HAPPY H/D HOLIDAYS, LOMONAAEREN!

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Title: Take the Air

Pairing(s): Harry/Draco, Ron/Hermione

Summary: Someone or something is attacking Muggles and leaving them for dead. Auror Harry Potter is assigned to the case, but with his usual partner unavailable, he is stuck with the worst, most anti-social, rude, and annoying Auror ever to walk the halls of the Ministry. Or perhaps he is only that way around Harry…

Rating: NC-17

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Warning(s): I tried to keep it under 20k. And failed.

Epilogue compliant? Not on your ever-loving life.

Word Count: ~50,000

Author's Notes: Hello, lovely prompter, I know you write more than most of the other authors in this fandom put together, and you can definitely write your own fics when you want something in particular, so it's a bit intimidating to write for you. You seem to enjoy darker themes than I normally write and… yeah, I didn't manage that, either. But I did tailor this fic to your prompts and it has plenty of action, and hopefully a bit of plot and a sprinkling of magical theory. I do hope you enjoy it. Happy holidays!

Additional notes: 1) There really was a tornado in London on December 7, 2006. 2) A bird is said to take the air when it seeks to escape by trying to rise higher than the falcon. 3) Eroe is Italian. 4) Many thanks to my lovely betas for shredding this and keeping it from crawling to 100k and boring everyone to death. :D

(Take the Air)

Saturday, November 3, 2006

Tremaine was drunk. Not so drunk that he couldn't walk, of course, but drunk enough that leaning on Angelique and Paul greatly assisted his coordination.

"Where are we going?" he asked, possibly for the third time.

"The Seabreeze Club, you gormless wanker," Paul replied and gave Tremaine a jab with his elbow. "Did that last vodka tonic kill the last of your brain cells, then?"

"You say that like Tremmy had some to start with." Marcy laughed and Tremaine scowled. He hated that bloody nickname. He was not overly fond of Marcy, either, but she was Angelique's friend and needed to be tolerated.

"One does not become a partner in a law firm without having a high level of intelligence, Mar-Mar," Tremaine countered.

"You're a barrister?" Paul asked, eyes goggling. Angelique erupted into a fit of giggles. Tremaine approved of her laughter—it made her breasts jiggle in a most becoming fashion. "I didn't know! I am honoured to be in your illustrious presence! How does one address one of your esteemed greatness?"

"Shut up," Tremaine said with a laugh. "Although I don't mind if you prefer to call me—"

"Lord Blowhard?" Paul suggested.

"Counsellor Cockamamie?" Angelique asked at the same time.

Tremaine snorted. He could always count on his friends to keep him from getting a big head. “That’s Counsellor Cock-a-mighty to you, woman.”

The others fell about laughing and making jokes, but Angelique squeezed him tighter with a suggestive-sounding, “Well, that it is.”

Tremaine gave her arse an appreciative squeeze and made to comment, but the air suddenly seemed twenty degrees colder. Paul’s breath made a cloud when he laughed.

“Blimey!” Marcy cried. “Why is it so bloody cold here?”

“I’ll bet it’s a ghost!” Paul said in a hushed tone. He hunched his shoulders and formed his fingers into claws. “Or a…demon.”

“That’s not funny, Paul,” Marcy said and punched at him with a fist. She missed when he danced away with a laugh. “Come on, let’s get to the Chelsea. I’ve got the willies.”

“I thought we established that Tremaine has the willy,” Paul said, but Tremaine noticed even he quickened his pace. The cold seemed unnatural and disturbing. Tremaine didn’t believe in ghosts or demons, but something in his primal brain had begun to scream.

“Let’s go,” Tremaine said and walked faster. Angelique jogged to catch up.

“Maybe it’s aliens!” Paul shouted dramatically.

It startled a laugh from Tremaine, even though he wished Paul would shut up. Something wasn’t right. Despite the alcohol in his blood, he suddenly felt stone cold sober.

“Oh god,” Angelique said, and then darkness joined the cold, as if stars and streetlights and house lights had been swallowed up. “Oh god, no…”

“What?” Tremaine whispered as the cold seemed to sink into his bones, chilling him to the marrow. A feeling of pure hopelessness overcame him, mingling with despair and sudden, absolute sadness. He thought he heard Angelique screaming, but the sound seemed very far away and small. Something cold clamped around Tremaine’s wrist, icier even than the air that turned his gasping breath into a cloud of fog. He could see nothing.

A putrid odor assailed him, smelling of death and decay; it wafted over his face like freezing air in a charnel house, and yet he could summon no energy to pull away. He couldn’t breathe; whatever it was seemed to draw the very air from his lungs. As Tremaine’s thoughts spiralled into blackness, he thought he felt something terrible clamp over his mouth.

Kissed by death, he thought dimly. Kissed by death kissed by death kissed by—

Wednesday, November 8, 2006

Harry’s footsteps rang in the cold white corridor as he walked briskly after the white-clad man. The smell of antiseptic was strong and Harry struggled not to wrinkle his nose at the smell of hospital, which seemed to be the same the world over, whether British or Scottish, Muggle, or Wizard. Cleaning fluid and something Harry’s brain helpfully tried to suggest was the scent of infirmity and illness penetrated his nasal passages.

Harry glanced at the man next to him to see if their surroundings bothered him, but, as usual, his features were an impassive mask. Harry forced his own face into an expression of polite interest as he turned his attention back to the Muggle doctor walking before them.

“…third case this week. It is completely baffling.” The doctor halted at a closed door with a nondescript plaque that contained the notation 4G within a plain white border. “I hope your presence does not hint at something…” He leaned closer. “Government-related.”

“That is what we are hoping to determine, Doctor,” Harry said, maintaining the same low tone used by the man. “We need to rule out the involvement of certain, shall we say, anti-government elements.”

The doctor peered up and down the corridor to make sure they were not overheard, and then he whispered, “Terrorists? Do you think it’s possible?”

“Anything is possible,” Draco said, “But very rarely plausible. It is our job to rule out the implausible and sift through the remaining possibilities to find the actual cause. Which would be easier if we could get on with our examination.” The doctor straightened at the dry words and his lips pulled into a thin line.

“By all means,” he snapped and opened the door.

“Must you be a complete arse?” Harry muttered as he passed his irritating partner.

“Must you spend all day chatting inanely with Muggles? I would like to get this over with and get out of here.”

Harry scowled, but schooled his features back into a calm mask before meeting the eyes of the doctor as he approached the bed. The man had a medical chart in hand and began to flip through the papers, reading aloud.

“Margaret Snead, age 29, resides at 45 Oakesdale Drive, Pembroke. Employed as a sales clerk at Norton’s Fine Footwear and Handbags, 774 Farnley Way. No health issues prior to the day before yesterday, other than having her tonsils removed at age 15 in a routine surgical procedure. Heart and organ functions are normal. Everything seems to be in perfect working condition, except that she has no brain function whatsoever.”

Harry nodded, trying to maintain a professional façade when confronted with a young woman who was, for all intents and purposes, dead. Her body still functioned, but it was an empty shell, devoid of life.

Harry had seen too many similar sights lately.

“When did it happen?”

The doctor looked at Harry’s partner and then raised a brow. Harry bit back a comment when he saw Malfoy holding a bright green quill over a leather-bound journal.

“Interesting pen,” the doctor commented.

“Family heirloom,” Malfoy replied. “When did it happen?”

The doctor shook his head, obviously not best pleased with Malfoy’s brusque manner. “She was brought in on Tuesday night. So far all attempts to stimulate brain activity have failed. Despite all treatments applied, she remains comatose.”

“According to the Mug—police report, she was walking home from a party with a group of friends on Brighton Street, shortly after one o’clock in the morning. They claimed that the air temperature suddenly dropped, and then Margaret stiffened and fell to the pavement, thrashing. Despite her friends’ attempts to revive her, she simply lay still and became… as she is now. Is this correct?”

“To the best of my knowledge,” the doctor replied.

“And this case is similar to Tremaine Johnston and Bethany Billingsley, also in this hospital?”

“As far as we can tell, the symptoms are identical, as was the sudden onset of their conditions. One moment they were walking, the next they were prone and had no brain activity.”

“There are several more cases in other local hospitals, is this correct?” Malfoy might have been talking

about garden herbs or potion ingredients for all the emotion in his tone.

“Seventeen cases that I am personally aware of,” the doctor replied.

Malfoy nodded and tucked his quill into the journal. “Thank you, Doctor. Potter?” Without waiting for Harry to respond, Malfoy left the room.

“I’m glad he’s not a physician,” the doctor said dryly. “Lovely bedside manner.”

“Yes, he is… something else. Thank you for your help, Doctor. We will let you know if anything comes to light.”

“I’m sure you will,” the man replied dryly.

Harry turned and hurried after Malfoy, catching him at the polished metal lift doors. Malfoy said nothing, simply stared at the doors until they opened. Two white-clad employees and a Muggle dressed in street clothes stepped out, leaving the lift empty. Harry and Malfoy got on.

“What do you think?” Harry asked when the doors shut.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

Harry bit his tongue. Malfoy had an annoying habit of answering questions with questions. Of course, he had dozens of annoying habits, but that one displayed itself several times a day. “Yes, I was just asking your opinion. It’s dementors, isn’t it?”

“Very good, Potter. It’s almost as if you’ve learned to think for yourself.”

Harry's fingers twitched, itching to slide his wand from his wrist holster and hex Malfoy with something unpleasant. He entertained himself for a moment or two thinking of Malfoy with egg-sized boils, or permanent baldness, or perhaps blowing up like a giant balloon, the way Harry's Aunt Marge had done so long ago.

Malfoy turned to look at him and his eyes narrowed at the sight of Harry's probably not-very-pleasant smile.

The doors opened and Harry marched out of the lift, pushed through the Muggles crowding the hospital entrance, and walked towards the car park. Malfoy had no trouble keeping up; he had long legs and a fast walk. The car park was several levels of concrete and metal, with stairwells accessible by heavy doors with peeling paint and the spray-painted marks of taggers.

Harry entered one of the stairwells and stopped on the landing. He waited until the door shut behind Malfoy. "Dementors, but how do we prove it? Anders isn't going to just take our word for it." Harry was not a particular fan of Artemis Anders, the Head of the Auror Department. The bastard was a stickler for the rules; he refused to make a move without mountains of evidence, and was also responsible for assigning Draco Malfoy as Harry's temporary partner.

"What a pity that the Head Auror won't take the Saviour's word for it," Malfoy murmured as he pulled out his wand. "Think of all the paperwork it would save."

"Look, Malfoy—" Harry's eyes were on Malfoy's wand. It was new, of course, since Malfoy's old hawthorn wand resided in Harry's old school trunk, shoved away in the attic at Number 12, Grimmauld Place. That one would never bow to Malfoy's will again; Harry would make certain of that. This new one, however, was a curiosity. The wood was very pale, almost delicate-looking, straight and unadorned but for a green leather grip wrapped in silver wire.

"Never mind, Potter," Malfoy said. "In the absence of empirical evidence, the preponderance of proof must therefore lie with the weight of the circumstantial."

Harry said nothing, he merely frowned at the knowledge that when Malfoy was not saying something annoying or sarcastic, he was generally spewing out words that made no sense at all. Grey eyes met his and Malfoy sighed dramatically.

“It means we keep talking to people and if they all give us identical feedback—in this case, pointing to dementors being the culprits—then Anders will have little choice but to acknowledge that we did our jobs and that our hypothesis, even with your input, is the correct one. Now, where did that last attack take place? Not Ms Snead, but the one prior to that. Johnston.”

“The Seabreeze Club. Johnston and his friends left the club and were walking to another pub up the street when Johnston collapsed.”

Malfoy reached out and clamped his hand on Harry’s bicep with a nod. “Take us there. I have a list of Johnston’s friends. We can start with them.”

Harry ignored the commandeering tone and Apparated them to West Brompton.

They appeared on the roof of the building directly across from the jazz club. It was a large edifice of glass and brick currently undergoing renovation, so any straggling builders would be easily avoided. Malfoy let go and started for the stairwell immediately; he pulled out his ledger and flipped it open.

“The girlfriend lives close by. Angelique Watson. Have you spoken to her?”

“No,” Harry replied. “Hansom took her statement. He said she was belligerent.”

“Most Muggles are,” Malfoy said dryly and then cast Alohomora on the closed door before opening it and starting down. The street was quickly reached and Harry was careful to lock the ground floor door when they exited, since he knew Malfoy wouldn’t bother. The club across the street was open for business, jazz music already blaring from the open windows.

“I doubt she’s inside,” Harry said, leaning close to Malfoy. “Her boyfriend is in a vegetative state in hospital. She’s most likely at home.”

“All right. She lives right around the corner.” They strolled down a quiet street lined with squat brick and mortar flats. Christmas lights twinkled in many windows, and blinked from random trees and bushes. They passed several apartment buildings and rounded a corner.

Harry shot surreptitious glances at Malfoy, who looked better in Muggle clothing than Harry had expected. The Ministry’s Muggle Liaison Office had wardrobe consultants for all missions requiring Muggle contact. Harry would have felt fine wearing jeans and a t-shirt, but Parkins had insisted that jeans were not appropriate attire for Muggle authority figures. Therefore, he and Malfoy were identically dressed in black trousers, white shirts with thin black ties, and black suit jackets. Harry thought Malfoy looked bloody amazing, although he would be hard-pressed to admit that aloud even under Veritaserum.

Malfoy stopped at a wrought-iron gate and pushed it open with a rusty squeal. Harry dragged his thoughts away from his casual admiration of Malfoy’s physique and concentrated on their mission. Malfoy’s long index finger skimmed the list of names on the plaque next to the number pad, stopping at Johnston. He used his pinkie to gingerly press 659, as if Muggle germs might rub off on him if he used too much pressure.

After long moments of listening to a tinny ringing sound through the speaker, a voice issued forth with one word: “Yeah?”

“Ms Watson?” Malfoy asked, leaning close to the speaker. “I am Agent Malfoy of the London Special Services Police. Agent Potter and I would like to have a word with you regarding Tremaine Johnston.”

There was a long silence and Malfoy looked at Harry with a vaguely worried expression. Harry reviewed Malfoy’s words, but he seemed to have got them right. There really was a London Special Services Police Force, specially created by the Muggle Prime Minister to deal with magical affairs, although few people other than the Prime Minister knew what the division entailed. Their Muggle-issued identification cards and papers were authentic and valid.

“Come on up,” the voice said finally. “I’m in 25.” A buzzer sounded and the door latch clicked. Malfoy pushed the handle down and dragged open the metal door. Harry followed him inside. Malfoy ignored the lift and went for the door marked Stairs, ascending three floors easily.

The door to flat 25 was ajar, so Malfoy pushed it open. Angelique Watson stood in the centre of the small room, smoking a cigarette. The room was filled with smoke, but she only glared at them and blew another long puff into the air.

“Tremaine wake up yet?” she asked in a dull tone.

Harry shook his head and she looked away.

“Yeah, I didn’t think so.” She made a sardonic noise and gestured towards a sofa covered in a striped fabric. The furnishings looked expensive, but the flat was a mess. Books, magazines, papers and envelopes lay scattered over every surface, half-burying items such as unwashed plates, bowls, and glasses. Harry pushed aside several magazines on the sofa to make enough space to sit. Malfoy looked as if he would rather be AK’ed than sit down. His journal and quill reappeared.

“Can you tell us where you were when Tremaine Johnston collapsed?”

She turned to glare at Malfoy and Harry blinked when he noticed the other side of her face. A huge birthmark covered most of her right cheek. It was a deep reddish colour and looked almost like a handprint. “I already went over this with the cops. Don’t you have the bloody police report?”

Malfoy gave her a cool look that Harry found impressive and wished he could mimic. It had not cowed the doctor at the hospital, but Angelique looked away before dropping into a chair across from Harry. She stubbed out her cigarette in an overflowing ashtray on the table.

“We prefer to gather our own information,” Malfoy said.

“Fine. Whatever. We were at the Seabreeze Club celebrating Marcy’s engagement until after midnight. We got tired of the music and decided to walk to the Chelsea to try and get some free drinks out of Barbara. She works there and she has a thing for Tremaine.” Her voice, which had been a steady monotone, caught at the name, but she paused for only a moment and continued. “Had a thing. We were all a bit drunk and joking round, laughing like loons. Paul was being a card and making Tremaine laugh.” Angelique smiled wanly at the memory and her eyes brightened with a wet sheen. “We were nearly there when it got cold. Like, really cold. We all stopped and were freaking out a bit. Paul screamed something about ghosts and aliens and that set Tremaine off laughing again. The stupid bastard.”

Harry caught Malfoy’s eye for a moment. The laughter fit their theory; dementors would have been drawn to the laughing, happy group. Malfoy’s quill made scratching noises in the silence.

“And then Tremaine collapsed and that was it.” Her voice went casual and Harry looked at her sharply. His Auror instincts were pinging.

“Did you notice anything other than the cold?” Malfoy asked. “Nothing else unusual? No shadows? Movement? Anything at all?”

“What do you mean by shadows?” she asked.

“Don’t be afraid to speak,” Harry advised. “Even if it sounds… crazy. We are just looking for information.”

“Crazy,” she repeated, “Like… dementors crazy?”

Harry drew in a shocked breath. “You know about dementors?”

Angelique scowled. “I knew it. You two are bloody wizards, aren’t you?”

“How do you know about wizards?” Harry countered. He glanced at Malfoy, who shrugged.

“I went to that stupid school in Scotland,” she muttered.

“Hogwarts? You went to Hogwarts?”

“That’s the one.” She sneered. “I thought it would solve all my problems. I was so happy when that bleeding owl brought that letter. I was going to go off and learn magic and everything in my shit life was going to be wonderful.” She shook her head. “Fuck that.”

“What happened?” Harry asked, shocked at her venomous tone.

“It got worse, that’s what happened. See this?” She gestured angrily to the blemish on her face and nodded. “Yeah, I got teased all the time when I was a kid. All the fucking time. I thought I could learn magic and they would all pay for being so mean to me.” She snorted. “The arseholes at that school were even worse. Calling me names and backing it up with magic spells whenever they could. The teasing and tormenting was a million times worse than any school here. After three months I couldn’t take any more. Wrote to mum and told her to bring me home. Fuck magic. I didn’t need it. You can all rot with your magic, for all I care.”

Harry thought back to her file. Her birthdate was two years before Harry’s; it was hard to believe she had been teased out of Hogwarts only two years before he’d arrived. Harry could not imagine giving up magic. Not for any amount of teasing or tormenting. He had a few unpleasant memories of his own from Hogwarts, namely the Heir of Slytherin incident in his second year, but he would never have turned his back on Hogwarts. He opened his mouth to say so, but Malfoy’s voice cut in.

“So, you saw the dementor.”

