded the curtain separating the front from the back with a jaundiced eye. The space looked small, not much larger than five or six wizards standing side by side. But he could hear Ginny giggling madly every now and then, and the bland replies of the wizard fitting her, some sort of apprentice to Francine. Perhaps the bottoms of Ginny's feet were ticklish and she squirmed and had to be fitted again every time, Harry thought. It would explain the delay.

It would also be one of the many things he didn't know about her.

Why am I marrying her?

It was the first time the question had ever occurred to him without an immediate answer springing up to fill the void in his head. Harry frowned and shifted uneasily again. He loved Ginny. Or, well, at least he liked her as a friend. He admired her for surviving in the brutal maelstrom that was Hogwarts during her sixth year. He admired her for wanting to fight in the final battle. He respected her as a person.

But was that enough to bond with someone for a lifetime, the way that Bill and Fleur had done, and have children together?

I always thought I would learn to love her after we had children together.

Harry shuddered and then sat still, staring at the wall. It was true, but he had never put it to himself in those terms before, and it was a hell of a thing to discover that he thought about his fiancée, whom he had been certain he was marrying for love.

He lurched to his feet, feeling suddenly sick for life and alertness and motion. The wizard behind the counter blinked at him as he made for the door.

"Where are you going, sir?" he asked. "Your lady isn't done yet."

Harry cringed. He didn't think the wizard was in the habit of calling most of the female customers of Francine's Fabulous Footwear "lady." It was just another sign of the exaggerated deference that surrounded him and Ginny, and which he didn't *want* to surround them. He shook his head and said, "Tell her I went for a walk," then ducked out the door.

He strode rapidly down the middle of Diagon Alley, his head bowed to escape the inevitable curious stares at his scar. Some people called to him, but Harry ignored them, and their voices died into confusion. The *real* Harry Potter, they must be thinking, wouldn't treat anyone so discourteously.

Harry snorted and dug his hands into his pockets. The real Harry Potter was a sodding prick at the moment, and felt like one, he thought. He was marrying a woman for whom he felt nothing more than intense affection, and he was letting a Courtship continue when he knew very well that nothing would come of it.

Well, at least one of those he could do something immediate about. He slowed his pace, looking for a shop that sold ink and parchment. He would owl Draco and tell him the truth, that he was so confused at the moment that the Courtship wouldn't be a good thing for either of them. Draco needed to find someone more worthy of his gifts and his pretty words.

Someone seized his elbow. Harry opened his mouth to yell, but the same person clapped a hand over his mouth and tugged him backwards. Harry found himself in the middle of a side alley, perhaps even the same one he had hidden in the day he received Draco's Courtship letter. He dug an elbow into his captor's stomach, or tried, but the man avoided him easily, and then leaned forwards and whispered into his ear.

"Really, Harry, you don't even recognize your lover when he clasps you in an amorous embrace?"

Harry shivered, the small hairs along his ear standing up. Then he swallowed and said, "I'll be quiet."

Draco seemed to understand, because he released him, but he turned him around in the next instant. Harry blinked, his eyes adjusting to the shadows after the intense sunshine of the Alley for an instant, and then nearly struggled to get away again.

Draco was leaning towards him, face transfigured with desire and warmth. He looked as if he were an owl about to pounce on a small and juicy treat. His eyes burned, and his fingers crept out and stroked down Harry's jaw and throat in an odd manner. After a moment, Harry realized that it was because they were trembling.

Something hissed. The white Wingmalkin pushed his head over Draco's shoulder and parted his mouth in a soundless snarl directed at Harry.

"Yes, he goes everywhere with me," Draco murmured, noting the direction of Harry's gaze. "He's been precious, someone devoted to me because of who *I* am, and not because of the money I spend on him or the entertainment I offer. Though I'm sure he gets plenty of entertainment out of me, all the same." His smile flashed brilliantly for a moment, and Harry began to hope he would get out of this with his sanity intact.

Then Draco focused on him again, and his smile turned predatory, whilst his eyes glittered. He touched Harry's face again, this time with a reverent motion.

"Do you know what it means when the person being Courted sends gifts?" he asked, his voice almost as soft as his cat's hiss. "Especially a gift like this, thoughtful and expensive?"

Harry fought to keep from groaning. Of course sending Draco a gift couldn't be seen as the offering of thanks and an equal exchange he had intended it as. Of course Draco would manage to warp the meaning in his own mind.

"I didn't look up that part of Courtship traditions," he said, trying to sound charmingly confused. "In fact, I only had one short conversation with Hermione about it. I—"

"You're *mine*, Harry," Draco said, and kissed him again.

Harry opened his mouth in a soundless cry. The sheer passion of the gesture forced him backwards, into the old wall behind him. Draco hadn't kissed like this, hadn't dared, when they were aloft, but now—

Harry's world reeled. There was a tongue in his mouth, sweet and hard and insistent, and Draco had forced a leg between his, and everywhere there was a coaxing demand that ripped moans from his throat and motion from his hips and warmth from his groin. He thrust back before he realized what he was doing.

And it felt so good. So far beyond anything he had experienced with Ginny.

He angled himself so that he could rub furiously against Draco. Draco laughed and gasped encouragement, one of his hands rising to tangle in Harry's hair and tilt his head. His other hand skimmed down Harry's chest to rest on his groin, splayed out, not squeezing, but offering a flat surface for Harry to rub against. And he must be amazingly coordinated, because all the time, he never left off the kiss or the curling darting motions of his tongue in Harry's mouth.