Angelique reached for the pack of cigarettes on the table and shook one out. She placed it in her mouth and was about to reach for the lighter when the end glowed red. Her glance shifted to Malfoy. “Thanks,” she mouthed around the cigarette. She took a long drag, pulled the cigarette away between her index and middle finger, and blew a long stream of smoke into the air. “Yeah, I saw it. The bloody thing went straight for Tremaine, fell on his face and started sucking. I tried to stop it, but it was so cold, I could

hardly move at all. I didn't have the energy to do much more than scream." She shuddered. "Everything was so dark. None of the others could even see it. I wasn't even sure what it was until later, when it all came back to me. Dementors. They guard the wizard prison, right? The kids used to scare me with stories about them. At Hogwarts."

"They used to guard the prison," Malfoy said, "until they all ran off to join their new boss. At least until Potter, here, killed him. Now they seem to be roaming free, attacking defenceless Muggles."

Angelique looked horrified for the first time. "You can stop them, can't you?"

"We'll stop them," Malfoy said confidently.

"What about Tremaine? Can you fix him?"

Malfoy only shook his head. "There is no cure for a dementor's kiss, I'm afraid." His voice was surprisingly gentle; it was the first time Harry had heard anything close to compassion from his partner.

Angelique rolled her eyes and took another drag from her cigarette. She sneered. "Yeah, that's what they said about my face. I'm pretty sure that was bullshit, but you're probably right about Tremaine." She sighed heavily. "He was a good man. I was hoping..." She closed her eyes and took a shuddering breath. Harry sensed that she was about to lose it.

"I think we have everything we need," he said gently. "We'll be leaving now."

"If you don't mind, I would like to come back for a signed statement once we have confirmed your story regarding—" Malfoy's words cut off when Harry's fingers dug sharply into his arm. Harry had bolted from the sofa to grab his partner, whose moment of compassion had obviously been a fluke. "Unhand me, Potter."

"I said we will be leaving now," Harry retorted through clenched teeth. "Thank you for your time,

Angelique. I am sorry for your loss."

She only nodded and took a pull from her cigarette, staring out the window at the pinkish glow caused by the setting sun.

"Come on, Malfoy," Harry said and towed him towards the door.

Malfoy shook him off. "Fine," he snapped. "Ms Watson, if you don't mind my asking, what House were you Sorted into?"

She answered without turning around. "Ravenclaw."

"Thank you," he said and then followed Harry out the door.

They tromped back down the stairs and down the walk, not speaking until the iron gate closed behind them. They walked back towards the jazz club. Finally Harry shook his head and glanced at Malfoy. "I can't even imagine."

Malfoy glanced sidelong at him. "No chance of you renouncing magic and returning to the Muggle way of life?"

Harry snorted. "Not a chance in hell."

Malfoy actually smiled, a genuine smile that seemed to light his grey eyes from within. Harry nearly stopped walking at the sight of it. "Pity," Malfoy said.

Harry looked away, disturbed by the rush of warmth Malfoy's smile had seemed to ignite. He assumed it was simply a reaction to the astonishment of seeing a human emotion on the prat's face. "Shut up," he

muttered. “Should we talk to Tremaine’s other friends?”

“Why bother? We need only go to Hogwarts, find a copy of Angelique Watson’s Hogwarts letter and record of her Sorting, and we’re done. Enough evidence even for Anders’ dementia. And we can give him Pensieve memories, if necessary.”

“Yeah, fine. I guess we’re done for the day, then?”

“We’re done. See you tomorrow, Potter.”

“Goodnight, Malfoy.”

They said nothing more as they returned to the empty warehouse, slipped inside, and Disapparated.

Friday, November 10, 2006

Despite Malfoy’s confident words, Anders was not completely convinced. Harry nearly gnashed his teeth when the man cocked his head and frowned, examining Harry’s report and scrutinizing the records Malfoy had retrieved from Hogwarts.

“Dementors, you say?” Anders asked for the third time.

“Nothing else fits the established pattern, Auror Anders,” Malfoy said. “Shall we proceed with efforts to locate the creatures, or should we hand the case over to the Unspeakables?”

Anders sat up straight at the mention of the Unspeakables. Anders had a well-known running feud with Charlemagne Croaker, the head of the Department of Mysteries. “Unspeakables? Certainly not! This is an Auror matter and we do not require input from the bloody Department of Mysteries!”

Malfoy looked thoughtful. “You are right, sir. Perhaps it would be best to converse with those most familiar with dementors?” He paused, but spoke before Anders could. “By that, I mean the guards at Azkaban, of course.”

Anders leaned back in his chair and tapped his fingers against the armrests. “Azkaban,” he muttered. “Azkaban.”

Harry shared a look with Malfoy while Anders mulled over the idea. Sometimes it took Anders several agonizing minutes to ponder all of the possibilities of even a simple suggestion. Harry shifted restlessly, but he had to give kudos to Malfoy for prodding the man into action as quickly as he had. Generally, it took at least three quarters of an hour to pry the smallest decision from Anders.

“Very well,” Anders said at last. “You two go and dig up everything you can about these dementors. Report back to me, and keep quiet about this. I don’t want Croaker running to the Minister and hinting that my department isn’t pulling its weight. Last quarter the bastard nearly succeeded in pushing through a budget cut just because…” He ranted on for a few minutes about inter-departmental politics, a speech Harry had heard at least six times. He wished Anders provided chairs for his guests, but the Head Auror preferred that his visitors remain standing, so that they would “remained focussed” whilst in his office.

Harry was beginning to think the man was a few feathers short of a Snitch.

Finally, they were excused from Anders’ office and walked towards the lift. “Well, Potter, have fun at Azkaban. I took the liberty of writing you a list of questions.” Malfoy pulled a rolled-up scroll from the sleeve of his Auror robe and handed it to Harry, who spluttered.

“What? What do you mean ‘have fun’? I’m not going to Azkaban alone!”

“Feel free to take along anyone you like, but I’m not going.”

Harry glared at him, but said nothing as a wizard dressed all in violet with garish yellow stars adorning his robes strode past. The man paid them little mind, muttering a long string of numbers over and over, obviously trying to keep them straight. When he had passed out of hearing range, Harry leaned closer to Malfoy.

“What do you mean you’re not going? Of course you’re going! We’re partners now!”

“That may be the case, but I cannot go to Azkaban. I refuse. I will be at home. If it makes you feel any better, I will be utilizing my father’s extensive library to do some research into dementors, so it is not as if I won’t be working. Don’t forget this.” He thrust the parchment at Harry, who snatched it angrily.

The lift doors opened to disclose several Aurors. Harry was immediately surrounded by pleasant greetings, questions, and friendly slaps on the back. Malfoy was ignored completely. He skirted the group and got into the elevator, obviously intent on abandoning Harry.

“Hold up, Malfoy!” Harry cried. “Sorry, guys, I’ll catch up later!” He slipped through the closing doors, causing them to spring open again.

“We’ll be at the Purple Cauldron after work. Come join us, Harry!” one called.

“Yeah, Harry, all work and no play, you know!”

Harry waved at them and the doors slammed shut. Malfoy glowered at him from his slouched position in the corner. His arms were crossed and he fairly exuded ice.

“I see your fan club is still intact,” Malfoy said.

“They aren’t fans,” Harry retorted. “They are—” He stopped himself before saying co-workers, because Malfoy was their co-worker, as well, and he certainly hadn’t been invited, or even acknowledged. Harry looked away, not sure how to explain. Harry and Ron often met the other Aurors at the Purple Cauldron,

or sometimes the Leaky. It was just what they did to blow off steam, have a few pints and talk about the job. Harry had never really thought about the fact that Malfoy was never there. He had always assumed Malfoy didn't want to come. Malfoy's former partner hadn't been the sociable type, either, so the two of them had always been relatively… ignored.

"You can come, if you'd like," Harry said impulsively.

Malfoy's glare grew even colder. "Fuck off, Potter. I don't need you or your acolytes."

Harry glared back. He opened his mouth to say something, he had no idea what, but the lift doors opened with a ping and a huge group of yellow-and-black-clad witches and wizards entered, all talking loudly and holding banners and signs that read Wimbourne Wasps. Harry was shoved into the corner opposite Malfoy by a large wizard dressed in an actual wasp costume, complete with large, fluttering wings.

"Why, hello! Are you an Auror? What do you think of the Wasps chances in the World Cup next year? We all stopped in to see the Minister and ask for his support to bring the World Cup to Wimbourne, but he wasn't in today. Isn't that a pity?"

Harry politely agreed it was a pity, and yes, he thought the Wasps had a fighting chance, and no, he had no idea where the Minister might be, nor when he would be back. By the time the lift stopped at the Atrium floor and Harry pushed out with the crowd of Wasp fans, Malfoy was gone.

~*~*~*~*~

It was late when Harry arrived home. He was cold and hungry and morbidly depressed. The dementors might be gone from Azkaban, but it was still a dark, lonely, wretched place, filled with half-mad (or completely mad) prisoners, merciless killers, and those drained of all hope.

An owl was waiting for him, bearing a message that said only, I would appreciate a report when you return. ~D Harry scowled. As if he planned on withholding information. He was half-tempted to Apparate to Malfoy Manor and report, despite the late hour, but given his current mood it would likely turn into an

argument.

Instead, Harry stood in his kitchen and wolfed down several pieces of bread smeared with pear butter, washing it down with milk guzzled straight from the jug. He couldn't be arsed to cook and was too tired to go and fetch anything more substantial.

The trip had taken all afternoon and had largely been a waste of time. Most of the guards currently at Azkaban had got their positions after the war. Only a few old-timers remained, and of those few, only one had remembered anything useful in regards to the dementors' service.

The man had recalled that "Old Jackson" had been in charge of the dementors. Wizards who were proficient in casting a Patronus Charm were the only ones allowed on the same floors as the dementors, but "Old Jackson" had been able to control them using something he called a "Stinger". The guard had been unable to elaborate; He only remembered that "Old Jackson" had been quite proud of the spell, which he had invented himself.

Unfortunately, "Old Jackson" had died during Bellatrix Lestrange's escape from Azkaban—the same breakout that had freed Lucius Malfoy. Harry supposed that was one reason Malfoy had been adamant not to accompany him. Regardless, Harry planned to repay him with an early morning visit. If he wanted a report, Harry would give him one, weekend or not.

He gulped a final swallow of milk and went to bed.

Saturday, November 11, 2006

Harry stood before the gates of Malfoy Manor, twisting his wand nervously in his hands. Strange how the mere sight of the iron gates had brought memories rushing back. This was the place where they had been brought, terrified. Hermione had been tortured, and Dobby had been…

Harry shut his eyes and swallowed. Harry took a deep breath and lifted his hand to push against the gate, half expecting it to contort into a caricature and speak, but it opened before he could touch the metal.

He frowned, but walked inside. His feet crunched on the gravel path.

Every step seemed to conjure another memory, but the one he kept returning to was the one where Draco Malfoy had looked at Harry's face, with his father's desperate demands ringing through the room. "Is it? Is it Harry Potter?" and Draco's response, when he had barely met Harry's eyes even for a moment. "I can't—I can't be sure."

Harry stopped midway up the walk. He turned in a slow circle, scanning the hedges, pretending to look for albino peacocks. In truth, he was not quite ready to enter the Manor. He might never be ready.

"This was your idea," he muttered to himself. "Get on with it."

With a puzzled look that became genuine when he realized there were no albino peacocks about, nor any birds at all, Harry continued up the walk and stopped at the base of the broad stone steps. He merely needed to walk up a few steps and knock on the door. It was a simple matter.

A house-elf popped into existence two steps from Harry, nearly causing him to leap out of his skin. After several thumping heartbeats, Harry put his wand away. "Hello?" he asked, trying to catch his breath.

"Mistress Narcissa is being in the garden, Mr Harry Potter. Please to be following the path." The house-elf gestured at a smaller path that led beneath a rose-laden archway. Harry nearly sagged with relief at not having to enter the house.

"Thank you," he said politely to the house-elf, who seemed to be wearing a bit of upholstery that might once have been part of a chair. House-elf reform would be a long time coming to the older pure-blood families. The elf looked surprised, but only nodded and disappeared.

Harry took the path and walked into a garden filled with roses of every colour and fragrance. He was nearly side-tracked by the urge to smell each one, but stopped only once to inhale the scent of a deep red version with blooms as big as dinner plates.

“That one is known as the Godric.” The voice was cool and not unfamiliar. Harry turned to see Narcissa Malfoy standing a few feet away. She held a large, flat basket half-filled with cut flowers. Her hair had been pulled back away from her face and she wore simple-looking robes in a dusky shade of pink. “Of course, I always lied to Lucius about that. He would have had them torn out, I think. He never understood that roses are more than their names. All he cared about were those beastly peacocks. Hello, Mr Potter.”

“Hello, Mrs Malfoy.”

“I hear you are working with Draco.”

“For a short time, yes.”

“He is pleased about that. Hopefully you can help him to…” She paused and then plucked a petal from one of the flowers in her basket. She tossed the wilted bit to the ground and gave him a smile that seemed forced. She had aged since last Harry had last seen her. There were lines on her face that had not been there before, and although her hair was still blond, he thought he saw glints of silver shimmering there.

“Help him to what?” Harry asked, hoping she would continue.

Her wand rested in the basket with the flowers. She took it and Vanished the petal with a spell. “I should not speak out of turn. Draco would not want me to carry tales and you are not here for a social visit. Draco is with his birds, just there, beyond the broom shed.”

She gestured towards a white building visible just beyond the garden, although it looked far too large to be a broom shed.

“Thank you,” Harry said politely. “It is good to see you again.”

“Likewise, Mr Potter.”

Harry bowed politely and bypassed her, heading for the edge of the garden.

“Mr Potter, wait!” she called and Harry turned back. She walked closer to him with a quick stride.

“Does Draco… Is he accepted by the other Aurors?”

Harry blinked at her. He hated to lie, but he had seen enough worry in the eyes of Molly Weasley to understand how a mother felt about her children. Narcissa was worried about her son. “Yes,” he said, “Of course he is.” It was mostly true; Malfoy was accepted, if not admired or liked.

“Does he have any friends?”

“Auror friends?” Harry asked, trying to hedge as warning bells went off in his mind. At her nod, Harry hedged. “I don’t know. We haven’t been working together long enough for me to ask him personal questions. We haven’t always got along. It’s been… difficult.”

She nodded. “I understand. Draco seldom talks about his work.” She looked away and arranged the flowers in her basket, looking as if she regretted bringing up the subject. “Never mind. He is not a child any longer. Thank you, Mr Potter.”

She moved away before Harry could think of a way to prolong the conversation. Narcissa was right to worry, Harry supposed ruefully. Malfoy was not exactly popular at the Ministry. Another archway indicated the exit, and Harry followed the path towards the white building beyond the garden. It was definitely too large for a broom shed, and looked to have been something more like a stable at one time.

Malfoy stood beyond the building, dressed in dark robes that fluttered in the breeze. It was much

windier once past the shelter of the house and gardens, and the wind gusted around the eaves of the shed. Malfoy raised an arm, still facing away from Harry, and a large bird fluttered its wings as it dropped from the sky and landed on Malfoy's forearm.

For a moment, Harry assumed it was an owl, but he stopped in shock when he realized it was not. It was a falcon.

Malfoy fed it something red and dangly, probably a strip of raw meat, and then tugged a leather hood over the bird's head. Although Harry hadn't moved, Malfoy turned and fixed him with a stare. He did not seem surprised to see Harry.

"Potter," Malfoy said loudly enough that Harry could hear him over the wind. "How was Azkaban?"

Harry bit back a number of retorts. "Nearly useless," he admitted. "How was your research?"

"About the same. Let me put my birds away and we'll go inside."

Malfoy stood before a low rock wall. A wooden fence jutted from one section of the wall and continued to the shed. Atop the fence nearest Malfoy perched two more falcons. Harry walked over and stood next to Malfoy. He looked out over a long, wide meadow that descended in a low gradient and ended at the edge of a forest.

"Is all that Malfoy land?" Harry asked following the dark blot of the forest with his eyes. It looked as wild and untamed as the forest at Hogwarts.

"As far as the eye can see," Malfoy said. "Will you carry Ayah? She doesn't like Gavin, and I usually have to make two trips. In fact, she doesn't much like anyone, so take care she doesn't nip you."

Malfoy waited until Harry lifted his arm and then he transferred the bird to his forearm. Her talons dug

into his skin and Harry tried not to wince.

“Why falcons?” he asked.

Malfoy snorted and turned to lift one of the others from the fence, transferring it to his shoulder. It flapped for a moment and then righted itself. “Birds seem to be a Malfoy tradition,” he replied. “My father was obsessed with those irritating peacocks. For my grandfather, it was pigeons.”

“The peacocks are gone?”

“Every last one of them. I despised those creatures. My father doted on them. He could watch a Muggle being tortured without batting an eye, but I saw him nearly brought to tears when the Dark Lord incinerated one of his favourite pets.” Malfoy rolled his eyes. “They were nasty and territorial and would chase me about the garden when I was small. I hardly went outside until I was old enough to hex them. Father never forgave me for disliking them. It was one of many points on which we disagreed.”

As Malfoy spoke, he removed the last falcon from the fence and walked to the shed. The wooden door slid aside when he approached, revealing a bright interior lit with a row of chandeliers. It had definitely been a stable at one time, although one full wall was now filled with an assortment of brooms. The opposite wall was made up of three barred cages that were large enough for horses, and farther down the gigantic room stood a row of traditional horse stalls.

The cage doors were open. Malfoy stepped inside the first one and transferred the falcon from his arm to a wooden perch in the centre of the cage. He removed the hood from the bird, which shook its head and squawked at him.

Malfoy strode out and shut the barred door with a whispered spell. Harry poked at one of the feet of the bird on his arm. He was pretty sure her talons were drawing blood. Her beak snapped at him, narrowly missing his fingers, but she moved her feet, only to dig them into a new space on his arm.

“Let me take her,” Malfoy said solicitously and grabbed her in a firm grip. She struggled, but he marched into the second cell and placed her on the perch. He did not bother to remove her hood before backing

out of the cell. “Ayah is a right bint, but she’s the best hunter of the lot.”

When the cage door shut, Malfoy pulled out his wand and took off Ayah’s hood with a spell. Harry surreptitiously rubbed at his arm. “Why falcons and not owls, or flamingos, or macaws?”

Malfoy shot him a look and then entered the third cage. “Why? Do I seem more suited to flamingos to you?”

Harry tugged at his forelock. “Well… yeah.”

Malfoy glared at him. “Flamingos?”

Harry laughed. “Okay, maybe not flamingos, but something a bit flashier than falcons, surely.”

“Flashier? Are you trying to suggest something, Potter?”

Harry coughed. “Perhaps we should drop the subject of birds and talk about dementors?”

“Fine.” The final gate clanged shut and Malfoy spelled the leather hoods into a small trunk and then slammed the lid. “Did you learn anything worth reporting, or did you just come all the way out here to annoy me?”

“Am I annoying you?” Harry asked.

“You annoy me by breathing, and you know it.” Despite his words, Harry thought he caught a hint of humour beneath them.

“I came here to report, although if you had accompanied me you would not have to hear it second-hand.”

Malfoy ignored the dig. “Whatever. Come inside and I’ll try to help you comprehend my notes.”