Harry felt excitement grip him and heave him up, his gut tightening painfully. His throat was dry, and he drank at Draco's tongue, sucked and pulled. He whined in a piercing tone as he felt his orgasm coil in his belly, the first orgasm he had shared with another person—

And Draco pulled back, leaving him empty and yearning.

Harry nearly reached for him. Then he dropped his hands back to his sides and wiped off the sweat against his shirt. "Why?" he whispered, unable to get any breath behind the word.

"Because," Draco said, looking as self-satisfied as the Wingmalkin on his shoulder, which had begun to groom its muscular tail, "sending me a gift says that you want to initiate an equal exchange of gifts. A deeper bond. You're not just being chased, you're chasing. You're letting me know my suit is welcomed and that you won't drop it suddenly because you're bored. You're mine now."

Harry stared at him in dismay. Then he gestured to his erection, which was already smearing the front of his pale robes with wetness. "*This* why," he said. He wished he sounded smarter, but that wasn't going to happen at the moment.

Draco winked at him. "The Courtship is about desire," he said. "And if you think desire is only delicious when fulfilled—" He laughed, the sound rich as ice cream and causing Harry to thrust his hips forwards involuntarily. "You have much to learn about it.

He slid away, the Wingmalkin looking over his shoulder to hiss disdainfully at Harry. Harry fell back against the wall and shut his eyes.

Oh, yes, he knew why Draco had done that. To make Harry want him more, to build up Harry's own longing to the point that he would become Draco's just as his gift had apparently said he would.

But he wasn't prey to the longings of his own flesh, was he?

Harry's eyes snapped open. Draco had Apparated out already, of course, but he didn't care. It was just as well there was no one around to witness the expression on his face right now, he thought.

For once, he was going to make a decision on his *own*, not influenced by any Weasleys, or Draco, or the future of the bloody wizarding world. He needed to think about it and decide what *he* wanted.

The idea was exhilarating, and Harry, after casting a few necessary spells to control himself, walked out of the alley with a grim smile on his face.

And never mind that he could still taste Draco's tongue in his mouth.

Harry sat in the Weasleys' attic, this time with the door locked and several subtle repelling charms on it. Hermione had looked at him knowingly when he asked her to teach him those spells, but she hadn't asked any questions. Harry thought she must have used them some of the time to escape wedding preparations.

He had ink and parchment in front of him, but this time, he wasn't writing a letter to anyone, except maybe to himself. He had already composed a list of things he wanted.

A happy life.

A reasonable amount of privacy. (He wasn't mad enough to think that he would manage to escape the attention of the press for the rest of his life, even though that would have been ideal).

Someone who loves me for who I am and not for my scar or my fame or the fact that I killed Voldemort. (He wasn't sure yet whether he would put Malfoy in that category, or whether he would call the emotion that Draco claimed to feel for him love, but it did seem, from the way that Malfoy had acted, that at least it wasn't the scar or the fame that he was interested in).

Some way to make Ginny happy, or leave her happy.

A family.

Harry paused and sucked the end of the quill thoughtfully when he looked at that last item on the list. Because, of course, the main question was: what *kind* of family? The Weasleys? The children he had envisioned having with Ginny, although he could picture their pranks more easily than he could their faces? The Malfoys?

He did have to shudder at the thought of that last. Draco might want him, but Harry could see no way his parents would ever welcome Harry into their house. Of course, they had no reason to leave the Manor for at least the next two years, so Harry could avoid them easily if he did choose to join Draco.

To join Draco. What exactly would this Courtship mean?

Harry leaned back in the chair and folded his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling. Hermione had said the Courtship was a more casual relationship, something the couple could work out on their own. Harry had no idea what Malfoy might want, unless he took his letters at face value, and even then, wanting someone to be happy didn't give a specific set of guidelines the way a marriage seemed to.

So, since I can't know what he wants without asking him, I'll do two things. I'll send a letter asking him, and I'll decide what I want.

And there's a third thing, too. Harry grimaced and sighed, shifting his seat. He had never looked forwards to talking to Ginny since the marriage preparations began, at least about something that

wasn't Quidditch or how mad her mother was acting. But now…

I have to find out how much she wants this. I have to find out the reason she's marrying me, how much of it is other people's expectations and how much is her own desire.

But first, he could write the letter to Malfoy, a less intimidating task. Harry settled a fresh sheet of parchment in front of himself and began.

Dear Draco:

I have to ask you what the Courtship means. You've described me in ways that make me blush—

Harry hesitated, then decided that line couldn't possibly be as revealing as the letter he had sent Draco with the Wingmalkin, which was full of rambling declarations he should have crossed out.

—and I know you want to have sex with me. But what is this, other than that? Why not choose someone you know better, someone you know would be in sympathy with your politics and your interests? I don't think there's anything we both like other than Quidditch and flying, and we really tried to defeat each other at those things, not to share them.

I do think I want to share something with you. But I need some more rules, some definitions. Are you looking for a few days of sex and nothing more? Because I might be willing to accommodate you if you are, but this seems awfully stretched out for that and I wish you had asked me before *I was going to marry Ginny.*

I know this isn't a marriage, but what is it? I know what I want. I want something that lasts, at least for a while. I want something where I try to make the other person happy and they try to make me happy. I want someone I can play pranks with and avoid the press with and fly with. And kissing would be great, too, but the reason I wanted to marry Ginny in the first place was that she was a friend. You and I have never been like that.

I'm sending you another few gifts. It won't do to let you get too ahead of me.

Harry.

Harry smiled, sealed the letter in an envelope, and began preparing Draco's gifts. This was the part he really liked. Receiving the gifts had been nice, seeing the memories of his parents had been wondrous, but in the end he felt more comfortable imagining someone else's face lighting up than getting presents of his own.

He clipped a curl of his hair from his head and tucked it firmly into a separate envelope that he would attach to the first. Draco was sure to recognize it; Harry didn't think anyone else had hair that looked like the feathers of a molting black phoenix. And Draco would know that Harry trusted him, because the hair could be used in Polyjuice Potion or certain nasty spells. Harry was saying that he didn't think Draco would use it that way.

For his second gift, he would have to go to Diagon Alley and buy a cheap ring. After the Wingmalkin and the wedding preparations, he simply couldn't afford any more expensive gifts right now, but the ring wouldn't be the point. It would be the spell that went along with the ring that mattered.

Grinning wildly, he crept past the kitchen where Mrs. Weasley was scolding several cousins who had made some candied fruit wrong, tiptoed outside the wards, and Apparated.

The moment's perfect.

Harry winced, and felt the pull in his shoulders. All afternoon, he'd been moving chairs around, first by wand and then by hand when his magic began to grow exhausted, in different patterns so that Mrs. Weasley could consider seating arrangements. But that was less laborious than some other things she'd had him do.

No, what caused him the most pain and the most hesitation was knowing that he needed to speak to Ginny about the reasons she was really marrying him.

And he hadn't done it yet.

Stirring restively, he leaned against the table for a moment and watched Mrs. Weasley and Ginny. Molly had been distracted from the chairs by some detail of a hair hanging from the back of Ginny's head. She scolded her quietly but continuously now, her head jerking like that of a terrier who held a rat.

Ginny nodded and nodded, staring at the ground. She never tried to say anything back. Harry watched her hand, though. It gripped the arm of a chair, and it had slowly grown white-knuckled.

At the very least, she has to be tired of all the preparations, he thought.

Mrs. Weasley abruptly snapped her head up and turned away, her eyes wide. "The biscuits!" she cried, and rushed into the kitchen, where something was burning. Harry hadn't been aware she was cooking.

He turned back to Ginny. She was collapsed into the chair she'd been pulling and shoving about, her head tilted back so that she stared at the sky, her hands clenched in her lap.

Harry shifted. Ginny looked so tired that he didn't like to disturb her.

But what if what you're going to say can free her from that burden? he reminded himself, and so he cleared his throat. Ginny cast him what looked like an expression of surprise and sat up with a weary little grunt.

"Yes, Harry?" Her voice was flat and uninterested.

She doesn't want to marry me. I can tell.

But, Harry reminded himself, he couldn't decide that without hearing a statement one way or the other. So he cleared his throat again and said, "Ginny, why are we getting married? I mean," he clarified, when she opened her mouth and her face went pale enough it made her freckles look like dots of blood, "why do *you* think we're getting married? Do you love me enough to go through all this? Do you—want to?"

There, he'd said it. And it was less hard than he'd anticipated. In fact, Harry thought, shaking his head a little, it was less hard than waiting for Draco's letter the last three days had been.

Ginny was staring at him. Harry had the impression that other emotions moved in her eyes, just beneath the surface, but her shock was so great that he couldn't tell what they were. He stepped close to her and clasped her hands. To anyone watching from the door of the Burrow, it would look like a private moment between the lovers. Harry hoped that most of the possible observers would think they'd had few enough of *those* lately, and leave them to it.

"I don't want all the fuss," Ginny whispered at last. "I wish we *had* eloped, or I *had* cut my hair. It would serve my mother right."

"But what about being married to me?" Harry stared into her eyes, still searching for the other feelings buried there. He wished she would stop blinking slowly the way she was, as if she were trying to stare into the sun. He needed her to wake up from the daze and tell him the truth. "Could you—I mean, do you want to be married to me? Or not?" He reached out and swept the back of his knuckles down her face.

Ginny sucked in a deep breath, as if she needed all the air in the garden to make a decision. "I don't know," she said, and the last word came out almost as a wail. The next moment, she had buried her head against his robe and started sobbing.

Harry cradled her, running a hand through her hair, and stared at the far wall of the garden for endless seconds. That didn't sound very promising, but maybe Ginny was just overtired with all the bustle. Maybe she would be all right when they got into a house of their own.

But I don't want to share that house with her.

And so Harry realized that he made his decision after all, without even thinking about it. No, he couldn't have the family he wanted with Ginny. Maybe Draco was the wrong choice, too, and the bond they were building through the Courtship wouldn't last, but at least he knew that his passion for Ginny was thin and attenuated, too small to stand up to the likes of the blows it had been assaulted with.

"Gin," he said firmly, "I can't get married to you."

Ginny blinked at him, and started to open her mouth, but at that moment Mrs. Weasley stepped out of the house and called with authority, "Ginny! I need to trim that hair!"

And Ginny was on her feet and scuttling across the garden, her shoulders hunched as if against a blow. Harry stared after her, at a loss.

He had not realized that he was not the only one who might have trouble making up his mind.

Amid all the bustle and all the confusion, it was almost a relief to find a peremptory letter waiting for him next to his bed that night.

Potter:

We need to talk. Malfoy Manor, five minutes after you read this. I know you can remember it well enough for Apparition coordinates.