Harry expected them to return to the gardens and enter the house via the front doors, but Malfoy bypassed the gardens completely and instead followed a path that skirted the broom shed and crossed a small brook by way of an elegant-looking white stone bridge. The path was lined with white flowers, blooming despite the threat of frost.

The path branched; the cultured, gravelled portion led onward towards what looked to be an elegant portico, but Malfoy took a smaller, dirt track that wound through a variety of green bushes and finally halted at a single door tucked away into an unobtrusive portion of the house.

Malfoy opened the door and went inside without waiting for Harry, who caught the door before it closed and trailed after Malfoy with a muttered oath. Beyond the door lay a dark hallway and a plain set of wooden steps. Malfoy took the steps at a brisk pace, nearly jogging.

“Servants’ entrance?” Harry asked loudly.

“Quite right. A relic from the days when the Malfoys employed gardeners and gamekeepers, horsemen and men-at-arms. The family was much larger then, of course. Too much work for house-elves alone.”

Pure-blood inbreeding taken its toll? Harry nearly asked aloud, but he refrained, trying to remember that he had a job to do and fighting with Malfoy would only make it more difficult.

The stairs led to a dark hallway with many doors. Malfoy pushed one open and gestured Harry inside. The room was large, but not excessively so, and filled with furniture that would not have looked out of place in a museum. A chess set was set up near one window. Floor to ceiling curtains were open, revealing the barren branches of an oak tree.

Two doors led from the room and Malfoy strode to the right-hand portal. “In here, Potter.”

Harry stopped short upon entering. The room was half the size of the one he had just left, and harkened back to the Slytherin dungeon at Hogwarts. The single window was made of green and blue panes that seemed to shimmer and change, diffusing the light and giving the whole room an underwater feel. A water feature on one wall strengthened the impression with the bubbling sound of water flowing over the uneven stone ridges. The rest of the room was furnished in dark wood and consisted mainly of bookshelves.

A single desk sat beneath the window, lit with several magical globes that hovered over the desk. Three of them brightened when Malfoy entered, casting a brighter glow over the desk, which was strewn with papers, books, and scrolls. Two comfortable-looking chairs occupied the space before the desk, and Malfoy gestured to one as he walked round to take the primary seat.

Harry seated himself on one of the chairs and managed not to roll his eyes at the green upholstery. At least there were no snakes in the motif, as far as he could tell.

Malfoy leaned over his desk and pushed aside a sheaf of parchment to expose a book. “Considering dementors have been around for centuries, there is remarkably little information about them. It’s possible the Unspeakables have details the common man isn’t privy to, so if you happen to have contacts there, you might see if you can dredge up a nugget or two in order to further our cause.” Malfoy tapped a long finger on one page of the book. “So far this is the only thing of interest I’ve located. It says when dementors were first created, they were intended to function as—”

“Isn’t that book from the Auror Library?” Harry interrupted, catching sight of the familiar gold edging on the seam, marked with black notches.

Malfoy scowled. “So what if it is?”

“You’re not supposed to take those out of the Ministry.” Harry realized with a start that he sounded remarkably like Hermione.

“I didn’t take it; I borrowed it. Are you really going to take me to task for breaking the rules, Potter?” Malfoy sat back, eyes flashing.

Harry glared. He knew it was a minor incident, but for a moment he saw it as his ticket away from Malfoy. There were no minor incidences in Ander’s viewpoint; every transgression was subject to censure and discipline, no matter how trivial. Harry could simply bring it to Ander’s attention and Harry would be free of Malfoy, just like that. Malfoy might even be suspended over it; at the very least he would be rebuked and fined.

Malfoy waited, tapping his arms on the dark wood of his chair, smirking slightly as though he sensed the direction of Harry’s thoughts. He probably did. Harry could practically hear Malfoy’s thoughts, although they took on the tone of a younger, more petulant version of the man before him. I dare you, Potter.

Harry was tempted by that alone, but the plain truth was that he had not seen any untoward behaviour from Malfoy. He seemed to be far more competent than Harry had expected, especially considering the departmental gossip surrounding Malfoy’s performance. Of course, that could have been because Malfoy was working over and above the requirements of his job in order to impress Harry—or show him up—but the fact remained that Harry had no valid reason to wish a different partner.

Except for the fact that Malfoy was a complete git.

“Whatever,” Harry said finally. “Did you find anything useful in your borrowed book?”

“Not particularly. Printed material on them seems to be in short supply.” Malfoy slammed the book shut with a snap. “What did you learn at Azkaban?”

Harry glared at him. He wondered how much backtracking he would have to do to get Malfoy to open up again and heaved a mental sigh.

“I have one possible lead,” Harry said and launched into an explanation of “Old Jackson” and his Stinger

spell, concluding with, “However, no one knows what the spell was or how to utilize it. I’m not sure how much use it would be to us, since it seems less effective than a Patronus in being rid of the creatures. ‘Old Jackson’ seemed only to use it to herd the dementors.”

“How did dementors receive their instructions?” Malfoy asked. “I’m not clear on how they communicate. The book mentions a sort of telepathy, but the description is vague.”

Harry nodded. “Instructions were doled out with a spell. It’s similar to Legilimency, but tailored to dementors; the spell doesn’t work on humans. All of the Azkaban guards are taught that one, in case a dementor needed to impart information about a prisoner. The dementors seem to possess a sort of ‘hive-mind’. In Azkaban, the guards would give instructions to one dementor and it would impart that information almost instantly to the other dementors in the prison. I have a list of names of people at the Ministry who were familiar with dementor control. Cornelius Fudge was one.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Fudge could barely issue commands to his own staff.”

“Is that you talking, or your father?” Harry asked and then nearly recoiled at Malfoy’s hot glare. No discussing Lucius, he noted to himself. Fair enough.

After a moment of shuffling book pages, Malfoy seemed to recover his composure. “It doesn’t matter. Fudge is dead, so he is as much use to us as ‘Old Jackson’, which is to say none at all.”

Harry nodded. They were running out of people familiar with dementors.

“It’s almost too bad Fudge didn’t… Wait a minute, does ‘Old Jackson’ have a family?”

“I don’t know,” Harry admitted. “I asked for copies of the Azkaban employee files, but we won’t have them for a couple of days at the earliest.”

“I’ll send a message to request a rush on Jackson’s file. If he had a family, he might have spilled some

information about dementors, and possibly taught someone that spell."

Harry nodded. "Anything else you can think of?"

"It's the weekend, Potter. Take some time off and do something non-heroic."

Harry bit back the reminder that he was only here because Malfoy had demanded information. Instead he flipped him an insulting gesture and went out, finding his own way out of the Manor and home.

Monday, November 13, 2006

Harry had commandeered the choice conference room, designated The Cauldron by some employee back in the early days of the Ministry. It was on the same level as Courtroom Ten, but Harry had long ago got past his negative memories associated with that room, buried beneath dozens of trials and testimonies until he saw it as just another place associated with being an Auror.

The Cauldron, however, was a favoured gathering room because of its rough stone walls, rustic fireplace, and enormous round table. It was pleasantly cool in the summer and warm in the winter, and gave meetings a conspiratorial affair that leant a strange sense of purpose to any topics discussed. It reminded Harry of the potions dungeon at Hogwarts, which should not have been a happy recollection, but the years had softened everything Hogwarts-related into a mostly-pleasant nostalgia.

Harry had arrived early to make sure the room had not been squatted upon by interlopers, and also to ensure he got his choice of chairs. They were all different and some were cosier than others. He unrolled a large map of London and attached it to one wall with a Sticking Charm.

Surprisingly, Malfoy did not arrive first. The other four Aurors were all seated at the table and Harry debated starting without him when Malfoy finally slipped through the door. As usual, he made no apology, but merely took a seat and cocked an eyebrow at Harry, as though he were the one causing the delay. The others stared at Malfoy with varying degrees of unfriendliness; not a single face was welcoming. Harry knew how they felt.

"Glad you could finally make it, Malfoy," Harry said, unable to resist at least one dig at his partner. "Now, I'm sure we all know each other and why we're here, but I'll lay it out just for the sake of procedure. We've discovered there is a group of rogue dementors stalking Muggles and giving them the Kiss. So far we have not been able to discern a pattern, and little enough is known about the creatures to give us a means of locating them. Our job is to find these dementors and put a halt to these attacks, not only to save the Muggle victims, but also to enforce the Statute of Secrecy. Far too many Muggles have witnessed the effects of these occurrences already."

"But Muggles can't see dementors," protested Timothy Clark, the youngest Auror in the room. He was a rookie, but his partner was a grizzled veteran and treated the boy almost like his own progeny.

"Are you suggesting we just leave the Muggles to the dementors, Timmy?" Rocco, his partner, asked in a dry tone.

Tim flushed. "No, of course not," he said quickly.

The sole woman in the room snorted. “Of course not,” Victoria repeated. “The puppy would never bark with the big dogs in the room.”

Tim pulled a face at her and muttered, “Not everyone here is a big dog.” His blue eyes stabbed at Malfoy and then looked away. “Some are mangy curs.”

Victoria laughed and smacked Tim on the shoulder. Her partner snickered. Harry fixed them all with a glare. Victoria was dark-skinned and dark haired; if Blaise Zabini and Pansy Parkinson had ever procreated, their daughter might look just like her, although the concept had most likely taken root based on Vic’s caustic personality. “Auror Grey,” Harry warned, “We are all on the same team. Let’s try to act like it.”

She stared back, not intimidated in the least, a grin still playing about her lips. Malfoy’s face could have been carved from a block of ice for all the expression it revealed. He sat back in his chair, outwardly relaxed, but Harry thought he saw tension in the line of his mouth, and rage simmering beneath the

fathomless grey of his eyes. Harry made a note to take the rest of the team aside and talk with them. While he approved of Malfoy-baiting in theory, in practice it might currently interfere with Harry's job.

Harry carried on with the agenda. "The fact is, these dementor attacks are becoming more frequent and severe. They are magical creatures, therefore it is our responsibility to contain them, before anyone else is harmed."

Victoria's partner sat forward, shuffling papers. "I've read all the briefs, which are startlingly… brief." His brown eyes flicked to Vic and she snickered, earning a grin from him. Victoria Grey and Brady Kern had been partners longer than Harry had been an Auror. Of course, rumours abounded about their relationship, but rumours travelled through the Ministry like microbes through a swamp. Harry knew there were plenty of tales about him. He glanced at Malfoy. And of course there were rumours about Malfoy, especially in regards to Malfoy's former partner.

Harry shook off his musing. "Thank you, Brady. We are well aware that our information is limited. This is why we have a task force and have not simply gone out and rounded the dementors up ourselves." He felt slightly smug about that "our" and the implication that he and Malfoy were actual partners and not that Harry was counting the days until Ron's return.

He was still surprised that Anders had suggested the task force and could only assume that the Head Auror was being pressured through some other avenue, possibly through his rivalry with Croaker. A quick solution would make the Department look good. The four Aurors assigned to him were good ones, including Rocco Delmonico, the grizzled veteran that reminded Harry vaguely of Mad-Eye Moody, and his rookie partner, Timothy Clark. Tim was young, but eager to prove himself. Harry had not worked with either of them before.

"Where is Auror Weasley?" Brady asked, shooting an enigmatic look at Malfoy.

"Ron is at the S.M.I.T.E conference." Harry hoped he didn't sound bitter. He wasn't bitter, not really, because he knew the conference would be wretchedly boring (although Ron would find it fascinating), but he had to admit three weeks in Amsterdam had its appeal. Apparently they had activities planned for every evening. Ron had barely had time to Floo Hermione and Harry had only spoken to him once since he'd left.

“Smite Conference?” Tim asked.

“Don’t you read Interdepartmental Memos, boy? The Strategic Meeting for International Tactical Excellence.”

“The Strategic… What does that even mean?”

“It means Weasley gets to go drink in Amsterdam for three weeks and I’m stuck with you lot,” Malfoy said dryly. “If any of you should, however, have the slightest clue about strategy and tactics, I would appreciate you applying them to this case before we all die of old age.”

“Stuck with—?” Tim burst out, half-rising from his seat. “You shouldn’t even be here, you—!”

“That’s enough!” Harry barked just as Rocco’s hand shot out and clamped over Tim’s arm. “Auror Clark, do you have a problem with Auror Malfoy?” Tim started to speak, but Harry talked over him. “Because if you do, I will have a clerk come down and you can file a formal complaint. Shall I send a memo?”

Tim opened and closed his mouth, obviously dying to spew forth venom, but Harry knew he had no grounds for a formal complaint. All formal grievances were reviewed by the Head Auror and the Minister. While Anders might be swayed by a frivolous complaint, Kingsley Shacklebolt would not. Employees had been suspended without pay merely for wasting Kingsley’s time.

“No, sir,” Tim gritted out.

“Very well, then I suggest we focus on the case and put any personal conflicts aside. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

Harry nodded curtly. He could feel a headache blooming between his eyes. It turned into full-blown throbbing when he caught Malfoy smirking at Tim, who looked like he wanted to climb across the table and strangle Malfoy with his bare hands.

Bloody hell, it was going to be a long, wretched case.

Saturday, November 18, 2006

"That way!" Harry screamed. "Go, go, go!"

Brady turned his broom and angled away, fighting the howling wind. Harry looked frantically for the others and was nearly startled out of his skin when a dementor swooped at him. He jerked up his wand and fought the familiar effects—bone-chilling cold and the leaching away of all happiness.

"Happy thought, happy thought," he muttered and let his broom fall, luring the dementor after him while Harry collected his thoughts. He remembered the time they had been at the Leaky and Ron had laughed so hard he had shot ale from his nostrils. "Expecto Patronum!"

The silver stag hit the dementor and shredded it like dark tissue. Harry rose on his broom again, still grinning, and feeling better as the chilling cold slipped away. They had got a frantic call that a pack of dementors had been spotted heading towards a funfair in Chiswick. It had been sheer luck that a wizard had been stargazing on his roof and noticed the dark shapes drifting overhead.

Harry and the others had reconnoitred immediately and managed to drive the creatures away from the fair before any Muggles were attacked. The wind was fierce and helped to muffle the sounds of their battle. Harry was not worried about the light of their Patronus Charms; from the ground, they would appear as flashes of lightning and there were plenty of those already in the air, flickering around the dark clouds in bright bursts.

Vic and Brady fought as one unit, circling round each other and frequently flying back to back—a neat

trick, that. Their Patronus Charms were strong and seemed effortlessly cast. Vic's gazelle galloped in lazy circles and Brady's swan fluttered between its antlers.

Harry looked for Malfoy. Rocco and Tim were below him, hovering on their brooms, alert for new foes. Harry had been right next to Malfoy—where had the prat gone? A puff of grey-edged cloud obscured Rocco and Tim. Harry rose higher to avoid it. The last of the dementors seemed to have gone.

A hoarse shout caught Harry's attention and he sped towards it, punching through the clouds and grimacing at the wet sensation. His annoyance vanished when he saw Malfoy crouched low over his broom, flying fast with a dementor nearly atop his broom bristles. The creature reached out—

Malfoy did a barrel-roll and fell away, dropping down and creating an immediate gap between him and his dark pursuer. Harry nearly stopped, impressed by the grace of the manoeuvre. The dementor paused for only a moment and then dove. Malfoy lifted his wand and shouted.

Harry waited, almost breathless, to discover what Malfoy's Patronus would be. He could not recall ever seeing it in training. The white flare that burst from Malfoy's wand was not a Patronus, however. It went straight through the creature in a flash that seemed to have no effect, and then dissipated.

Malfoy swore and shifted away again, but the dementor seemed to have learned from his first trick. When Malfoy paused to look back, the creature was almost upon him.

"Cast a Patronus, damn you," Harry muttered, but Malfoy seemed frozen. "Fuck!" Harry put on a burst of speed and yelled, "Expecto Patronum!" just as the dementor's hand stretched out to grasp Malfoy's face.

The stag ripped through the creature and then Malfoy began to fall.

Harry swore again and sped forwards; he caught Malfoy with one hand. Malfoy's broom spiralled away, falling through the clouds. Harry's arm nearly wrenched from its socket and his hand was slipping, still damp from the moisture he had flown through. He allowed them to drop, pulled towards the ground by Malfoy's added weight.

Once below the obscuring fog of the clouds, Harry could see Malfoy's broom, twisting in the air. He cast a quick Levitation Charm on it, halting its downward path. Not only would Malfoy kill him if it broke, but it would not do to have it land atop a Muggle.

Brady flew up and saw him struggling not to drop Malfoy, but he made no move to assist.

"A little help would be nice!" Harry yelled.

Brady flew closer. "Should let him fall."

Harry stared at him and felt Malfoy slip again. He tightened his grip and opened his mouth to snarl at Brady.

"Only joking," Brady said.

"Not funny. Do you mind?"

Brady moved his broom again and snagged a hand in the wide leather belt around Malfoy's waist. Harry nearly groaned with relief as much of the weight lifted from his aching shoulder. With Brady's assistance, he was able to shift Malfoy into his lap and take a firmer grip on him. The position was almost too-intimate. Malfoy's head lolled on Harry's shoulder and strands of blond hair blew into his mouth. Thankfully, Malfoy was beginning to stir.

The others had flown up whilst Harry and Brady were in the midst of the manoeuvre, and Tim snorted scathingly. "Not fast enough with the Patronus, was he? Maybe he thought the beast would spare him out of kinship."

"That's enough, Tim," Harry said wearily. It had only been a few days, but Tim's hatred of Malfoy had

seemed to grow like a cancer. Harry was not sure why Tim despised Malfoy, but it was obvious Harry needed to get to the bottom of it. He vowed to pull Tim aside later and have a talk with him. Personal feelings needed to be put aside when they had a job to do, and it was obvious Malfoy could not count on the team being there for him in a crisis situation. It was lucky Harry had been nearby when Malfoy had encountered the dementor; he doubted any of the others would have saved him. Well, Rocco probably would have, and possibly Vic, although she was still a question mark in Harry's opinion.

Harry dropped steadily at a quick rate, eyes scanning for the nearest place for them to land that would be safe from Muggle eyes. He heard Rocco cast a Notice-Me-Not Charm as they descended. Harry spotted the flat roof of a tall building and headed that way.

"Wha…?" Malfoy moved on Harry's lap and both arms came up to clench around Harry. Another waft of blond hair moved over Harry's face, and then Malfoy gasped and came fully awake, just as Harry touched down onto the roof.

Malfoy shoved him away violently with an oath and Harry's jaw clenched. That was Malfoy gratitude for you. Malfoy nearly fell, obviously still suffering from the effects, but he straightened haughtily just as Vic thrust a chocolate bar at him. Malfoy hesitated, visibly conscious of the eyes on him, but he finally took it and unwrapped one corner.

Harry thought it best to draw attention away from Malfoy before Tim said something else that would cause Malfoy to hex him. Malfoy's wand had not been lost, as they all wore wrist-cords that bound their wands to their masters. They were magically reinforced—an Expelliarmus might disarm an Auror, but their wands would go no farther than the ends of their cords. That bit of practicality had been Ron's idea, quickly adopted by the entire department and it was now part of standard Auror regalia.

"Good work," Harry said. "They seem to have gone. We got lucky with the tip. Does anyone want to go back to Headquarters and add this location to the map? See if any pattern is emerging yet?" They had attached the map to the wall in Harry's office, with red flags marking the dementor attacks. So far there had been no rhyme or reason to the appearances of the creatures. The locations were scattered far and wide, traversing the whole of London, as well as an attack in Southend-on-Sea and one in Basingstoke. There were probably more in outlying areas that had not been reported yet.

"I'll go," said Rocco. "I live closest."

“All right. The rest of you feel free to go home. Thanks for coming on short notice.” They hadn’t much choice on the last; being an Auror assigned to a task force meant being on call until the case was done. But it didn’t hurt to hear a thanks now and again, Harry knew.

The others nodded and soared into the sky without speaking. Malfoy ate his chocolate and glanced at Harry. “Thanks,” he said with evident reluctance.

“Want to tell me what the hell that was about?” Harry asked, allowing his anger to seep forth now that they had no witnesses.

“What what was about?”

“The spell you used up there? Why didn’t you just cast a fucking Patronus? Are you trying to be creative? You nearly got yourself killed!”

Malfoy flushed and looked away. He took another bite of chocolate and chewed slowly.

“Accio Malfoy’s broom,” Harry snapped and flung the spell outward. Malfoy finished chewing and swallowed before the broom made it to the roof and smacked into Harry’s waiting hand.

“Thanks, again,” Malfoy said tightly, with only a hint of sarcasm.

“You didn’t answer the question,” Harry retorted, making no move to give him the broom.

“Holding my broom ransom, then?”

“I want the truth. If you’re trying something new, then I need to know about it before you go attempting

anything else stupid in the heat of battle."

Malfoy glared at him, but to Harry's surprise, he looked torn and suddenly uncertain. If Harry didn't know better, he would suggest Malfoy was nervous. Malfoy sighed explosively. "Damn it all, I knew this would come out eventually. It's just my bloody luck I was assigned to this case, and with you, despite the fact that Anders thought he was doing me a favour. My luck is astounding, at times, really, it is."

"Stop the theatrics and just tell me."

Malfoy sighed again, shoulders slumping. He crumpled the chocolate wrapper in his fist, clenching and re-clenching until it was a tiny ball. "I can't cast a Patronus," he said finally. He darted a glance at Harry and then looked away.

"What?"

"You heard me," Malfoy snapped. "I. Can't. Cast. A. Patronus. There, I've said it. Now you can hurry off to the Ministry and have me booted out of the Aurors, as I'm sure you've been wanting. Why don't you call Clark back so he can go along and enjoy the show?" He turned away and stalked to the edge of the roof, robes flapping in the wind.

Harry hurried after him and caught him by the shoulder, spinning him around. He faced the angry silver stare. "It's not possible. You would not have passed the final exam. It's a requirement."

"I cheated."

Harry's jaw gaped. Part of him danced with glee. Malfoy was right; that admission alone would be grounds to have Malfoy tossed out of the Aurors permanently. Inability to cast a Patronus Charm, compounded by cheating…

"Wait, how the hell do you cheat at something like that? Either you cast a Patronus, or you don't. Did

you Imperio the examiner, or something?" Harry mentally cringed at the idea. Casting an Unforgiveable on an examiner would not only get Malfoy sacked from the Aurors, but would probably add a stint in Azkaban.

"Expecto Patronum!" Malfoy cried and flicked his wand. A silvery winged serpent sprang from the end of his wand, wound twice around Harry, and then shot into the sky and disappeared.

Malfoy smirked as Harry stared at him, completely flummoxed. Malfoy's lips cracked into a smile, but it quickly faded. "Impressive, isn't it? It took me weeks to perfect it, especially in defiance of the words I had to speak." He shook his head and his hair whipped over his eyes for a moment. Malfoy lifted a hand and pushed them back. Harry thought he could use a haircut, even though the look was disturbingly attractive. "It's not real. It's an Illusion Charm. Illusio." The serpent appeared again, circling Harry slowly. "I had to work out how to cast it non-verbally while speaking the words to a different spell."

The serpent faded and Harry still could not find words. Speaking one spell while casting another… It was impressive magic, and stunningly difficult. Harry forced himself to speak. "Wouldn't it have been easier to just learn the Patronus?" he asked quietly.

Malfoy shook his head. "Not for me. I'd been trying since sixth year. This was my only option." He shrugged. "Anyway, Potter, it's been nice working with you." He grimaced. "Not really, of course, but… Well, I rather liked being an Auror." His grey eyes, clear and honest for perhaps the first time since Harry had known him, shone with regret. And then the moment was gone and Malfoy was taking the broom from Harry's hand. He straddled it. "Goodbye, Potter."

He flew into the growing darkness and Harry watched until he faded from sight, feeling inexplicably saddened.

Sunday, November 19, 2006

Harry did what he always did whenever he felt conflicted; he went to see Hermione. To his surprise, he exited the Floo to find her living room in chaos. All of the furniture had been stacked into a large pile in the centre of the room, and then apparently covered in books.

“Hermione?” he called, wondering if some strange experiment were under way.

“Over here,” she called from round the other side of the furniture/book tower. A three-foot walkway allowed him to pass between the stacked material and the wall. He found Hermione on her knees, wand in hand, trying to coax old wallpaper from the wall with a delicate spell. Her hair had been pulled back into a horse’s tail and she wore an oversized t-shirt and jeans.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

She huffed a stray hair out of her face and then sat back on her haunches. The bit of paper dangled from the wall. “I’ve always hated this wallpaper. I thought I’d take the time whilst Ron’s away to rip it out. Of course, it’s more difficult than expected. Too much force on the Scraping Charm and it gouges a hole in the wall. Too little and it leaves bits of paper.”

Harry wrinkled his nose. Home renovation was not his favourite thing. Other than installing heavier curtains to cover Mrs Black’s painting more permanently, he had not done much to Grimmauld Place. Of course, he was rarely there, thanks to his job.

“What will you do once the paper is gone?” he asked.

“Paint it. No more paper!” She rubbed the small of her back and then leaned forwards again to work at the stubborn wallpaper. “And then I’ll wait to see how long it takes Ron to notice. I’m estimating two weeks.”

Harry laughed. “I’ll take that wager. I give it three.”

Hermione giggled. “Well, are you going to help me or are you planning to tell me why you’re here and then escape?”

Harry dropped to his knees next to her. “Teach me the spell.”

They fell into a rhythm and Harry found the manual labour to be actually cathartic. She had been right about the spell; it took a particular flourish to get it just right. A foot-wide section tore off in a long strip and Harry felt like crowing with satisfaction. He glanced at Hermione, who had started on the wall opposite his. He knew it was stupid to be so competitive, but he was determined to finish his side before she finished hers.

“Why are you here, anyway?” she called. “Certainly you have better things to do with your Sunday than help me redecorate. Where is Ginny?”

Harry’s wand slipped and the spell tore a chunk of plaster from the wall. He swore softly and repaired it before she could notice. Now that he was here, he was not sure how to bring up the issue of Draco Malfoy. Harry knew exactly what she would say in regards to Draco cheating. Her face would get that pinched look and she would tell him he was “honour-bound to turn in Malfoy” or some such sentiment. He supposed he was, but something about it did not sit right with him.

Maybe it was only Malfoy’s defeated expression when last he had seen him.

“Ginny is… um… off with George.” Harry had no idea where Ginny was, but it seemed logical she was with her brother, since she normally hung around Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes on the weekend, ostensibly to “help out”, but in reality just to play with the merchandise.

“You two haven’t spent much time together lately.” Hermione’s voice sounded carefully uninterested and Harry winced. He should have known it would only be a matter of time before Hermione picked up on the cessation of their relationship. They hadn’t completely broken up; Ginny had merely suggested they take a break so that Harry could come to terms with his sexuality. That had come about after she’d caught Harry snogging one of her Quidditch teammates, a situation Ginny had engineered when a casual conversation about having a threesome with another man had sparked too little protest from Harry.

Harry scrubbed a hand through his hair at the memory. He had assured Ginny he was bisexual and had

only kissed the man out of curiosity, but she had been adamant that he “sort himself out”. She had given him a year, but Harry had been so busy with work, as well as having little idea how to go about sorting himself, that his February deadline was fast approaching without Harry so much as kissing another bloke.

He sighed. “Ginny and I are taking a bit of a break.”

“Yes, even Ron has noticed that, but neither of you seem particularly unhappy, so I haven’t pried. Ginny seems to be having a brilliant time with the Tornadoes and you… Well, you have your work. How is that going, by the way? The thing with Malfoy.”

Harry heard her move and jolted into action once more, quickly stripping wallpaper while he spoke. “Malfoy? He’s…” Harry watched another strip of wallpaper fall while he wondered how to quantify Malfoy. He was still a prat, but there seemed to be more beneath the prattishness now. Perhaps there had always been more, but Harry had never cared to look. “He’s determined,” Harry finished and congratulated himself on finding something almost complimentary.

She made a derisive sound. “I should imagine he’s determined.”

Harry frowned. “Why? What have you heard?”

For a moment there was no sound but the wallpaper tearing free. “Never mind. I shouldn’t carry gossip.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Hermione, he’s my bloody partner until Ron gets back, and he has not exactly been easy to work with. Anything you can tell me, I would appreciate.” In truth, Harry was half-hoping to hear something terrible about Malfoy that would justify Harry turning him in. Other than his inability to cast a Patronus, Malfoy had been a decent, hard-working Auror, loathe thought Harry was to admit it.

“You should know the rumours better than I,” she said. “How many partners has he gone through? Three? It is said that Curtis Laigle refused to work with him and actually left the Aurors because of him.”

Harry knew that rumour well; it was a popular tale over drinks at the Purple Cauldron. There were dozens of stories about what Malfoy had done to deserve his partnerless state, although the death of Malfoy's first partner was not his fault; the man had died whilst on holiday in Bermuda. It had seemed simple bad luck to Harry, but several rumours had Malfoy poisoning the man or arranging his death in order to escape him. Some even believed Malfoy had only joined the Aurors to pick them off one at a time from the inside. Ron had always enjoyed passing such tales around.

Malfoy's second partner had adamantly refused to work with him and had been so vocal and doggedly determined that Anders had caved and reassigned him within the first month. But Malfoy's partnership with Laigle, his final partner before Harry, had lasted over a year.

"I only knew Curtis in passing. He was quiet, but he always seemed to like Malfoy well enough. There was visible tension between them shortly before Laigle quit the Ministry, though. I'm sure that gave rise to most of the rumours." Apparently, Brady Kern had even caught Malfoy and Laigle shouting at one another a few days before Laigle's departure. Brady insisted that Malfoy had been begging Laigle to stay on. "Everyone thinks that Laigle was carrying Malfoy's weight. They expected Malfoy to screw up and get tossed after he left."

It hadn't happened, however. Malfoy had been a free agent for several months. Anders had assigned him to random tasks that probably had Malfoy chomping at the bit for some action; desk jobs and research mostly, things no one else wanted to do. Shit jobs, Harry thought. Such assignments probably would have continued if not for Ron's conference and the dementor situation.

"What do you think?" Hermione asked. "We both know how rumours can be."

"I... don't know what to think. At this point, Malfoy is an enigma." Harry reached out and ripped at a stubborn bit of wallpaper whilst prodding it with his wand. He only vaguely remembered Curtis Laigle, mostly seen from across the room during briefings, sticking close to Malfoy. The other Aurors had referred to them as "the Blondies" due to Curtis's dirty blond hair, which had looked nearly brown next to Malfoy's white-blond.

"Well, Ron will be back soon, and then it will be a moot point. All finished! How is your side coming?"

Harry glared over his shoulder. He still had several feet of wallpaper remaining. "Almost done," he said grudgingly. "Hey, what do you know about dementors?"

Monday, November 20, 2006

Malfoy did not show up for work on Monday morning. Harry made up an excuse for the others, who gathered in Harry's office to put forth no new theories on the dementor case. No one commented on Malfoy's absence, except Tim, who muttered, "Good riddance," under his breath, but loudly enough that Harry heard.

Harry reined in his annoyance and let the comment pass. He was secretly glad for the reprieve; he hadn't yet made up his mind about whether or not to turn Malfoy in for his inability to cast a Patronus, or at least have him removed from the case. They were fighting dementors, for Merlin's sake. Their only useful spell was a Patronus.

Hermione, at least, had come up with some theories. Harry detailed them to his crew, explaining that the dementors seemed to be drawn to Muggle gatherings filled with happy, laughing people. It was Hermione's opinion that since the war, the dementors were slowly starving without their steady diet draining the happiness (and life) from the prisoners in Azkaban. It seemed they were also beginning to band together to hunt in packs, judging by the group Harry and the others had fought on Saturday.

There were no new reports, so Harry sent Vic and Brady out to re-examine the existing known attack sites to see if anything had been missed, and to check with the Muggle authorities to learn had been any new incidences reported. Harry planned to meet with someone in Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures—they had been assigned a contact there, but the man was currently working on another high-profile case and had only promised to meet with Harry for a few minutes. Harry tasked Rocco and Tim with trying to come up with possible Muggle events or scenarios that might draw the attention of the dementors.

“How are supposed to do that?” Tim protested.

Harry fixed him with a hard stare. “Go talk to people. Merlin, try the Muggle Liaison Office. They might

have some idea."

Rocco clapped Tim on the back of the head. "Come on, boy. Stop embarrassing me with your bloody foolish questions."

"Hey, it was not a foolish question!"

"T'was."

"And stop smacking my head!"

"I will when you stop asking foolish questions." Still arguing, Rocco and Tim left Harry's office. Vic and Brady had sidled out earlier, eager to escape the Ministry for the streets where they felt most at home. They were field operatives, for certain.

With the rest of the team gone, Harry felt somewhat at a loss without a partner. He supposed he should go and pay a visit to Malfoy and find out if he planned to hide at Malfoy Manor until Harry made up his mind. Instead, he filled out some non-urgent paperwork and then tidied his office a bit before meeting with the man in Magical Creatures, which turned out to be a waste of time. Dementors, it seemed, were not classified as magical creatures, but instead were considered to be magical creations, similar to inferi. The man had no further information for him.

Harry took Hermione to lunch and listened with a smile while she detailed the message she had received from Ron earlier in the day.

"Goodness, he does go on about strategy and tactics," Hermione said and clucked her tongue. She folded the letter and tucked it into the book she had brought along, apparently thinking Harry would be boring enough company that she might find time to read. "I'll just save that bit for later. It will help put me to sleep at bedtime."

“He’s good at it, though. If he was here, he probably would have figured out…” Harry broke off as his thoughts went in a different direction than his words. What would Ron do if he were stuck with Malfoy as a partner? Obviously, he would work all the angles and try to find the most viable solution. Despite Harry’s annoyance, he did not want to turn Malfoy over to Anders for his inability to cast a Patronus. It seemed cowardly, handing over a fellow Auror. The others would not think less of him, but only because it was Malfoy. And they might be less inclined to trust Harry should the situation depend upon it.

“Figured out what?” Hermione asked and twirled a chip through a pool of vinegar on her plate.

“Figured out exactly why Curtis Laigle left the Aurors,” Harry said and got to his feet. “I’ve got to run, Hermione. Enjoy your book.” He leaned down and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “Thanks for lunch.”

“Goodbye, Harry. Good luck,” she said with a wry grin. She popped the chip into her mouth and opened her book, dismissing him before he even made it out of the café.

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Curtis Laigle opened the door and gaped at him.

“Harry Potter?” he asked and then seemed to shake himself. “I mean, Auror Potter. Is anything wrong?”

Harry smiled gamely, suddenly less certain of his mission when the man stood in the doorway with a drooling baby perched on his hip. “Hi, Curtis. No, nothing is wrong, don’t worry. I just came to ask you a few questions about Draco Malfoy.”

Curtis’ openly curious face seemed to slam shut. His eyes narrowed and his demeanour turned chilly. “About Draco? What do you want to know?”

The baby made a cooing sound and banged a brightly coloured rattle against Curtis’ chest.

Multi-coloured lights instantly sprang from the toy and swirled around it in a shifting pattern.

“Um… do you mind if I come in? It’s a bit cold and I wouldn’t want…” he gestured towards the infant.

“Delores,” Curtis said in a grudging tone.

“Wouldn’t want Delores to get cold.”

Despite the truth of Harry’s words, Curtis hesitated, but he finally nodded and stood aside, allowing Harry to enter the small cottage.

Inside the main room, Harry blinked when he saw a woman dozing in a cosy-looking chair. The baby banged the rattle again and make a sharp shrieking noise. The woman’s eyes opened.

“Curt,” she admonished. “You didn’t tell me we had company.”

Curtis put out a quick hand. “Now, Raina, you just stay there and rest.”

“I’ll get some tea,” she said and pushed aside the blanket around her. The movement seemed sluggish.

“No, I’m fine, really,” Harry said quickly. “I’m just here to talk to your… husband,” he glanced at Curtis to make sure he hadn’t stuck his foot in it and she really was his wife—thankfully, Curtis nodded, “and then I’ll be on my way. No need to get up.”

She frowned, but settled back into the chair and closed her eyes. She was pale and blond and seemed incredibly frail. Harry glanced at Curtis, who jerked his head to indicate a short hallway. “We can talk in the baby’s room, if you don’t mind.”

Harry shook his head and followed Curtis with one last glance at the woman.

The room they entered was brightly decorated in a balloon theme, with large balls of colour on the walls, balloon-shaped floating lamps, and other spherical paraphernalia. Curtis placed his daughter in the crib and she gnawed on the rattle while staring up at him through huge blue eyes.

Curtis pulled out his wand and spelled the door mostly shut. He looked at Harry and sighed. “Raina isn’t well. The pregnancy was extremely hard on her. I thought I might lose her a half-dozen times.” He pushed a hand through his thick blond hair. “But you aren’t here to talk about that. What’s up with Draco?”

Curtis gestured to a small sofa that was propped against the wall. It was one of the few items in the room not covered in a balloon motif, but was instead a soft yellow. Harry sat down. He wasn’t certain how to bring up the reason for his visit. “Did you know Draco can’t cast a Patronus?” he asked bluntly.

Curtis sat in a nearby rocking chair. “Yeah. Yeah, I knew that. Why?”

"You knew?" Harry was surprised. "And yet you did not see fit to report it?"

Curtis shrugged. "Didn't seem that important. We never ran into dementors and in the rare instances we needed them for communication, Draco compensated. He's a master of improvisation."

"Obviously," Harry replied, frowning. "He improvised his way into the Auror Department by casting a fake Patronus."

Curtis laughed aloud, shocking Harry again. "Bloody hell, that one always impressed me. I know it's wrong that he cheated, but you have to admit it's a brilliant bit of magic." He sobered and looked at Harry. "I take it the jig is up, then? Is Draco being booted finally?"

"What do you mean by finally?"