Draco Malfoy.

Harry drew a swift, glad breath as he dropped the letter. Maybe another decision had been made for him. Draco sounded brittle and furious about the last gifts that Harry had sent him, and he'd gone back to calling Harry by his last name. That probably meant he wanted to break the Courtship with some incomprehensible pure-blood ritual, and then at least Harry would have the choice of just a marriage with Ginny or no marriage instead of thinking that it was a choice between people.

Not even a choice, remember? You made it.

But Harry shrugged as he draped his Invisibility Cloak over his shoulders and sneaked down the stairs, past people sleeping the deep sleep of exhaustion. He hadn't announced his decision to anyone except Ginny yet, who certainly hadn't told anyone else. So for the moment, it felt private and like he could change it if he wanted to.

Even though he probably couldn't.

Harry snorted softly as he stepped out onto the Burrow's lawn and walked beyond the anti-Apparition wards. He was just a mass of contradictions, wasn't he? And Malfoy was probably one, too, for wanting him.

He closed his eyes and recalled the Manor without effort. Even if it had changed somewhat since the war, Harry thought the image of the place where Hermione had been tortured was burned into his retinas.

And that's another sign that he's given up on me, too, isn't it? He wouldn't be so callous as to refer to why I know the Manor if he hadn't.

It was with a strange confidence that Harry Apparated. If the Courtship had gone on too long, if he'd tried to depend on it too much, then he might have been devastated Malfoy was breaking it. As it was, while it would hurt, it wouldn't be the end of his world.

He was glad. He'd faced that often enough for one lifetime.

He opened his eyes after finishing the Apparition, and saw the Manor's gates gleaming before him under the moonlight, and the path running up to the house beyond them, and a ghostly white peacock stalking across the lawn by itself, plaintively calling.

And in front of the gates stood Draco, with his arms folded and his hair uncovered so that it flashed in the moonlight. By the time Harry fully took note of him, he had unfolded his arms and was striding rapidly forwards. Harry unhooked his wand and hopped to the side, ready for a duel.

Draco ignored the wand as if it had been a stick, and Harry was so astonished that he let him do it. Draco had him gripped by the shoulders a few moments later and was shaking him until his teeth rattled in his head and clipped his tongue. Harry tried to pull back and shoot an ankle out so that he would catch one of Draco's legs and trip him, but then he was caught by Draco's words.

"Do you know what that bloody ring *did* to me? I don't know where you learned that bloody spell, but I'm sure it's illegal. Fucking Merlin, Harry, I was wearing that ring when I was trying to have a serious discussion about the family's finances with Father yesterday!"

Harry tried to maintain the seriousness that Draco probably wanted him to have, but the image of Draco squirming about with an erection—Harry had enchanted the cheap ring to make Draco feel like he was being stroked and sucked at the most inconvenient moments—made him snort and then shout with laughter. Draco stared down at him with what was probably disgust when the laughter shook Harry loose from his hold and made him roll on the ground. At last he snarled, and Harry heard real danger in his voice.

"I suppose that's your ridiculous revenge for my leaving you hard and wanting in Diagon Alley?"

"Of course it is." Harry wiped tears away from his face and sat up, grinning at Draco. It struck him as entirely fitting that Draco was standing above him with pristine clothes and a mocking sneer and that Harry was in the dirt at his feet. That was the way that other people would always see their respective positions towards one another. Draco was a fool to try to change that. Harry was a fool for wishing it otherwise, in fact. "I don't know why you think that I'll agree to be yours just because you said I was, or because I sent you a gift without knowing every single nuance of your silly pure-blood traditions. This is what I'm like, idiot. Always fighting you, always stronger than you." Draco's eyes flashed. Harry saw an opportunity to drive the knife deeper. "Your rival, not your lover."

Draco's eyelids drooped over his eyes, and suddenly his face wasn't funny at all. "Why can't you be both?" he whispered, and then he dropped down so he was kneeling on Harry's chest and began to kiss him again.

Harry, through sheer startlement, tried to pull away. Ginny had never kissed him like this, had never been so *insistent*, and hadn't shoved her tongue into the corners of Harry's mouth as if refusing to give him an escape or pushed it down his throat as if seeking his heart.

But, as Harry's breathing began to speed up and he noticed that his hand had risen to lock in Draco's hair and keep his head still, he realized this was exactly the way he liked to be kissed.

Draco's knees crushed his chest. Harry rolled them over so that he was on top, and then Draco pushed at him and toppled them over again. Harry groaned and kissed and pushed and thrust, one fist beating an irregular tattoo on Draco's chest. Draco locked a leg around his hip and held him still, his tongue and his teeth never ceasing their regular clicking, darting motions in Harry's mouth.

At last he pulled back and said softly, "You're mine. This isn't something that can be denied, Harry."

Harry shut his eyes for long moments. His palms stung from scrapes with dirt ground into them. His legs ached from the awkward position he'd been in for so long. His mouth was full of a taste, his mind full of a knowledge, that he thought he'd never get rid of now.

"If I'm yours," he said, voice uneven, "then you're mine, too."

Draco leaned towards him, eyes burning like stars. "Why," he whispered, "did you ever think I would be anything else?"

Harry reached towards him, mind wiped clean of anything except the knowledge that he *had* to hold Draco.

But Draco slipped through his hands like water, and walked to the gates, and looked over his shoulder, and said, "There's one step left of the Courtship, the most dramatic," and then went back into the house, leaving Harry to stare after him in incredulous frustration.