Curtis rolled his eyes. "It was only a matter of time. Not because of Draco's cheating, mind you; he only did that to get in. An acceptable risk, in my opinion. One silly spell keeping him from the Aurors just seems wrong. No, it was only a matter of time before Draco told the Ministry to fuck off. He's too good for how he's treated there. Many's the time I had to bite my tongue to keep from hexing some bollocking idiot, like that fuckwit Clark. I don't know how Draco puts up with it, really. Man's got the patience of a saint."

The baby made a shrieking sound and banged the rattle against the edge of the crib and then threw it aside with a gasping wail. Curtis pushed out of the chair and went to peer at his daughter, who immediately stopped crying and gurgled at him.

"It sounds as if you actually like Mal—Draco," Harry said, perplexed.

"Delores, Daddy is not going to carry you round the house all afternoon. It's your naptime, so shut your little eyes and go to sleep." He tugged a balloon-print blanket over her and then repeated the movement as she lifted her pudgy legs and kicked the blanket away completely. "Of course I like Draco. He's ace."

"I'm sorry, that's really... Well, the story is that you quit the Aurors because you couldn't tolerate Draco as a partner any longer."

Curtis shot a glare over his shoulder, taking Harry aback with the venom there. "That's fucking rot. I promised Draco I would never reveal the truth, but it sounds like he's already outed for the Patronus thing, so I'll tell you. It's for his own good. At least someone will know, even if it's too late to make it right." Curtis conjured a red dummy and placed it into the baby's mouth. She sucked at it eagerly and wrapped one fist around the ringed end. Curtis pulled up the blanket once more and this time Delores only sighed. Her eyes blinked slowly, obviously giving in to sleepiness.

"Someone will know what?" Harry asked.

Curtis stroked his daughter's curls once and then returned to the rocking chair. "Someone will know what Draco did for me. He covered my arse for nearly a year. I was a bloody useless Auror, never was very good at it. I was even worse once Raina got pregnant. She had problems from the beginning. Constant fainting, could hardly keep food down, anaemia... You name it. She fainted once and banged her head; I didn't find her until I got home from work. She spent three days in Mungo's while we wondered if she would miscarry." Curtis drew and released a shuddering breath. "She's getting better now, thank Helga, although it's been a long recovery. Anyway, the whole bloody time I was half-mad with worry. I popped home forty times a day to check on Raina. I couldn't concentrate. I could barely cast a proper bloody spell. Draco carried my weight the whole time, kept telling me not to worry; he'd see us through. And he did, too. You go back and look at my reports filed during that time. I didn't write a single one. Draco disguised his handwriting, but he did all of his paperwork and mine, too, on top of doing all the legwork for our cases. I owe him... more than I can ever repay. He's a good friend."

Harry was so shocked he could hardly do more than stare for a moment. "Draco Malfoy. Did all that for you? And no one knows."

Curtis shook his head. "No one but me and Draco and Raina. And now you. Feels good to admit it, I must say. I nearly quit a dozen times, but Draco knew I needed the pay, to keep Raina on the special potions she had to have. I've got enough saved now to take a few months off until Raina is strong enough to take care of Del while I go back to work somewhere."

"This is really... surprising," Harry admitted.

"Why? Because it's Draco Malfoy, and he's this terrible ex-Death Eater scum who only became an Auror so he could undermine the Ministry from the inside? Did anyone ever to bother to think that he became and Auror for the same reason we all did? That he wanted to do some good? And for him, maybe to achieve some sense of atonement for the things he was forced to do? No one has even tried to get close to him; they only spit on him and pass stories behind his back. Frankly, I'm well rid of the Aurors. The lot of them make me sick." Curtis coughed and added, "Present company excluded, of course."

Harry forced a smile. "No need to exclude me. I'm just as guilty as the others when it comes to judging Malfoy, maybe even more so because of our past history. We did not get on in school."

Curtis snorted a laugh. "Yeah, he told me about some of that. Admitted he was a right prat at Hogwarts. He always admired you, though."

"What? Me?"

Curtis grinned. "Yeah, he would never admit it, of course. Hell, Draco will never admit to anything other than arrogance, but I can tell by the way he talks about you. We talked a lot, once I finally got him to open up a bit." Curtis paused and his expression seemed to dare Harry to speak.

“I’m sorry, I am just… having a difficult time processing this.”

Curtis nodded. “If you came to dig up dirt on Draco, you came to the wrong place. I’ve half a mind to go to the press and tell them everything Draco’s done for me.” He sneered. “Of course, they wouldn’t believe me, and Draco would Crucio me.”

“Why? Don’t you think it would be better for him if people knew he wasn’t the evil prat he pretends to be?”

“Of course I think so, but Draco won’t have it. He says if his actions don’t speak for themselves, then fuck everyone.” Curtis shrugged. “I think he’s really lonely. Of course, he has me, and Raina, but—” He shook his head abruptly, flushing, as if he had said too much. “Anyway, I’m sure Draco will be much happier out of the Aurors. Perhaps he will finally give in to his father’s last wishes and marry some pure-blooded girl.” Curtis wrinkled his nose.

“He’s not leaving,” Harry said. “Unless he does it on his own.” He grinned at Curtis’s obvious surprise. Harry felt better than he had in days, and his mind was calm now that he had made his decision. He got to his feet. “Thank you, Curtis. This has been enlightening. Give my regards to your wife. I wish her a speedy recovery.”

Curtis rose, seemingly flummoxed. “Not— You haven’t—? What about Draco’s Patronus?”

Harry smiled widely. “Leave that to me.”

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A quick trip back to the Ministry disclosed that Malfoy had not been in; nor had he left a message. Out of curiosity, Harry went down to the Records Room and requested two case files worked on by former Auror Curtis Laigle, one from a few months previous and the other from three years ago. A quick perusal of the handwritten reports made it immediately obvious they had not been written by the same person. There were similarities, but enough differences to confirm Curtis’s story. Draco Malfoy really had covered for Curtis.

Harry returned the files, signed out for the day and Apparated to Malfoy Manor.

The gates opened for him immediately, which was unexpected. He had thought it might take some tricky manoeuvring to gain access this time.

Rain dribbled down as he walked and became a true downpour by the time he reached the front steps. Malfoy stood in the open doorway. He looked anything but welcoming.

“I expected someone less prestigious,” Malfoy said. “Or did you volunteer to deliver the news personally?”

“What news?” Harry asked. He wondered if Malfoy would let him inside; the Umbrella Charm he had cast kept him dry, but the air was still cold and damp.

“News of my termination, of course. I assume you hurried to Anders with the tale of my ‘conduct unbecoming an Auror’ or whatever they choose to call it. I am certain Anders was only too happy to be rid of me.”

“Oh, that. Actually, no,” Harry said. He refrained from grinning with effort, glad to have the upper hand over the icy prat.

“No, what?”

“No, I did not go to Anders, or even Kingsley. I think we can handle this matter between ourselves.”

Pale brows rose until they disappeared into Malfoy’s blond fringe. “Blackmail, Potter? You surprise me. I would not expect you to be so mercenary. What do you want?”

“Hardly blackmail. I plan to teach you to cast a Patronus.”

There was silence but for the rain, and then Malfoy burst out laughing.

Harry glared, affronted. “It’s not a laughing matter. I practically taught Defence Against the Dark Arts during our fifth year, while you were prancing around abusing your power on Umbridge’s Inquisitorial Squad. I know what I’m doing.”

Malfoy’s face looked pinched and reminiscent of when he was a child on that very squad, but then his eyes flashed and he pushed away from the door jamb. “Fine,” he snapped. “Let’s see what you can do.”

He held the door open for Harry, but the moment it closed behind him, Malfoy set off down the wide hallway at a quick pace. Harry had to hurry to keep up with him. They made several turns until Malfoy thrust through a pair of gigantic white doors. His feet rang on the floor of the great room as he stormed out to the centre of it.

Harry stopped in the doorway and stared. The room was enormous, empty, and very white and cold. Multiple arched window embrasures lined each side of the room, decorated in bas relief in patterns.

Partially open curtains let in a glimpse of the grey sky outside. Crystal chandeliers sparkled overhead, although their light was muted now, shining only on the floor where Malfoy stood.

“Coming in?” Malfoy asked archly. He had drawn his wand and stood in the typical at-rest pose learned in Auror Training, feet slightly apart, left shoulder towards Harry, head held high.

Harry walked into the room and his footsteps echoed in the empty ballroom. He smiled. “We’re not duelling.”

“I thought we could start with that. As a warm-up.”

“I don’t think so.”

Malfoy snorted and swished his wand in the air. “Frightened, Potter?”

“I don’t think so,” Harry repeated and kept walking. Malfoy’s eyes narrowed as Harry approached. Harry examined him with new eyes, thinking of his conversation with Curtis. Malfoy wore staid black trousers and a white linen shirt under casual smoke-coloured robes. His hair was no longer slicked back, at it had been in school, and was almost too long, falling over his forehead and threatening to catch in long, pale eyelashes.

Only a shadow of the angry, pointy child remained, glittering from the cold eyes and sneering from the firm-set lips. Could Malfoy really be as lonely as Curtis had suggested?

“The first thing to do,” Harry said as he stopped quite close to Malfoy, “is to find your happy thought.”

The temperature in the large room seemed to plummet. A wandless, magical response to Malfoy’s irritation? Harry wondered. “I don’t have happy thoughts, Potter. Hence the reason for my failure. Lesson over. Run along home, now.”

Harry snorted. “Everyone has happy thoughts. We just need to find yours.” He cocked his head and looked at Malfoy critically. The man was rich, gorgeous, and pampered. How hard could it be to find something in his past that had made him happy? He had seemed pleased enough at Hogwarts, tucked between the bouts of petulant rage.

“What is your happy thought, Potter?” Malfoy asked with a sneer. “Something involving the Weaselette?”

Harry pondered the question. Although he’d had plenty of good times with Ginny, usually they had involved his other friends, as well. He wondered if that was strange, but shook it off. “Actually, my current happy thought is the time Dean Thomas walked into my living room wearing a corset and heels, just as Ron was taking a drink of ale. Most of it shot straight out his nose and the rest of us fell about laughing so hard I thought I might actually die.” The memory teased a grin from him, even now, remembering Dean prancing around the room talking in a high falsetto, and Ron’s look of abject terror.

“What was Dean Thomas doing in drag?”

At the time, Harry had thought it a colossal joke, but now he suspected Dean had kenned to Harry’s uncertain sexuality and wanted to give him a taste of the other side. Dean had certainly spent enough time wriggling in Harry’s lap that night, at any rate. Harry flushed, remembering. “It was my birthday. I think he mainly wanted to make Ron’s head explode.” Harry chuckled again, thinking of Hermione’s giggles. He sobered at the recollection of Ginny’s speculative look; that moment might have been the beginning of her quest to determine Harry’s sexual orientation.

“Well, Blaise once dressed in drag for me, but that was definitely not a happy memory,” Malfoy said.

Harry blinked at him, trying not to think how hot Blaise Zabini would look in women’s clothing. “Why not?”

“My father walked in.”

“Ouch.” Having Lucius Malfoy walk in on any amusing gathering would suck the fun out of any occasion, Harry figured.

“By my recollection, the subsequent lecture lasted six hours, with frequent reprisals over the next four years.”

“Why?”

Malfoy lifted a hand and began to enumerate, using his wand to touch each finger in turn. His voice became colder and took on the clipped tones of Lucius Malfoy. “One, ‘Malfoys are not deviants’, Two, ‘You will marry into a family of sufficient blood purity’, Three, ‘You will produce at least one Malfoy heir and continue our lineage’, Four, ‘You will—‘. Never mind. As I said, not happy memories.” Malfoy lowered his hands. His eyes seemed to track the stone railing that edged the upper gallery. A faint flush tinted his cheeks and Harry realized he probably regretted his outburst.

“No happy childhood memories, then?” Harry asked gently. “What about holidays, or your birthday?”

Malfoy snorted and turned away. “I tapped every last iota of happiness from those memories long ago, Potter. They sustained me during the dark times.” He walked in a slow circle, frowning, as if remembering unpleasant things, which was definitely not what Harry needed. “They no longer have any power. Most of my memories in this house have been tainted. Even this room, the scene of so many grand parties when I was a boy.” He swept out a hand. “Do you know, right there in that very spot, the Dark Lord—”

“Don’t!” Harry shouted. His voice rang and echoed in the cold room, drawing Malfoy’s surprised glance. “Don’t,” Harry repeated, more quietly. “That’s counter-productive.”

Malfoy smiled without humour. “Hmmm, yes, I suppose it is.”

Harry frowned. “All right, surely you cannot be without any happy memories. What about at school? You

seemed smug enough, then. No happy times tormenting younger classmates or Hufflepuffs?"

Malfoy's stare was penetrating. "I always did that with Crabbe and Goyle."

Harry nearly winced. "Oh." He gnawed his lip, thinking hard. "Quidditch?"

"You always beat me to the fucking Snitch," Malfoy snapped.

"I haven't played since we were children!" Harry protested.

"Yes, and it was rather pointless after that, since you're the only one I wanted to win against."

Harry felt a pang at that, although it was not until much later that he recognized it as flattery. "You have issues," he said, frustrated.

"Thank you for pointing that out, Potter." Malfoy's glare was potent.

"What about the time you kicked my face in?"

To Harry's surprise, Malfoy stared at him for long moments, looking almost horrified, and then he took a shuddering breath. "How can you suggest that anything happening during that terrible year could even remotely be termed happy?"

Harry turned away, confused and mortified. That year had been awful for both of them, he had to admit. Not exactly happy-memory-inducing. Getting desperate, he asked, "Your first kiss?"

Malfoy wrinkled his nose. "Pansy Parkinson."

Unable to stop himself, Harry made a gagging sound and Malfoy laughed.

“It wasn’t as bad as all that. Pansy can be very enthusiastic. Who was yours?”

“Cho Chang. It was rather like kissing a wet sponge,” Harry admitted wryly. It had been a happy memory at one time, but had worn down into a vaguely uninteresting muse.

“You win. I have been purged of happy memories.”

Harry forced back a laugh. “What about your second kiss? Or third? Surely you’ve had… you know?”

“Yes, Potter, I have had you know. And frankly, I have been unimpressed with it.”

Harry practically gaped at him, astounded that Malfoy would make such an admission. “You, too?” he blurted before he could stop himself.

Malfoy stared back, apparently just as astonished as Harry, and Harry scrambled madly for something to say to fill the horrible, yawning space of too much information. “Gingerbread!”

“What?”

“Everyone loves gingerbread. Don’t you have a happy memory involving gingerbread?”

“Have you gone completely insane?”

“I think I’m getting there. Just go with it.”

“You want me to cast a Patronus based on my happy feelings for gingerbread?”

“You know you love it. Now, cast.”

Malfoy made a sound of disgust, but he immediately lifted his wand. “Expecto Patronum!”

Nothing happened. Not even a spark of light. “Try it with a bit more of a flick,” Harry suggested. He lifted his own wand and demonstrated the wand movement slowly. His benevolence earned him a glare.

Malfoy tried it again, exaggerating the wand movements, which still weren’t quite right, Harry noted. He wondered how to tactfully mention it.

“A little, um, less sweeping,” he said.

Malfoy jabbed and snapped the wand movements (too narrow, too sharp) while shouting the words. Harry mentally groaned and barely refrained from burying his face in his hands. It wasn’t working; Malfoy was getting angry. No pathetic happy thought could withstand an onslaught of pure rage.

Malfoy gave him a haughty “I told you so” look. “You know, I don’t really like gingerbread all that much.”

“Apparently, you don’t like anything very much,” Harry snapped.

“Perhaps you are simply a substandard teacher.” The mocking glare was back, superior and irritating.

“Perhaps you are simply a prat!”

“Twenty points from Gryffindor.”

“Bloody hell,” Harry snapped, “why did I even think this would work?” He spun on a heel and stalked from the room.

“Overweening arrogance?” Malfoy suggested loudly and the words rang through the cold room.

“Fuck you!” Harry yelled back and then he was through the huge doors and making his way outside, cursing Draco Malfoy and his own overwhelming stupidity in believing the man was anything other than a complete arse.

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Harry’s rage lasted until the iron gates clanged shut behind him, and then he took several deep breaths, exhaling slowly after each one.

“Damn it,” he said softly. He had meant to keep his temper, above all. What was it about that man that caused him to complexly lose all self-control? He scowled. “Overweening arrogance,” he muttered, feeling another spike of anger. It wasn’t arrogance; he knew he could teach Malfoy, if only he were willing to learn.

Harry walked as his thoughts seethed, and he found himself studying the dirt lane that bordered the Malfoy estate. On his right was a high, impenetrable hedge, lined with huge oak trees that draped long branches over the road. Matching trees lined the other side, bordering a thick forest. Harry could sense Muggle-Repelling Charms and knew it likely any passing Muggles would barely notice the hedge, if at all. The lane was quite beautiful with autumn colours painting everything in red, orange, and gold.

The downpour had ceased as quickly as it had begun; by the time Harry had exited the house, it had turned into a random scattering of droplets that now shone from every surface. Harry wondered what Narcissa’s garden would look like and imagined raindrops clinging to each rosebud. Would Malfoy

appreciate such a thing, or was he currently cursing Harry's name and hexing house-elves.

Harry knew he should go back and apologize, but swallowing his pride enough to do so would be difficult at the moment. Still, he wondered if the aborted attempt at training had upset Malfoy. With a quick stare up and down the lane to ensure there were no watchers, Harry cast a careful spell and felt his body melt away.

It was far from pleasant. Each time he changed he remembered his panic the first time the spell had nearly worked; the terrifying sensation of his body changing, not so much morphing as disappearing into some strange nothing, paring him down to an essence that was both him and not him.

Everything righted itself once the form took hold; however. He flapped his wings experimentally; it had taken him ages to learn how to fly, animal instinct notwithstanding. His human intellect was a distraction in his Animagus form and it was always a learning process to remember to tamp down his human thoughts and let the more primitive portion of his brain take over.

He flew to the top of a nearby tree and perched there, swaying dangerously on a branch, talons digging into the wood. He glared at a nearby sparrow who chirped fearfully and fluttered away. Yeah, you'd better fly, he thought in bird-speak. I'm fierce.

With a piercing cry, he launched into the air, wings pinioning as he took himself higher and higher. Before long, it started to feel natural and he plummeted towards the ground before spreading his wings and floating in a long, lazy spiral. His sharp eyes scanned the ground below, searching for a tasty rat or careless squirrel, even as his human side recoiled at the thought.

Harry basked in the pure love of flying for a bit and then turned and flew over the trees that marked the border of the Malfoy estate. He felt a slight twinge as he crossed; obviously the wards were attuned to magic of any sort, but nothing dreadful happened, so he continued on and fluttered to a rough landing on the roof.

A single crow peered at him through one suspicious eye. Harry stared back, hoping to look intimidating. Crows were dangerous, he knew. If they felt threatened, they would summon an entire murder to harrow him, pecking and clawing until he fell to the ground or took refuge in his human shape. This one

seemed content to simply watch him, for now, so Harry ignored it. He walked closer to the edge and peered over, seeking the broom shed amongst the scattering of Malfoy outbuildings. It was easily spotted by the peaked, turreted roof, so Harry gave the crow one last warning look and flew down to it.