Harry came to a decision the next day, after several hours of thinking matters carefully over. There was next to nothing he could do about Draco—he would do what he wanted when he wanted to do it, and Harry knew a letter urging him to hurry would only create more delays—but he *had* to settle matters for Ginny.

So he set out to corner her.

This was surprisingly difficult.

Ginny had decided that this was her day to Help Her Mother. First Harry found her baking cookies, then washing her hair, then practicing conjuring the more ephemeral decorations, glamours and the like, that wouldn't be hung until the day of the wedding itself. And she kept her

back determinedly turned towards him and her head ducked aside each time.

Harry eventually decided to just remain near her, because that way he could catch her when she was done and before she could move on to the next task. She would *have* to pay attention to him then.

But that was a mistake, because that way Mrs. Weasley could pounce on him.

"Harry! Just the boy I wanted to see." Mrs. Weasley bustled up beside him, extending a mass of knitting that Harry accepted with clenched teeth, trying not to resent that she'd called him a boy instead of a man. "Hold this, dear, and think as hard as you can about the day of the wedding."

"Why?" Harry stared at the knitting with a jaundiced eye. It had ominous frilly edges to it. "I already have my robes."

"I know, dear, I know," Mrs. Weasley soothed him, whilst winding a loop of thread around her left hand and raising her wand with her right, "but I wouldn't trust Madam Malkin to put decorations on the robes, especially not the ones required for a special wedding like this. The lace that goes around the cuffs—"

"The *what*?" Harry tried to yank his hands away, but somehow, when he wasn't looking, the knitting had twined itself far more firmly about his wrists than he knew was possible. "I'm not having any lace on my robes!"

Mrs. Weasley's face took on the slightly stiff smile it was apt to acquire when Ginny talked about cutting her hair. "Yes, you are, dear," she said. "It's part of the traditional ornamentation, back in the days when men and women weren't so uptight about having entirely separate clothes."

"Yeah?" Harry said flatly. "Well, I *am* uptight about it, and I'd prefer not to, thanks." He gave another pull, and several threads unraveled.

"*Harry*." Mrs. Weasley looked at him with large, shining eyes now, and even Harry couldn't tell whether her tears were coming from genuine hurt or only irritation. "Please. You know that we've planned all this for months, and now there's less than a month left, and you can't possibly want to back out now—"

Harry distinctly heard Ginny catch her breath behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and found her eyes fixed on him. But other than that they had a feverish shine, they gave him no clue what she was feeling. Maybe she was angry, maybe ready to cry herself.

"Hold still, Harry," Mrs. Weasley reprimanded him, in a softer tone now, since she must think he was cooperating. "After the lace on the cuffs there's only the lace collar, and I meant to discuss the decorative wig with you, and what do you think about a style that'll lift your hair away from your forehead and make you look your best?"

"And expose my scar?" Harry swiveled his head back to stare at Mrs. Weasley.

"Well, yes." Mrs. Weasley smiled at him and gave him a little motherly pat on the shoulder, which made Harry have to spit out bits of thread. "I understand that you don't like people looking at it, but you really do look so much better when you have your fringe out of your face, instead of trying to hide beneath it like a shaggy little lion!" She chuckled. "And then there are the doves that you'll want to let fly—"

In that moment, as he stared into her eyes, Harry understood an incontrovertible truth.

She's mad. She's gone insane. She's planning the wedding for the wedding's sake, and coming up with more traditions that we can add to it for the sake *of tradition, not because she really wants to use them or because Ginny told her she required them. Well, and because I'm paying for it and she doesn't have to worry about expenses, but still.*

He scrutinized Mrs. Weasley's face more closely, and saw the grainy dark circles under her eyes and the way her hand holding the wand trembled.

She's gone mad, and she's tired, and she'll probably collapse of exhaustion after the wedding's over, or even before. Her dream is eating her alive.

I'm the only one who can rescue her from it, since I have no idea what Ginny will do.

Harry took a deep breath and focused his magic as closely as he could on the knitting that bound his wrists. It fell away in useless, cut loops and he held up his free hands, rubbing them.

Mrs. Weasley sighed, a sound that seemed to rattle in her lungs. "*Harry*," she said. "Now it'll only have to be done over." She blinked, and held up the knitting, looking from her left hand to the right for a moment as if she couldn't remember which was which. "You need to know—"

"No," Harry interrupted. His own voice was hoarse and shaky. Of course, his heart was beating so fast that that wasn't surprising. "You need to know that I have no intention of going through with this farce of a wedding, Mrs. Weasley."

Mrs. Weasley's face crumpled. "Harry?" she whispered, and this time, her voice was that of a little girl lost. But it wasn't louder, Harry thought, than Ginny's hard, relieved exhalation behind him.

"I can't get married like this," Harry said bluntly. "Not like a celebrity. I went along with it just because it seemed to make you happy, but I need more than that." He hesitated, wondering if he would manage to find the right words, then hurried on when he saw Mrs. Weasley open her mouth again. Maybe these weren't the right words, but he couldn't risk her voice overriding his and maybe convincing him and Ginny again. "I need something private, and something joyous, and something flexible."

Mrs. Weasley licked her lips, and then said in a falsely bright voice, "All right, dear. Perhaps you can Court Ginny."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Weasley." Harry's heartbeat still hadn't calmed, which he thought was ridiculous. He rubbed his palms on his robes in an effort to free them from sweat. "I don't want anything about this wedding to come true at all. That includes marrying Ginny."