To Harry's delight, he saw a flash of blond hair on the hillside nearby; Malfoy had taken out one of his falcons. Harry stayed where he was, huddled in the shade of one of the roof turrets, as the bird took flight. It was far more graceful than Harry would ever be; not for the first time he wondered at his Animagus shape. Was it simply his love of flying that had translated to a bird's form? Hermione had theories, of course, but Harry had listened to them with a steadily increasing lack of interest. It didn't really matter, after all.

The falcon, a female, Harry remembered, flew lower over the empty field and then rose to sail over the faraway treetops before banking and sweeping towards the right. She skimmed a hedgerow barely visible in the distance and then flapped her way back to Malfoy. She landed lightly on his gloved arm with barely a flutter and dipped her head to tear at the strip of red meat Malfoy had offered.

Harry watched until Malfoy had spelled a hood over her head, and then Harry flew down to land on the fence post nearest Malfoy, curious as to his reaction.

"Why, hello, there. Aren't you a bold one? Attracted by Ayah? Or did you slip your jesses and escape your master?" Malfoy's voice was toneless and soothing.

Harry lifted his wings and stepped from one clawed foot to another. He gave Malfoy a disdainful look, something raptors were exceedingly skilled at.

"If my cages weren't full, I might consider trapping you. Your markings are lovely."

Harry cocked his head, inwardly preening. Of course his feathers were lovely. He flapped his wings to show off the pale undersides, spreading his striped tail for balance.

Malfoy took a step towards him and Harry panicked, throwing himself from the perch into the air and

flapping madly for the roof of the broom shed. Malfoy's laughter followed him.

"Beautiful and skittish. Good hunting." Malfoy raised a hand in farewell and disappeared into the shed. Harry debated waiting around, but decided not to push his luck. The last thing he needed was for Malfoy to decide he needed another falcon and make room for Harry in one of his cages.

He took to the air again and flew back over the estate until he reached the deserted road. He turned back into his human self and Apparated home.

Thursday, November 23, 2006

Malfoy was angrier than Harry had seen him in a long while. He paced the length of Harry's office, which was only about four paces with Malfoy's long stride, an unsatisfying distance to work off any decent snit, Harry knew from experience.

"Bloody stupid, stubborn, bastard wanker! How the fuck did he make Head Auror again?" Malfoy's voice rang in the room, safe enough from eavesdroppers due to the multiple Silencing Charms he had cast upon storming into the room after Harry.

Harry left off replying, since he didn't really want Malfoy's rage to turn on him. They had tacitly declined to mention the Patronus training attempt when Malfoy had returned to work on Tuesday. Another dementor attack had drawn their attention—the word had come too late for them to do anything other than question witnesses and visit the comatose victim.

"Why can't Anders see that running around after the attacks is a ridiculous waste of time and resources? We need to be proactive. Setting a trap for them is the only way."

Harry thought Malfoy was right and had backed him up during the meeting with Anders, but the Head Auror, as usual, had waffled and mulled over each point Malfoy had raised for so long that even Malfoy's seemingly infinite patience with political manoeuvring had nearly boiled over. When Anders had finally agreed to "talk with Kingsley about it", Malfoy had curtly bid the man a good day and stormed off to rant

at Harry.

Malfoy stopped pacing and threw himself into Ron’s chair with an explosive sigh. He swivelled slowly, staring at the ceiling. “I suppose it doesn’t matter. When is Weasley due back?”

“Sunday,” Harry replied.

“He’ll most likely be assigned to the case with you and I’ll be shuffled back to partner-less shit duty.” Malfoy’s tone was surprisingly matter-of-fact. “I hadn’t quite finished purging the third floor Obsolete Case files.”

Harry wrinkled his nose. Had they really put Malfoy to work purging files? That would be a waste of talent.

“Thanks for your support, Potter,” Malfoy said in a tone that sounded only partly grudging.

“I happen to think you’re right. Possibly not about using Muggles as bait, of course, but there has to be some way we can lure the creatures…”

“They are already attacking Muggles, Potter. At least this way we might have a chance of stopping them." He pulled out his wand with a sigh and tapped the framed photo of Hermione on Ron's desk. The dark wood became instantly a bright, glittering pink.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked.

"Annoying Weasley." Malfoy began to systematically decorate items on Ron's desk with assorted glitter-encrusted colours until it looked as if a child's playroom had exploded. The lamp was purple, the quill holder bright orange, and the ink pot became an ever-changing rainbow.

"He's going to kill you."

"And yet, you have not stopped me."

Harry shrugged with a grin. "I was thinking about pulling a prank, myself. This is better."

"Because now I'll get the blame?"

*Exactly."

"I could name you as my accomplice."

Harry chuckled. "I doubt I will escape his wrath. We share an office, after all. He will tell me I should have stopped you."

"We fought. You lost." Malfoy smiled, eyes gleaming, and for just a moment Harry realized how wickedly handsome Malfoy was. He shook off the thought with a snort.

"In your dreams. I went out for lunch and came back to this," Harry retorted and gestured towards Ron's rainbow-sparkle desk. "I have no idea who could have done such a dastardly thing."

"You think Weasley will actually buy that? You are a dreadful liar."

Harry shrugged and grinned. “Why are you in here ranting at me?”

“Because I know you want to Crucio Anders as much as I do.”

“Well, maybe not Crucio,” Harry said and glanced at the door.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “I was speaking figuratively. Honestly, Potter.”

“Oh. Well, yes, figuratively, I would like him to pull his head out of his arse and let us do our jobs.”

“Do you really think my idea would work?” There was caution in Malfoy’s tone, as though he expected Harry’s support to be nothing more than an elaborate trap. Harry felt a pang when he realized he had contributed to Malfoy’s lack of trust in his own department.

“I don’t know, but at least we would be doing something instead of…”

“Accioing air?” Malfoy finished, grinning as he finished the old saying.

“Yeah.” Harry smiled back. “Hey, I have an idea. Do you want to come with me?”

Malfoy blinked. “Where?”

“The same place I always go when I need help figuring things out.”

“You can’t be serious?”

“Yes.” Harry nodded and got to his feet. “Let’s go see Hermione.”

Malfoy shook his head with a half-horrified, half-panicked look. “No. She detests me.”

“She doesn’t.” Harry rounded the desk and held out a hand. “Come on… partner.” The way he said it left no doubt that it was little more than a dare. Malfoy’s eyes flashed, bravado visibly driving away the uncertainty.

“Fine,” Malfoy snapped. “But if she hexes me, it’s on your head.” He reached out and took Harry’s hand. Harry clasped it for only a moment before using it to haul Malfoy out of the chair. He used a bit more force than necessary and Malfoy ended up nearly plastered against him. They stared at each other from a too-close distance for several heartbeats, and then Malfoy dropped Harry’s hand and gave him a push. “Shove off, Potter,” he said, but both the push and the words were playful.

Harry obediently turned and went out, glad that Malfoy was behind him so he wouldn’t see him smiling like a fool.

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Hermione was—after a moment of surprise at finding both Harry and Malfoy in her office—very diplomatic.

“Problem?” she asked and set aside a long scroll she had been reading. She tapped it with her wand to mark her place with a glowing line. “Or did you just pop in to invite me to lunch?”

“Um… both?” Harry asked and attempted an enticing grin.

“Hmmm, I’ll wager the lunch was not a consideration until mentioned, but I’ll take it. I’m famished. Can we discuss the problem while we eat?”

“I suppose. Where do you want to go? The canteen?”

Hermione made a noise of disgust just as Malfoy said, “No.” They both stared at each other as if astonished to have agreed on something. “I do not eat in the canteen,” Malfoy added.

“Not good enough unless it’s prepared by house-elves?” Hermione asked.

Malfoy’s eyes narrowed and Harry said, “Hermione! Stop that. We are going to have lunch and we are all going to get along.” He suspected that Malfoy refused to eat in the Ministry canteen because many of the other employees treated him like he was unspeakably vile. Such behaviour was not limited to Malfoy’s immediate co-workers in the Auror division.

“Sandwich shop?” Harry suggested.

“Too cold outside. I want something warm.”

“Dante’s Pub,” Malfoy said quietly.

Harry’s mouth began to water. Dante’s was a longer walk than most Ministry employees preferred, but it was well worth it. They specialized in chowders, stews, and soups that were the stuff of legend.

“Done!” Hermione said. “Let’s go.”

They spoke little on the walk. Muggle traffic was heavy and it was too cold for conversation; the weather had taken a nasty turn. The pub, once reached, was cosy and warm with a crackling fire and near-private dark-panelled booths.

Harry ordered a fish stew and Malfoy surprised him by requesting a Shepherd’s Pie. It seemed far too common for someone of Malfoy’s refinement. Hermione’s brows rose, also, but she said nothing and chose beef stew with dumplings.

“All right, what do you need my help with?” Hermione asked when the waiter had disappeared into the growing lunch crowd with their orders.

“Auror Anders is being indecisive,” Harry admitted. “I think Mal—Draco might have an idea, but we can’t implement it without Anders’ approval. So I’m thinking of doing the next best thing.” Harry explained Malfoy’s idea and then moved on to his own variation. “In lieu of setting up a Muggle event to attract dementors, I’m hoping we can locate the next place they might strike. How do we determine which Muggle events are coming that might draw dementors?”

“It needs to be something with high energy. You say the attacks commonly occur around happy people—seldom during events, but afterwards, when it’s easier to pick off stragglers?”

Harry nodded.

“That seems to be the case,” Malfoy admitted.

“I think the best place to look would be the library,” Hermione said.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Hermione, this is—”

“A Muggle library,” she interrupted.

Harry’s eyes widened and he exchanged a look with Malfoy, who looked slightly panicked. “We can’t research at a Muggle library,” Harry said.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Of course you can.”

Harry shook his head vehemently. “Hermione, I never went to the library as a child. I don’t think the Dursleys knew about books. And Malfoy is a pure-blood. His innate condescension automatically draws

Muggle attention."

Malfoy stared at him. "That was actually rather impressive, Potter."

Harry grinned. "Thanks. I just pretend to be you and the large words spill out."

Malfoy's grey eyes softened into genuine amusement and Harry's heart gave a curious beat-skip.

"You're both idiots. Eat your lunch and I'll take you to the library. Honestly, it's not that difficult."

Harry and Malfoy were prevented from commenting by the appearance of the waiter with their food, and then they were too preoccupied with the succulent meal to do more than make random comments about the quality of the food, which was superb.

Afterwards, Hermione coaxed them into a Muggle cab—Malfoy wedged close to Harry, probably to get as far from the cars rushing past the window as possible—and his knuckles were white where he clenched them over his knees. Harry had been on some wild automobile rides in his life, not the least of which included riding in a flying car with Ron Weasley driving, but this Muggle driver seemed to believe he had the right of way over all other vehicles. The sheer number of near-collisions was mind-boggling and even Hermione clutched at Harry's arm a time or two with squeaks of terror.

Harry had the urge to cling to Malfoy when they swerved around a bicycle rider—barely missing him—in a manoeuvre that sent them all sliding across the seat and crushed Hermione against the door. The driver apologized profusely after shouting what were presumably curse words in another language out the window at the angry bicyclist.

"Never. Again," Malfoy vowed in a low tone when the cab finally screeched to a halt outside the library.

Harry nodded fervently as they all fled the cab. Hermione dredged up some Muggle money and paid the

fare. She smiled at Harry and shook her head before she led them into the large building.

“All right, come over here and I’ll teach you how to use the computer. Most of the information you’ll need should be found on the internet, although it might not be a bad idea to peruse local magazines. I’ll try to cross reference the events you’ve already pinpointed and see if we can find similarities.” She glanced at the large clock on the wall. “I’ve only got another thirty minutes and then I need to get back. I assume you two can handle this without coming to blows or drawing undue attention.” It sounded more like a threat than a question.

“Of course,” Harry said. Malfoy just gave her a haughty look.

Harry was vaguely familiar with computers. The Dursleys had purchased one after Dudley had howled that “all of his friends” had one. It had been installed in Dudley’s room, so Harry could only have a go when the Dursleys were absent. Dudley had eventually smashed the monitor in a fit of rage and the computer had ended up stuffed in a cupboard with the rest of Dudley’s broken items.

Malfoy watched intently as Hermione ran through the search process for the online card catalogue, clicking the keys rapidly and explaining the layout of the library as she did so. Harry was distracted by a dark-haired girl who kept looking up from her book to stare at Malfoy. After a time she gave up reading entirely and just watched him, tongue flicking out to wet her lips every so often. Harry frowned.

“Harry, are you paying attention?” Hermione asked.

“Yes,” he said automatically.

“Good, then I’ll leave you both to it. Good luck.” She gave Harry a kiss on the cheek and breezed out.

“Um… what is the next thing we need to search for?” Harry asked. He searched for the correct keys on the keyboard and wished he’d listened more closely to Hermione.

“Why aren’t the letters in alphabetical order?” Malfoy asked. “It’s idiotic the way it is.”

“I don’t know!” Harry protested, wanting to defend Muggles, but having no idea why the keys were in nonsensical order. He had never learned to type.

“Muggles,” Malfoy said derisively and then consulted Hermione’s list. “Concerts.”

“Concerts,” Harry repeated, drawing the word out as he hunted and pecked for each letter.

“That’s the wrong box,” Malfoy said.

“No, it isn’t.”

“Then why does it say ‘Author’ and not ‘Subject’?”

Harry frowned at the screen. He knew he had selected the correct box. The bloody tiny blinking line was obviously mocking him by changing locations without his knowledge.

“How did Hermione do that copying thing?”

“I don’t know, but I could probably read every book in here by the time you retype the damn word.”

“Do you want to do this?” Harry demanded in an irritated hiss.

“Certainly not,” Malfoy replied.

“Then shut it.” Harry painstakingly typed the word in the correct box. He waited. Nothing happened. “I think it’s broken.”

“You have to press the enter key, you imbecile.”

Harry remembered that as soon as Malfoy mentioned it, but he glared at him for good measure as he poked the button with a stiff finger.

“Hello,” a voice said. “Do you guys need some help? You seem a bit...”

Harry looked up to see the dark-haired girl smiling at Malfoy. She was voluptuous and dressed to highlight the fact. To Harry, her stare seemed slightly predatory. He opened his mouth to assure her they did not need assistance.

“Well, he is an idiot,” Malfoy said before Harry could speak. “Perhaps you wouldn’t mind helping me to locate some upcoming Mug—upcoming current events. Celebrations, sporting matches, things of that sort. Events that have the potential to draw a large, happy crowd." Malfoy smiled winningly at her and for a moment Harry thought she might swoon. He glared and felt somewhat annoyed that he'd never seen such a look on Malfoy's face before, not even at Hogwarts.

The girl beamed at Malfoy. “Are you in advertising, then? Here, let me show you some options.” She took Malfoy’s arm and escorted him to another computer terminal and then leaned all over him under the guise of showing him some options.

“Options,” Harry muttered. “Is that what they are calling it these days?” He pounded the keys on the keyboard so fiercely that he drew the censoring gaze of a matron who reminded him unpleasantly of Madam Pince. He stopped hammering the defenceless keys with effort and tried to stop glaring in Malfoy’s direction.

The girl tittered and Malfoy’s husky laugh reached Harry’s ears. He saw red for a moment and found himself staring at the blinking cursor on the screen. Harry had no right to be annoyed. Malfoy was his partner, nothing more. Malfoy could flirt with every Muggle girl in London if he chose. It was none of

Harry's business.

I'm just jealous, he rationalized. A beautiful young girl like that; who wouldn't want her attention?

Harry tried to shake off his annoyance and concentrated on using the infernal machine.

Sunday, November 26, 2006

Harry beamed at Ron and then caught him in a crushing hug. Ron laughed and tried to break Harry's ribs with his return embrace.

"Missed you, mate," Harry said roughly. "How was the conference?"

Ron pulled away, grinning as broadly as Harry. "It was brilliant. I learned loads! There was a team there from Moscow and they presented some tactical solutions for hostage situations that were amazing. Wait 'til you see my notes."

Ron gushed on about the conference for nearly an hour, describing highlights of the panels and telling tales about the Amsterdam shenanigans of the participants. Hermione bustled around the kitchen as they spoke, asking questions and placing gentle pats on her boyfriend in between setting Molly Weasley levels of food on the table.

"Hermione, we're not that hungry," Ron said at one point, but he snatched up a ginger biscuit and took a bite anyway.

"The holidays are coming, so I am just getting in some practice. I don't need your mother to show me up every year."

“It’s not a competition, Hermione.”

“The hell it’s not,” Hermione muttered, leaning close to Harry so that only he could hear her as she took a bit of shortbread and popped it into her mouth. She sighed. “More almond next time, I think.”

“Sorry you got stuck with Malfoy,” Ron said, switching subjects. “How is that going?”

Harry’s jaw tightened. Ever since the library incident, his interactions with Malfoy had been stilted. Between them, they had a decent-sized list of upcoming events to stake out; Harry had added them to the map at the Ministry and solicited ideas from the team as to the best way to keep an eye on all of them. They planned to lurk at most of the events, but a few happened on the same day, which necessitated splitting up the group.

“Fine,” Harry said shortly.

Ron snorted. “That good, eh? Think Anders will put me on the case and take Malfoy off now that I’m back?”

“I don’t know,” Harry admitted. In truth, he was not sure which option he would prefer. On the one hand, working with Malfoy was growing increasingly stressful due to the odd tension between them, but Harry was also coming to value Malfoy’s insight and dogged work ethic, especially in the face of the obvious dislike between Malfoy and the other members of the team. Despite Tim Clark’s snide comments and Brady Kern’s amusement, Malfoy never acted less than professionally around them, even when Harry was ready to hex them for their behaviour.

He wished he could blurt out the truth about Malfoy’s former partner, but he doubted Malfoy would appreciate Harry’s belated show of support under those circumstances. Perhaps it would be best if Ron was assigned to the case and Malfoy was released to await a new partner, hopefully one who would appreciate him as much as Curtis Laigle had. And Malfoy could not cast a Patronus. Harry needed to remember that, as well.

“Tell me about the case,” Ron said. Before Harry could speak, he continued, “Hey, that reminds me!

Westinghouse—do you remember him from that International mixer we had in Edinburgh? Anyway, he was telling me about this case where this mysterious pox was taking down wizards, but the healers worked out it was a spell rather than a disease…" With that, Ron was off on another tale, which turned into several more.

When Harry finally gave in to Hermione's not-subtle yawns and pointed glances towards the fireplace, it was much later than expected and Harry still hadn't got round to talking about the dementors.

Harry figured there would be time to bring him up to speed once Anders assigned him to the case. He reflected it was good to have Ron back.

As he readied himself for bed, Harry wondered how Malfoy would take the news of being removed.

Monday, November 27, 2006

Harry arrived early, although not earlier than Malfoy, who nodded at him curtly from across the canteen where he sat nursing a steaming mug. Harry prepared his own cup of tea and debated joining his temporary partner, but decided to go to his office and catch up on paperwork while he awaited news.