Silence so hard reigned after that that Harry wondered if he was about to be cursed out of the house.

Instead, Ginny squealed and jumped on him, wrapping her arms around his neck and showering him with kisses on both cheeks and his lips. Harry grunted in surprise and staggered backwards. Ginny followed him, clinging like a monkey, laughing, but Harry could clearly see tears sliding down her cheeks as well.

"That's not a girl's usual reaction to being told that a bloke doesn't want to marry her," was all he could think of to say.

Ginny jigged up and down in front of him, her hands clasping his, her face as bright as the day. Harry thought the last time he'd seen it like that, they'd still been at Hogwarts. "Oh, *Harry,*" she said. "I didn't really want to marry you either, but I was going along with it for the family's sake. And maybe we could have been happy together, but I don't think so." She smiled up at him, cheeks so flushed that she looked like someone had slapped her. "I'm in love with someone else, you see."

Harry blinked. "That's a new one on me."

She laughed and let go of his hands to spin in a circle. Harry started smiling in spite of himself; she was so carefree. "The assistant wizard at Francine's Fabulous Footwear," she said. "The one who was fitting me in the back room, and who I was taking so long to see? We've been exchanging owls for months."

Harry felt like smacking himself. He should have known. "That's why you needed your shoes fitted so many times," he said.

Ginny nodded.

"Well, good." Harry leaned over to kiss her on the forehead, ignoring Mrs. Weasley's sharp, "*Ginevra.*" "Who's the lucky fellow?"

"Gregory Goyle."

Harry felt as though his mouth had dropped permanently open. He swallowed and nodded slowly. *Well, if Malfoy changed, why can't his friends change, too?* "Congratulations," he said.

Abruptly, Ginny grabbed his hand and ran with him out the front door. Harry heard the crackle and hiss of a spell behind him and reckoned that Mrs. Weasley had finally lost patience and tried to curse them. Ginny was giggling and shrieking like a five-year-old as she pushed Harry towards the little shed behind the house where Harry and Ron kept their brooms. "Get out of here," she said. "Mum's bound to be a little displeased for a bit—"

A purple spell landed behind them that made the grass sizzle.

"A *little*?" Harry said, shuddering.

"A little," Ginny said, unfazed. "But I can face it better because I'm her daughter, and I'm not the one who actually broke the engagement." She winked at him. "Besides, don't you have someone of your own waiting for you?"

Harry suspected he was gaping again.

"You never were any good at lying, Harry," Ginny murmured. "And I might possibly have received some owls offering me money to break the engagement on my own, and then accepting my suggestions when I said that what you really needed was someone to fly to, not just someone to run away from."

"*You're* the one who gave the memory of the Gryffindor common room to Malfoy!" Harry said.

"Don't you think you should call him Draco now?" Ginny ducked a Cutting Curse, which Harry thought was aimed at her hair, and then shoved him again, more strongly, in the direction of the shed. "Just remember that I expect your firstborn child to be named after me."

"Men can't have children," Harry said, but then was nervous as he remembered that he hadn't known men could Court other men, either. "Can they?"

Ginny laughed at him hard enough that she was rolling on the ground, and thus missed another of her mother's spells. Grinning up at him, she said, "Why don't you go find out?"

Harry nodded and ran.

It was ridiculous, Harry thought, that he could have the courage to defy his mother-in-law—surrogate mother, really—over an enormous wedding that had cost her lots of time and effort to prepare, and yet he couldn't work up the courage to knock on the front doors of the Manor. Or even take his broom and circle the house, for God's sake.

He shifted his weight for the third time. He'd spent twenty minutes now standing outside the iron fence that surrounded the Malfoy estate and staring in like an orphaned boy in front of a sweet shop. Peacocks strutted past him, one with its tail half-plucked and neck curved as if it were trying to hide its face.

There's one step left in the Courtship, the most dramatic.

What had that meant?

Harry hesitated and licked his lips. Maybe he wasn't hesitating out of fear, he thought. Maybe he wanted that last step of the Courtship Malfoy had promised him.

Though whatever it is, I don't think it's likely to be as dramatic as breaking my own marriage into smithereens.

Harry cast one more thoughtful look at the house, and then Apparated to Diagon Alley and the Leaky Cauldron. He had no idea that Malfoy was home at the moment, he told himself. He was probably attending one of his numerous parties or walking through shops more posh than Harry had ever known existed, studying jewels through an eye-glass.

Harry would wait at the Cauldron and see what Malfoy did when the news of his refusing Ginny broke in the papers.

It isn't fear, or weakness, or the feeling of having gone as far as I can and wanting someone else to do part of the work, he told himself as he nodded to Tom and paid for a room for the night. No news had arrived here, at least, because he got no more than the ordinary hero-worshipping glances. *It's just that I would hate to miss out on whatever Draco's got planned.*

As he sat on the bed and thought about Ginny's reaction and her confession and Draco's probable reaction, he began to laugh.

And for the first time in months, the laughter sounded unforced, unfettered, free.

"Is it true that you refused Ginny Weasley?"

"Is it true that you're in love with someone else? Who?"

"Will you marry *me* instead?"

Variations on those three questions had plagued Harry all morning. He had been steadily forcing his way through Diagon Alley in an effort to find Draco, but the crowd had surged around him and shouted the questions into his face, until he had retreated back into the Leaky Cauldron.

People had tried to climb the stairs and hammer on the door of his room, too, until Tom had chanted a long string of words in Latin. Then there had been a sound like the roar of a lion, and a heavy thump that shook the walls in Harry's room.

Then there had been silence.

Harry lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling and gnawing his thumbnail whilst his mind spun in

worried circles. Had he done the right thing by refusing Ginny? Yesterday it had seemed so simple: he would be free from the wedding preparations, he would free Ginny to go after the one she loved, and he would be free to pursue a relationship with Draco.

But now he wondered how his friends would react, and the rest of the Weasleys. Hermione, at least, would probably welcome the end of the wedding preparations with relief, but what about Fleur and all the Weasley aunts and cousins who had flooded the house for months to practice their parts in the event? What about Mr. Weasley, and Bill, and George, and Charlie?

What about Ron?

What gave Harry courage was the memory of his conversations with his best friends, both telling him he should back out of the wedding if he was unhappy, rather than go forwards with something that would change his life in so dramatic a manner. Hermione might have heard some of the truth from Ginny. Ron had seemed concerned about both his sister and Harry. Maybe he'd be disappointed at first—especially because Harry couldn't believe he would be in on the secret of Draco's Courtship—but he would come around.

Harry could only hope.

He was so deep in considerations of gloom and potential disasters that it took a long moment for the noise from the street to reach him. Gasps, shocked screams, cheers, and angry shouts mingled, rising from Diagon Alley. Harry stood up at last and went to the window of his room that overlooked the Alley. He wondered if they had discovered his presence, or if George had introduced some new product. Certainly, there wouldn't be joy mingled with the anger if it was a Death Eater attack or similar.

He stared out the window—and his jaw dropped for the third time in two days.

Draco Malfoy was advancing up the middle of Diagon Alley, and his magic must have held a clear path open in front of him through the crowds, because there was no way on earth that he could have been left unmolested otherwise. He wore a floating cape of white peacock feathers over his shoulders, and more bobbing feathers in his hair. His head was lifted and his face tilted back to the sky, his smile beatific. On one shoulder perched the Wingmalkin, hissing at anyone who strained against the barrier keeping them back.

Other than the feathers, Draco was stark naked.

Harry stood there a moment in a dream, staring. He felt as if he'd been turned to stone. This was simply one shock too many.

When he told me it would be dramatic, I didn't imagine anything like this.

For a moment, he doubted whether this was the gesture Draco had meant after all. Perhaps he was only doing this as a result of one of the crazy bets that he regularly made with his circle.

Harry had no idea. He had no idea if Draco valued him this much, if he could ever fit into Draco's life—

And then Draco found his eyes and smiled, the insufferable self-satisfied smile that Harry had wanted to punch off his face more than once, and spun so that the back of the cloak was to Harry.

On the back in glittering letters as green as the Killing Curse glowed the words *Property of Harry Potter.*

Draco gave a graceful shrug, and dropped the cloak to the ground. Then he dropped the spell that kept him protected from the crowd. Several women and men ran eagerly forwards, their hands groping out.

Harry didn't think. He grabbed his broom from the floor, hopped onto it, and flew out the window.

For a moment, the Alley spun dizzily beneath him, but in moments he had oriented himself on the bobbing feathers that stood up from Draco's hair and the lashing tail of the Wingmalkin. At least a few people had fallen back with sharp red scratches across their face from the kitten's protecting claws, Harry noted dimly.

The next moment, he dived like a hawk.

Glimpses of buildings enclosed him like a tunnel, so fast did he descend, and then he was pulling up and steering through grasping hands and lashing arms and bobbing heads. He knew the proper moment to drop his hand and catch Draco's.

Memories tried to assault him—this was the way he'd pulled him from the Fiendfyre, exactly like—but Harry pulled and hauled, and Draco climbed, and then they were both on the broom, Draco's arms wrapped around his waist, his lips fastening on the back of Harry's neck as if he were a starving vampire.

His erection shoved into the curve of Harry's arse, and Harry couldn't help a short backwards thrust of his hips. Draco laughed, the sound rich and deep enough to make Harry start hardening.

"Get us out of here," Draco whispered into his ear, and then latched onto Harry's earlobe with devouring teeth, which didn't *help.*

Harry kicked himself out of the daze when someone else tried to touch Draco's thigh, and then kicked the broom upwards. Once again the buildings spun around them. Then they were soaring above the disappointed, shrieking crowd, with the Wingmalkin flying after them, all its claws shot and its fur standing on end.

"Where are we going?" Harry asked on a gasp, tilting his head back. "The Manor?"

"You think I'm going to last that long?" Draco whispered. "Fuck no. We'll go to your room. Just let me cast a Disillusionment Charm, to make them think we've Apparated."

It occurred to Harry to ask where he'd stashed his wand, but the sensation like an egg breaking over his head occurred before he could. The next moment, Draco cast a spell that imitated the popping sound of Apparition. The crowd's roar overwhelmed the noise of Harry's heartbeat in his ears.

Then Draco thrust into his arse again and bit his ear, and Harry turned the broom hastily back towards the Leaky Cauldron.

They tumbled onto the bed, somehow falling directly from the broom and leaving it to smash into the wall. Harry would have protested about scratches in the wood—it was a new-model Moonbrush—but Draco curved an arm around his neck and sucked on his tongue, and then he had better things to think about.

(Although he did notice from the corner of his eye that the Wingmalkin had taken up a perch on the windowsill from which it could stare at them disapprovingly).