The dementor team was not scheduled to meet until ten o'clock. It was with some relief that Harry greeted Ron's exuberant arrival into their office at 9:42.

"Harry! You'll never believe this!" Ron's eyes grew round and his mouth formed an O when he beheld the glittering wonder that was his desk. "What happened to my desk?"

"Um… I dunno," Harry said, trying to suppress a grin. "It was like that."

"It was like that? Since when was it like that? My Horton Hornsby autographed Snitch is green! Harry, how could you?" Ron snatched up the glittering green Snitch. It wasn't an official game-winning Snitch, of course, since the Cannons hadn't won a game since the dawn of time, but Ron treasured the

commemorative item. He clutched it to his chest and glared at Harry.

“Sorry, mate,” Harry said and allowed his grin to spill forth. “It wasn’t me. Um… you were saying?”

“How do you change it back?” Ron demanded. He pulled out his wand and cast Finite Incantatem. To his obvious relief, the green sparkles faded from the Snitch, revealing the standard gold beneath. Ron sighed and replaced it on his desk. “At least it’s not permanent. Best hope you don’t go on leave, Harry.”

Harry laughed and watched Ron restore the items on his desk. Malfoy had been thorough—even his memo clips were multi-coloured and shimmering; Harry thought they looked rather pretty. “Duly warned. Really, though, what were you saying when you came in?”

“Oh. Oh! Anders and Shacklebolt want me to teach a course based on some of the techniques I learned at the conference! Me! Teaching a course! Isn’t that amazing?”

Harry blinked at him and wondered how Ron was supposed to run a training course whilst helping him with the dementor case.

Ron’s smile faded at Harry’s lack of response. “You… you don’t think I can do it?”

Harry shook himself. “No! No, I mean, of course you can do it. You’ll be brilliant, only… I was expecting you to work with me again.”

Ron’s face fell again. “Right. About that… Apparently Anders thinks Malfoy is doing fine, since you haven’t complained or whatnot. And he mentioned something about not wanting to break up a team that has ‘meshed symbiotically’, I think he said. You think he even knows what that means? Anyway, bad luck, yeah?”

Harry snorted. “Bad luck for me, but good for you! Training now! Soon you’ll be Head Auror. Anders

better watch out for his job." He grinned broadly.

Ron chuckled and dragged a hand through his hair. "Go on. I am a bit nervous, though. My first time giving a presentation. Merlin, I hope I don't bollock it up. I need Hermione. Good luck with the dementor thing!"

Before Harry could do more than lift a hand in farewell, Ron was gone with a familiar, slightly-panicked expression firmly in place. Harry's grin lasted for long minutes and then he sighed and set off to find Malfoy and deliver the news that they were to be stuck together for the foreseeable future.

For some reason, the news did not bother Harry as much as he'd expected.

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Malfoy's office was half the size of Harry's, and seemed to have been created from a storage room that sat right next to the eastern stairwell. The door to that particular stairwell had a permanent, loud squeak that no amount of spellwork or oil could eradicate. It was a popular route for Aurors heading for the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes. The door was almost constantly squealing.

Malfoy's office was, not surprisingly, excessively neat. Unlike Harry's overflowing Inbox and paper-scattered desk, Malfoy's area looked almost unused. Incoming and Outgoing boxes were stacked with precision, file drawers were closed (and probably properly locked), and even the coat rack near the door held a single black cloak and simple green scarf. Harry and Ron's coat rack had accumulated three jackets, a hat, four or five scarves, and a bright-flowered lei left over from someone's bon voyage party months previous.

There was no window and only a single painting on the wall, a bleak scene of two barren trees on a snow-covered landscape. The sky surrounding the trees was nearly black and the single, tiny figure of a man between the trees seemed overwhelmed and lost. Harry found it cold and lonely, but the urge to study it in depth was great.

He almost desperately wondered why Malfoy had chosen it, but he had never worked up the courage to

ask.

Malfoy glanced up from the scroll he had been reading. “Potter,” he said with no inflection.

“Malfoy. I’ve come to tell you, um…”

“That I’m off the case and Weasley is reinstated?”

“No. The opposite, actually. Anders assigned Ron elsewhere. We’re scheduled to meet with the others in ten minutes. Are you ready?”

Malfoy looked surprised for only a moment, and then he frowned. “Is my presence necessary? I am trying to organize my notes gathered from our outing to the Muggle library, as well as my recommendations for potentially useful spells. I had expected to hand them over to you later today.”

Harry’s lips thinned at Malfoy’s mention of the Muggle library. The outing that had ended with Malfoy receiving the Muggle girl’s phone number—and an offer of assistance that had nothing to do with their case. Harry wasn’t certain why he had felt such relief when Malfoy had incinerated the girl’s number; it was not as if Malfoy had a telephone with which to call her.

He shook off the memory and focussed on the problem at hand. He knew why Malfoy did not want to attend the meeting. Clark and the others had grown more obviously antagonistic towards Malfoy, probably due to the expectation of Ron’s return. Harry would have to do something about that.

“All right, but I am scheduling one of the training rooms for us this afternoon. We’re going to work on that Patronus.”

Malfoy’s eyes narrowed, but Harry had granted him a reprieve by allowing him to skip the team meeting and Malfoy knew it. “Fine,” he snapped and then lifted a small piece of paper. “I also tracked down the

son of Old Jackson, the Azkaban guard."

"You found his son?"

"He lives in Edinburgh. Do you want me to go and speak with him?"

"I'll go," Harry said. Malfoy's eyes narrowed and Harry quickly corrected, "I meant we! We'll go. After the Patronus lesson."

Malfoy stared and him with a measuring look and then returned his attention to the scroll.

Harry glanced once more at the disturbing painting and left.

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The training room was one of the smaller ones, usually reserved for Auror use. The walls were empty stone, scarred, chipped, and blackened in places from decades of spellwork. A small purple splotch on the ceiling dripped endlessly, but the droplets always vanished before they hit the floor. If the purple liquid touched human skin, the victim would giggle for hours; it was a common prank to bring newcomers into the room for the amusement value.

Both he and Malfoy avoided it without comment.

"Let's see that wand movement again," Harry stated in his most authoritative tone.

"I am not a First-year, Potter," Malfoy snapped and executed the movement perfectly.

“Maybe you should stop acting like it, then,” Harry muttered and scowled when Malfoy glared at him. More loudly, Harry said, “Did you happen to dredge up a happy memory since the last time we tried this?”

“Perhaps,” Malfoy replied with a sneer.

Tension crackled in the air between them and Harry forced himself to let out a breath and relax. Antagonizing Malfoy was not going to help him to cast a Patronus. Harry shut his eyes and tried to centre himself, to remember how it felt back at Hogwarts when he was teaching Dumbledore’s Army. Encouragement, not censure, was the necessary tool.

“All right,” Harry said. “I’ve found it helps to warm up a bit, first. Want to have a go at duelling? Non-lethal.”

Malfoy smiled at that, faintly, but it was there. “As you wish.” Before Harry was ready, Malfoy spun, crouched, and cried, “Tarantallegra!”

Harry barely deflected it with a hastily-cast Shield Charm, hissed as he dove aside. He rolled and then leaped to his feet again with a shouted, “Aguafrigidis!”

Water fountained from Harry’s wand and sprayed beneath Malfoy’s feet where it instantly turned to ice. Malfoy, scrambling to avoid Harry’s hex, slipped and went down on one knee. His wand scraped on the ground.

“Stupefy!” Harry yelled, but Malfoy’s wand twitched up and Harry’s spell deflected from the magical shield and dissipated against the ceiling with a spray of grit.

Malfoy cast again and Harry staggered back, flailing as the sleeve of his robe turned into a swarm of bees. The bastard had always been good at Transfiguration. Batting at the angry insects, Harry barely deflected the next hex. He dispatched the bees as Malfoy charmed away the ice on the floor.

They circled one another and Harry found himself grinning. After a moment, Malfoy grinned back and Harry laughed. “You’re damned good at this,” he admitted.

Malfoy’s smile widened. “You are not half bad, I suppose.”

Harry snorted a laugh. “High praise, coming from you. Truce?”

“You just don’t want any more bee stings.”

“Damn straight. Those bloody well hurt.” Additionally, his Auror robes were ruined. He would have to drop them off at the Magical Uniform Assignment and Repair Department and face the censoring stare of the Head Seamstress.

“Very well.” Malfoy straightened. “Truce. For now.”

“Excellent. Now, let’s see that Patronus.”

Malfoy’s amusement fled. His face took on a near-panicked expression and he turned away. As Harry watched, he visibly steadied himself, lifted his wand, and said, “Expecto Patronum!”

A silvery puff shot from his wand and made it partway to the floor before it disappeared.

Harry let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding. “Good!” he said encouragingly. “That’s good! Neville could only make a silver burst for his first dozen tries. Don’t give up.”

Malfoy shot a glare over his shoulder. “You are comparing me to Longbottom?”

Harry's jaw tightened. "You know, this will really go much easier if you don't insult my friends."

"That will be much easier if you don't constantly mention them."

Harry conceded the point… nearly. "You focussed on Neville. I was being encouraging."

"Are we going to argue all day, or are you going to try and teach me?" The sneer was back, as if their moment of camaraderie earlier had never happened.

Harry bit back half a dozen retorts and forced a smile. "All right. Let's try it again and see if we can avoid sniping at one another."

Malfoy cast again, but produced nothing more than a puff of white smoke. It was obvious his mood had soured and it was affecting his performance. Touchy git, Harry decided. He stepped forwards. "It seems your happy thought only works after you've been trying to maim me. Imagine that."

"Perhaps that is my happy thought, Potter," Malfoy said, but his shoulders lost some of their tension.

"That would not surprise me, Malfoy," Harry said dryly. "Now, think about doing something terrible to me and try again."

Malfoy sniffed and raised his wand. This time Harry tried to pay attention to his movements, to act like a teacher instead of an irritated schoolboy.

A larger silver burst followed and Harry gnawed his lip for a moment before he stepped closer to Malfoy. "Okay, try this. Your wand movements are a bit stiff. Let me…" Screwing up his courage, Harry moved behind Malfoy, and then reached over his shoulder to grasp his wrist. His chest pressed against Malfoy's stone-stiff back and for a moment Harry feared Malfoy would elbow him in the ribs—or worse.

Neither of them moved for three heartbeats, and then Harry slid his fingers more firmly over Malfoy's, trying to ignore the fact that his face hovered just over Malfoy's shoulder and that the warmth of him burned through Harry's robes.

"Lift," Harry murmured and pulled gently on Malfoy's hand. Malfoy allowed it, and seemed to relax incrementally. "Good," Harry said. "Now swish and jab, all in one smooth motion, as if you are—yes, like that. Now, again."

Harry guided Malfoy's hand through the proper wand movements twice more. He was so intently-focussed on the motion that it took him a moment to realize he had leaned even closer against Malfoy and had placed his free hand on Malfoy's hip. He discovered it the instant Malfoy went completely still and rigid once more.

Harry realized how intimately close they were with a jolt of surprise. Malfoy's scent was familiar to Harry, now that they had been working together for three weeks, but Harry had never noticed how many nuances were beneath it. There were wood scents and sweet scents and a hint of something spicy and… and Harry was standing far too close to Draco Malfoy, and breathing him in.

Harry nearly flung himself away, but that would be cowardly as well as horrifically obvious. Instead he held his ground, although he could feel his muscles protesting, bound up as tensely as Malfoy's. "Now… cast," Harry said on a breath. Beneath his embarrassment, something had taken root, something that seemed to curl through his blood like the insidious tentacles of a venomous tentacula.

Malfoy moved, lifting his arm and repeating the motion with Harry's hand still lightly covering his own. His shoulder shifted against Harry's chest, a small motion that seemed much larger. Harry's hand on his hip, although barely touching, seemed too-intimate, something that Malfoy would never allow under normal circumstances. Their breathing seemed synchronized, each inhalation and exhalation taken as one. Malfoy's scent filled Harry's senses.

"Expecto Patronum," Malfoy whispered. His movements almost seemed to be made in slow motion. Harry watched with a surge of hope as brilliance emerged from the end of Malfoy's pale new wand. A silver cloud spewed forth and writhed with a shifting, changing burst of luminescence…

And faded away.

They both stood frozen for a moment, and then Malfoy stepped briskly away, not stopping until several strides had carried him a fair pace from Harry, who felt alternately cold with loss and hot with the realization that he would have been perfectly happy to stay in that position with Malfoy for a very long time.

Harry cleared his throat and turned aside, unsure whether confused or mortified would win the current battle for dominant emotion. “That was… really good,” he said and felt like kicking himself when the words came out an octave higher than his normal tone of voice. “You should… um. Keep practicing. You’ve almost got it.”

With that, Harry walked briskly to the door and paused before going out. Malfoy watched him with a frown that seemed more perplexed than disturbed, thankfully. Harry forced what he hoped was an encouraging smile and fled.

In the nearest loo, Harry splashed water on his face and avoided his own gaze in the mirror. Bloody hell, how could he possibly be attracted to Draco sodding Malfoy?

Wednesday, November 29, 2006

If Harry had encountered Toby Jackson on a random Muggle street, he would have taken him for exactly what he was—a solid blue collar worker. He was not overly tall, and more round than slender, with a sparse beard and ruddy complexion. He wore a knitted cap even though they were indoors, and greying bits of brown hair tufted out beneath the edges.

His cottage was more of a shack, but it had an excellent view of the Firth of Forth, or at least it would on days when the clouds weren’t hugging the water and spitting a deluge of cold rain.

Toby had offered them bottles of Edinburgh’s Excellence, to which Malfoy had surprised Harry by

accepting. It was far too cold to be drinking ale; Harry would have preferred hot tea, in addition to the fact they were on duty, but he followed Malfoy's lead and sipped at the malted beverage.

"Pipefitting, eh?" Malfoy asked. "You do any work at Hogwarts after the war?"

Toby grinned and nodded. One of his teeth jutted out at an odd angle and he had a habit of playing with it with his tongue. "Yeah, plenty of pipes needed replacing. We had a whole team working day and night. Took most of the summer. I bought a new chair with my extra income." He patted the arms of the plaid chair in which he sat. "Has Vibratin' and Massage Charms," he added in a low voice.

Malfoy whistled and leaned forwards as if impressed. Harry gulped his ale to keep from coughing. He had never seen Malfoy acting anything but highbrow and patrician. "Can I try it?" Malfoy asked.

Toby nodded and levered himself up. Malfoy sat in the chair, looking as out of place as a supermodel at a hoedown. Toby activated the Vibrating Charm and Malfoy leaned his head back and sighed.

"Say, this is nice," he said. "I might have to pick one up for myself."

The next ten minutes were spent waiting for Toby to locate the address of the chair dealer and extolling the virtues of the massage features and the colour selections. Harry watched Malfoy and tried not to look bored witless.

"Thanks for this," Malfoy said companionably and tucked the scrap of paper into his pocket. "I'll be sure to mention to Mr Sedeo that you are quite satisfied and also that you referred me." Malfoy winked. "Perhaps he'll give you a kickback?"

Toby snorted. "Not likely, but I appreciate it, Draco. You're here to ask about my dad, yeah?"

Harry's head snapped up. He knew what Malfoy had been up to, but even so he'd wondered if they would ever get to the actual reason for their visit. It was possible Malfoy had a chair fetish. Harry shied

away from thoughts of Malfoy and fetishes; now was definitely not the time for that tangent.

Malfoy vacated Toby's precious chair and regained his own hard seat, gesturing for Toby to return to the vibrating plaid confines. "Yes. Your father worked at Azkaban prior to the war, correct?"

Toby nodded. "Yeah, he was killed there. Some followers of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named broke out. I can't recall their names at the moment—I've got the Prophet article, though." Toby made as if to rise again, but Malfoy lifted a quick hand.

"No, that's not necessary. We're actually more interested in the dementors. Your father seems to have been something of an expert where dementors are concerned. The other guards at the prison spoke very highly of him."

Toby sat back with a proud-looking nod. Harry studied the multi-coloured bricks that surrounded the fireplace. Malfoy definitely did not want Toby to retrieve that article—chances were good that Lucius Malfoy had been one of those escapees.

"Yeah, he was the best. He invented a spell he used to keep them in line. Called it the Stinger."

Malfoy glanced at Harry and then back at Toby. "Exactly. Did he, by chance, happen to teach it to you? The Stinger?"

Toby nodded, looking eager. "Yeah! He said he wanted me to be ready, in case I ever ran into a dementor. He taught me the Patronus and the Stinger. 'Course, I never used it on an actual dementor—never saw one up close, did I?"

"That's brilliant!" Draco breathed. "Do you think you could teach us?"

Toby gaped at him. "Me? Teach a spell to Aurors? To Harry Potter?" Harry nearly cringed.

“Indeed,” Malfoy said and grinned. “Wouldn’t that be a feather in your cap?”

“’Deed it would! The boys down at the pub would be—” Toby’s face fell. “Well, they’ll never believe me, will they?”

“Do you happen to have a camera?” Malfoy asked in a sly tone.

Harry groaned.

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Harry glanced sidelong at Malfoy and tugged at the neck of his Auror robe in an attempt to keep the gusting wind from blowing down his back. Their footsteps crunched on the path as they sought a secluded place from which to Apparate.

“Those photos will be in the Daily Prophet tomorrow,” Harry groused.

“This isn’t about you, Potter, it’s about saving innocent Muggle lives. Interesting spell, isn’t it?”

Harry scowled, but he supposed Malfoy was correct. “It’s a modified Imperius with a hint of Legilimency and a Stinging Hex thrown in. It’s astonishingly clever, really.”

“And tailor-made for dementors. The question is—do you think we can use it?”

“I don’t know. It has a limited range and duration. Old Jackson seemed mainly to use the spell to keep the dementors in line without resorting to a full-on Patronus.” Unlike the Patronus, Malfoy had picked it

up quickly, likely because it required precise mental focus and no happy thoughts.

Two Muggle panel trucks were parked side by side and Malfoy ducked between them. Harry joined him and they wordlessly Apparated to the Royal Botanic Garden. The place was renowned for its Herbology School and Magical Plant Garden, but it also contained direct Floo access to the Ministry of Magic.

They did not speak again until they were safely ensconced in Harry's office. It was after hours—again—and Ron had already gone home. Malfoy sat in Ron's chair and Harry reflected that Malfoy had spent more time there than Ron had recently. Malfoy opened Ron's right hand drawer and withdrew a packet of chocolate biscuits.

"I'm going to get blamed for those going missing, you know," Harry commented.

"They taste even sweeter for that, thank you, Potter." Malfoy popped one into his mouth and crunched it with a smile.

Harry decided to ignore him, instead grabbing parchment and a quill and quickly writing out the instructions for casting the spell. He didn't want to forget it after one night's sleep. He would also take it to Hermione and see what she thought about it.

Malfoy absently turned Ron's prized Snitch green and crunched another biscuit.

"Will you stop that?" Harry demanded. "It was Impellafodio, right?"