Draco was tugging on his shirt and opening his legs wide enough at the same moment to cradle Harry's hips whilst thrusting against him, and for long moments the only thought in Harry's mind was that he was a marvel of coordination. Then Draco rolled over, and he was on top of Harry, and Harry experienced a sharp surge of excitement at the contrast of his weight and strength with Ginny's.

Another flick of that unseen wand, and Harry was naked. Not that he objected, especially when Draco reached impatiently down between them and grabbed his cock.

Harry had a better idea, though, and he wasn't going to let Draco control every bit of this encounter, even if he was temporarily on top. He grabbed both their cocks in his hand and then moved Draco's hand so that it was grasping both of them as well. Draco gasped in approval into his mouth and began to make immediate, forceful movements that Harry feared would end everything before he got a chance to enjoy it.

Therefore, he gentled his own rocking and traced his tongue in a slow circle around the outside of Draco's mouth. He gripped Draco's madly stroking fingers and held them still with his free hand, meantime speeding up his own hand. Their cocks rubbed together, a combination of slickness and warmth Harry had never imagined. He gasped as their heads caught against each other, and thrust two times before he slowed down and went back to his measured stroking.

"So good," Draco gasped into his ear.

Harry licked his mouth again, and thumbed the shaft of Draco's penis. Draco's eyes rolled back in his head. He shuddered. A peacock feather drifted down from his hair and brushed against Harry's shoulder, sending a mild thrill through him. Another had broken at an awkward angle and

dangled past Draco's ear, making him look beautiful and ruffled.

"Imagine," Draco sighed, "what it'll be like when you suck me, when I fuck you, when I suck you, when you fuck me. Imagine a hotter, wetter warmth than this around you. Imagine me wanking you when I know what you like. Imagine—"

The warmth was intolerable, and so were his words. Harry flung an arm around his neck again and kissed him silent, clicking their teeth together and jumping with the pain of it. But the sensation dived to the base of his spine and joined the building slickness between their fingers, and the soft squishing sound of them rubbing together and the constant temptation to arch his back and bring them closer, and the intensity in Draco's eyes as he stared down.

It was all too much at last. Harry wrapped himself near, pressing his chest into Draco's until he vaguely thought Draco would carry the imprint of his muscles, and shuddered through the most satisfying orgasm of his life. Draco licked the side of his neck and coated his stomach with a dripping, sliding pool of liquid. Harry was startled to feel a greater sense of smugness and triumph than he had when *he* came.

It was a pleasure he could not imagine sharing with Ginny.

No more comparisons, he told himself sternly, and stroked his hands along Draco's back, scrabbling for a moment, because sweat down the spine and semen from his hand made his grip slick. *This is what you chose.*

Long moments later, Draco opened his eyes and slid off Harry like a snake to lie beside him. He brushed Harry's hair back from his forehead and smiled at him. Harry wondered when he had started finding the way Draco's mouth twisted attractive.

"You liked your last gift, I take it," he murmured.

"You do that again, and I'm going to punish you," Harry said, then blinked. *Did I really just say that?* It seemed Draco was going to teach him new sexual things about himself even after he'd thought he'd already learned every lesson.

Draco gave a faint moan and braced himself on one elbow to kiss Harry lightly, ignoring Harry's attempts to deepen the contact. "Not now, Harry," he sighed when he drew back. "I'm too worn out for another round."

"We'll see about that." Harry cast a glance down at Draco's twitching groin.

"For the moment," Draco said, and his voice had abruptly strengthened, "I want to know why you chose me at last."

"Because you weren't just the opposite of Ginny," Harry said, the reasons spilling easily from his lips without involving his brain, much the way the comment about punishment had. "Because

you were someone *different.* Because I still want to beat you when we race across the sea next time. Because I was dreaming about you, even though I tried not to remember that. Because you left me longing, and I had to feel you satisfy me. Because I want to know how you've changed since the war, and why you chose me. Because I want you."

"All very good reasons." Draco bowed his head, his smile secretive.

"I don't know much about a Courtship," Harry confessed, propping himself up on one elbow in turn, "or how the marriage that comes from it is supposed to work."

"I told you," Draco said firmly, "it can be whatever we want it to be. It's flexible. For the moment, we know we want to have sex with each other. And I think sexual fidelity will have to be part of it, considering what a possessive lover I have." He pretended to pout.

Harry scowled at him.

"I wouldn't want anyone else touching you, either," Draco said, and for a moment his face became harsh as granite. The next moment, it had relaxed, and he flung an arm and a leg over Harry. "And I want us to be able to make each other happy, and do other things than argue. Other than that, I don't know what it'll be any more than you do. The duties and freedoms should be the ones *we* choose to take up."

Harry trembled for a moment. The words frightened him, and he didn't know why—until he tried to imagine the future, and saw only a gaping, windy tunnel.

He'd *always* had some sort of structure and control in his life. First the Dursleys, then Hogwarts, then the tutoring and studying for NEWTS, and then the expected happy ending with Ginny, and most recently the wedding.

"I don't think I know how to be free," he whispered.

Draco clasped his hand and his jaw and turned Harry's face so that Harry was looking at him. "I'll be there," he said quietly, with the force of a vow. "I promise."

And slowly, Harry's mental picture of the future acquired a companion, ornamented in white and gold, mounted on a fast broom, his smile taunting and his eyes full of brightness.

Harry found himself smiling strongly. He leaned over and placed his lips as close to Draco's as he could whilst still leaving himself room to speak.

"Let's fly."

End.