"Yes, Potter. Have we accomplished enough today? If so, I think I'll go home."

"Yeah, we're done." Harry kept writing as Malfoy got to his feet. Before he reached the door, Harry added, "And, Malfoy… Nice work with Jackson, today. Thanks."

“Just doing my job, Potter,” Malfoy said, but his voice was low and without its usual bite. Harry smiled as Malfoy left.

Thursday, December7th, 2006

Harry could hardly believe his eyes as the swirling column formed from the clouds and stretched towards the earth—the houses—below.

“Are they causing that?” Harry shouted to Malfoy, angling his broom towards the man until their knees touched. Even then, he could barely hear Malfoy’s reply over the screaming wind.

“Can’t be!”

The weather had been ominous and ugly all day, with stiff winds and spitting rain, but a tornado? He had never heard of a tornado striking London before.

They had been in pursuit of four dementors, their Muggle research having paid off, and this time with enough foresight to prevent an attack, at least so far. The creatures had taken to the clouds, however, and Clark had set off in pursuit, likely overcome with the excitement of the chase after a week of sitting round the office bored and waiting for something to happen, broken only by equally boring stretches of hanging about at Muggle events hoping for a dementor sighting.

Harry had shrugged and they had followed Tim. Truth be told, Harry preferred to be on a broom, even when battling high wind and stinging rain, and even when pointlessly chasing dementors. They had no way of stopping the creatures and could only drive them away. Eventually they would outpace the Aurors’ brooms and disappear.

Malfoy leaned close enough that his hair brushed against Harry’s cheek as it whipped in the gale. “This thing is drawing attention! We need to get out of sight!”

Harry nodded in agreement just as the tornado touched down and tore a bit of roofing material from a tall building below. Harry spotted Rocco up near the swirling clouds, out of sight of most Muggle eyes. Where the hell was Clark?

“There!” Malfoy said and pointed. “Stupid puppy, what is he doing?”

Clark sped his broom towards the ground and then winked nearly out of sight, at least having the foresight to cast a Disillusionment Charm. Harry followed suit and was pleased to note Malfoy doing the same. They both followed and Harry intended to shout at Tim for being reckless and order his arse back to Headquarters.

Harry saw what had drawn Clark’s attention as they neared the ground. A dementor had cornered a Muggle near an opening between low buildings. The creature hovered over the terrified Muggle, fetid black tendrils flapping in the driving wind. A gust shoved at Harry’s broom and lifted him several metres above Malfoy, who angled his broom into it and hurtled downwards.

Reddish tiles lifted off the nearby roofline as Clark’s Patronus exploded from the end of his wand.

Malfoy shouted, the words lost to Harry, directed at Clark. Harry watched with horror as roofing tiles and larger bits flew through the air towards Clark, who paid no attention, lifting his wand in victory as the dementor fled.

Harry was too far away to assist. He felt like he was flying through heavy syrup, battling the wind as he watched Malfoy fly at breakneck speed towards Clark, who hovered in the path of the falling debris, oblivious. Malfoy cast a spell; it deflected some of the roofing pieces, but not all.

Clark looked up just as Malfoy struck him, knocking him end over end—a huge piece of roofing tile slammed into Malfoy, who tumbled towards the ground.

Harry’s heart leaped into his throat, nearly choking him as he tried to scream the words of a Cushioning Charm. Luckily, Rocco was next to him and cast at the same time. Malfoy hit the ground hard, but much of his velocity had been reduced. Harry landed and left his broom at a dead run, barely aware of Clark

and Rocco touching down nearby.

Harry crouched next to Malfoy’s still form and turned him over carefully, wary of a possible spinal injury. The chunk of debris had hit Malfoy on the lower back. Harry winced when he saw Malfoy's face; it was badly scraped from contact with the ground, and rapidly swelling. Blood trickled from one nostril. He was limp in Harry’s arms.

"Take our brooms back to headquarters!" Harry snapped at Clark, whose face was properly ashen in the face of Harry's glare. If Clark dared to say one word about Malfoy "deserving" it, Harry would hex him where he stood. "I'm taking Draco to St Mungo's. Rocco, deal with the Muggle." He jerked his head towards the man who stood gaping at them from his slump against the wall. Clark's Patronus had saved the man from the dementor, but he seemed nearly as paralyzed at the sight of robed men riding broomsticks.

Trusting Rocco to take care of both the Muggle situation and Tim Clark, Harry gathered Malfoy into his arms and Disapparated.

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Harry sat in an uncomfortable chair and awaited word from the St Mungo's staff. They had hustled Malfoy into a private room of the Generic Injuries and Illnesses ward, leaving Harry to drink lukewarm tea and thumb through month-old issues of Witch's Weekly and The Quibbler.

Footsteps approached and Harry looked up to see Tim Clark approaching, still clad in his Auror robes. His face was streaked with dust and his brow was furrowed. He sprawled into the chair next to Harry.

"How is he?" Clark asked, looking genuinely worried.

"I don't know. They haven't come out."

Clark sat forwards and rested his forearms atop his thighs. His hands over his knees. He looked at the plain white floor for a minute or two and then said, "I was wrong."

"Wrong?" Harry asked.

Clark glanced at him and then away. "About Malfoy. I should be the one in there, not him." He jerked his head in the direction of Malfoy's room. "He didn't have to do that. I wouldn't have done it for him. I've been a right prick to him and then he goes and does that. Why?"

"He's a good Auror," Harry said quietly.

"Yeah." Clark groaned and dropped his head again. "I can't believe he never hexed me. If he was a bloody Death Eater like I kept claiming, he would have hexed my balls off, or poisoned me, or done something. I feel like a bloody idiot not to have seen it."

Harry said nothing; his own preconceptions had led him to believe the worst of Malfoy until Curtis Laigle had opened his eyes. At least Auror Clark had come to the realization on his own. They sat in silence for a time. Harry Vanished his cold tea and made another cup from the Everfull Pitcher near the outer doors.

Rocco entered the room, took in their bleak expressions, and said nothing, only sat down to wait with them. Shortly thereafter, Vic and Brady strolled in. Harry was cheered to see them, thinking that finally, finally, they were acting like a team. He hoped they would not soon lose one of their number.

"A tornado in London," Brady said. "Who'd have thunk?"

"Did anyone contact Malfoy's mother?" Vic asked.

Harry felt a spear of panic. He had been so worried about Malfoy that he hadn't even thought about Narcissa. Vic rolled her eyes and sighed. "Men," she said in a tone that spoke volumes. She waved Harry

off. "I'll do it."

Harry got to his feet and stopped her with a hand. “No, I should. It’s my responsibility. And I’ve spoken with her before.” The time Harry had conversed with her on a forest floor came back to him in a rush and he glanced at the closed door once more before gathering his thoughts and heading for the public Floo connection.

A house-elf took the call and Narcissa came through the moment she heard the words “Draco” and “St Mungo’s”. For someone caught completely unawares on a random Thursday afternoon, she looked as elegant as though she had planned to attend a formal Tea. Perhaps she had.

They returned to the waiting room and Harry explained what had happened. The others gave awkward introductions. Tim blushed and stammered and apologized, explaining that it was his fault and assuring her that Draco had saved his life.

Narcissa was chalk-white by the time she sat down, but she still managed to reassure Tim with a murmured, “Do not worry, Auror Clark. I am quite certain that Draco will be fine.” Despite her words, Harry noticed the tips of her fingers were white where she pressed them into tightly against her thighs as she sat down.

Neither of them mentioned that Malfoy had been in there for hours already.

Forty minutes later, the door finally opened. They all got to their feet in a rush as a single green-robed healer walked towards them. Her face was severe, although she looked vaguely like Molly Weasley, except that her hair was steel-grey rather than ginger.

“Auror Potter,” she greeted and then looked at Narcissa. “I am Healer Corrigo. Are you related to the patient?”

“I am his mother.”

“Good, then you can sign all the forms. Auror Malfoy will be fine. He had some kidney damage and one of his vertebrae was fractured. That took some fancy spellwork, but Healer Salus is very good. There was some danger of injury to his spinal cord, but we believe the procedure was successful. The kidney damage was corrected with potions, although he will need to keep taking those for the next week, just to be safe. He will be very sore and require bed rest, and light duty once he returns to work. No flying, running, or chasing after tornadoes, Auror Potter.” Her tone was stern, as though it were Harry’s fault Malfoy had got himself injured. "We recommend he take it easy for the next three weeks, minimum."

Harry only nodded, too relieved at the prognosis to comment.

The healer went on. “He is resting at the moment, but you may go in for a few minutes, if you’d like.”

“Thank you, Healer Corrigo,” Narcissa replied. She took several steps towards the room and then paused to look back at Harry. “Coming, Mr Potter?”

Harry joined her with a nod and together they entered the room where two healers still remained. One seemed to be cleaning up whilst the other filled out paperwork beneath a dim lamp.

The one writing, Healer Salus, Harry presumed, spoke to Narcissa, reiterating what the other had already said, and giving instructions for Malfoy’s care. The other healer pulled two chairs close to the bed and Harry sat down in one and looked worriedly at Malfoy’s face. Malfoy looked as though he was merely sleeping. His scraped cheek had been healed and Harry smiled at that. He could imagine Malfoy’s upset should anything mar his perfect complexion.

Both healers finally went out and Narcissa took the chair next to Harry’s. She reached out and lifted one of Malfoy's hands. Harry had always thought of Malfoy as pale, but next to Narcissa his skin appeared quite dark. In fact, Malfoy looked a lot healthier than he had at school. All of the outdoor work seemed to have made him even fitter than he’d been—

“Lucius was furious when Draco announced he meant to be an Auror. They argued for days.”

Harry nodded, surprised at Narcissa's disclosure. He could well imagine such a scenario.

"He meant for Draco to follow in his footsteps, even though he knew that path had been sullied by the choices he… we… had made. Of course, diverging from that path during the dark times would have been incredibly dangerous. Only Severus had the courage to walk that road." She sighed. "And he paid for that betrayal."

"You did," Harry said quietly. "You walked that road when you saved my life."

Her fingers tightened around Draco's. "I paid for that betrayal, as well. I sometimes think the Dark—Voldemort—cursed my family. His shadow now lives in every corner of my home. Sometimes I think I see him, lurking at the edges of my vision. I startle at every unexpected movement, thinking it is him, or that bloody snake. And then Lucius…" She closed her eyes for a moment. "Well, that was no natural illness."

"But Voldemort— But he's gone," Harry insisted.

She smiled at him wanly. "Yes, you did your job well, Harry. What he did to Lucius took root long before that fateful day. Lucius was never very good at Occlumency. The Dark Lord knew that Lucius' loyalty belonged solely to me and to Draco. He detested that, above all, and he used it to manipulate Lucius time and again. He hated every tender emotion and sought to stamp it out."

Harry looked again at Malfoy's still face. Malfoy, who was slowly becoming Draco in Harry's thoughts, separate, and yet still tangled inextricably with the mysterious lineage that was the Malfoy family.

"In the end, I betrayed him, and Lucius paid the price. And Draco, obliquely."

"Draco?" Harry asked, struck with sudden fear that Voldemort had visited the same curse upon Draco, the wasting illness that had taken out Lucius Malfoy in less than two weeks' time, stymieing all efforts to

heal him.

“They never reconciled, Lucius and Draco. By the time we realized it was fatal, Lucius could no longer communicate. Draco believed… he still believes, that Lucius despised his choices. In truth, Lucius was very proud of him.” A tear trickled down her cheek and Narcissa lifted a hand to brush it away with a wan smile. “But coming from a mother, those words mean little to a boy desperate for approval. Draco needed to hear it from Lucius. And now he never will.”

She replaced Draco’s hand on the bed and rose to pour a glass of water from the chilled pitcher on the bedside stand. She took a drink and offered the pitcher to Harry, who shook his head.

“Unfortunately, Draco now seems far more willing to take up the Malfoy mantle and become the sort of person Lucius expected him to be. It is almost as if his ghost holds more power over Draco than Lucius ever held in life.”

“His… his ghost?” Harry asked, horrified.

Narcissa laughed, an odd sound in the quiet room. It echoed slightly and she replaced the glass on the table before seating herself once more. “Not literally, of course. I only meant that Draco strongly feels the need to live up to his father’s standards, more so now than he had while Lucius lived. It is a pity, at times. I think it keeps him from being truly happy.”

“What would make him happy?” Harry asked, confused by her words. Was Malfoy not happy as an Auror? He mentally kicked himself at that. Of course Malfoy wasn’t happy; the entire department treated him as though he were some sort of blight.

Narcissa did not bother to answer.

A few moments later, Healer Corrigo returned to shoo them out, insisting that she would notify them the instant Draco awakened.

Harry bid Narcissa good evening, sent the other Aurors home, and returned to Grimmauld Place where he fixed a cold dinner and lay on the sofa, replaying the conversation in his head.

Saturday, December9th, 2006

Narcissa Malfoy opened the front door to admit Harry, but she allowed a house-elf to escort him to the mirrored hallway that marked Draco's rooms. Harry followed the bouncing creature, who sang tunelessly the entire way, seeming lost in her own world. She simply gestured to Malfoy's door and allowed Harry to open it before she hopped down the corridor and away.

The sitting room had changed since the last time Harry had seen it. A full-sized Christmas tree sat in one corner, twinkling merrily with fairy lights and gleaming with silver ornaments. The fireplace mantle was festooned with evergreen boughs and holly. Harry felt a pang when he thought of his barren living room at home. He vowed to purchase a tree and invite Ron and Hermione over to help him decorate.

He walked through the room and knocked on the door opposite Malfoy's office, swallowing his nervousness at the knowledge that he was about to enter Draco Malfoy's bedroom.

"Enter!" Malfoy called.

Harry pushed open the door to find Malfoy reclining in a gigantic bed, propped up by an obscene amount of pillows. Curtains surrounded the massive four-poster bed, but they had all been opened to admit light from the two floor-to-ceiling windows on either side of the bed. A selection of books had been stacked upon the bed and one of them sat open on Malfoy's lap.

"Potter. Have you come to rescue me from my mother's smothering?"

Harry grinned and walked closer. "Not really, but I have brought news."

Not surprisingly, much of the décor in the room was green, but it was a lovely, medium shade that was nothing like Slytherin green, and much of the fabric contained a subtle pattern that gave it a rich, touchable look. The blankets that surrounded Malfoy had a similar design, although the sheets were stark white. The holidays had not been forgotten here, either, and more greenery bedecked the fireplace mantle, interspersed with ornaments and white candles.

Malfoy himself, thankfully, wore what looked like a silk shirt or pyjamas in a pale blue colour. Harry's eyes were drawn to the bedside table where several vases rested, filled with flowers of various shapes and sizes. A bright balloon was attached to one vase; it bobbed with unfelt currents of air, and looked almost incongruously cheerful.

"Well wishes?" Harry asked and jerked his chin towards them.

"Yes. Astonishingly, I do have a few friends left," Malfoy said. Harry flushed, but Malfoy added, "Although some of them are a surprise. Apparently I have moved up in Clark's esteem. I should have saved his arse months ago."

Harry stepped forwards and picked up the indicated box of chocolates. A small card sat on top. Thank You was written in generic embossed script, but beneath the golden words was a handwritten message. Get well soon. Sincerely, Tim Clark

Harry smiled. "Impressive," he said. "But I have even more amazing news."

"More astonishing than Clark pulling his head out of his arse? I find that hard to believe."

Harry's grin widened. "Anders has given the go-ahead for your plan to trap the dementors."

Malfoy gaped at him, which was an amazing sight that Harry would not have missed for the world. He laughed aloud when Malfoy said, "You're lying."

Harry shook his head. “No. He really did. Most likely because you were injured in the line of duty, Clark gave a glowing recap to the press, and Anders obviously wants to milk the goodwill as long as possible. Here.” Harry tossed the Daily Prophet on the bed next to Malfoy.

“Have a seat,” Malfoy said absently and gestured at the edge of the bed as he picked up the paper.

Feeling extremely self-conscious, Harry sat down on the bed, trying to look casual, and most likely failing miserably. Luckily, Malfoy was already immersed in the article and paid Harry little mind.

“’Valiantly sacrificed?’” Malfoy read aloud and made a scoffing sound, but the splash of colour over his cheeks belied his mockery. He was pleased, and Harry was happy for him. “All I did was push the idiot out of the way of falling debris. It was a spur of the moment decision. And a stupid one.”

“Hmm, Tim didn’t think it was stupid. In fact, judging by these chocolates, you have a fan-boy for life. Why haven’t you eaten any of these?” Harry opened the box. The chocolates were all slightly different; they all looked elegant and expensive. Only one slot was empty.

“Pardon me for not trusting that prat Clark, who despised me two days ago. I fed one of those chocolates to a house-elf. So far, it’s still breathing, so I’m inclined to think Clark isn’t trying to poison me. Possibly. You’re welcome to be the next test subject.”

Harry decided it would be best not to bring up the ethics of using house-elves as poison testers. The sweets looked far too tempting to suspect, so Harry fished out an oval piece decorated with tiny white chocolate flowers that opened from buds to five-petalled blooms before melting and forming new buds. It was somewhat mesmerizing, but the scent was too tempting to resist. He took a bite.

“Merlin,” Harry said with a groan as the exquisite flavours flooded over his tongue. The citrusy taste of fresh lime mingled with the sweetness of the milk chocolate. He shut his eyes and savoured it, allowing the confection to melt completely before he swallowed. He opened his eyes to find Malfoy watching him with mouth slightly agape and one brow lifted. “You’re right, Malfoy. I think they’re poisoned. I should probably take these with me for proper testing.”

Malfoy snatched the box and stared into it before plucking out a dark chocolate semi-sphere, unadorned but for a curlicue of the same chocolate. Malfoy popped the entire thing into his mouth and then closed his eyes. Harry ate the rest of his own piece and tried in vain to drag his eyes away from Malfoy's face. He wondered what it would taste like to kiss Malfoy now, with the essences of both chocolates mingling.

Malfoy chewed and Harry watched his jaw and throat work. Harry swallowed his sweet with difficulty, feeling his throat going dry and wishing he had something with which to wash it down.

Malfoy's eyes snapped open and fixed on Harry, who suddenly wondered if Malfoy could read his thoughts (and didn't that idea make him want to brush up on Occlumency). "It's good," Malfoy said. "Clark is forgiven." With that, Malfoy tossed the box of chocolate-laden perfection atop the book pile next to him, out of Harry's reach. "Now, Potter, what exactly has Anders given us leave to do?"

Harry attacked the new subject, glad of something to fix his mind on other than the urge to taste Malfoy.

The issue, of course, lay in the fact that Malfoy's idea had been sketchy, at best. Using a large Muggle event to lure in the dementors was not much different than their current tactics of staking out such events and waiting, although Malfoy had suggested adding certain magical energies in order to entice the creatures, hoping to bring them all.

"The problem," said Malfoy, leaning forwards with a grimace in order to rub at his lower back. "The problem is that we have no idea what to do with them once we have them. Your beloved Patronus Charm does nothing but drive them away. Why lure them in only to scatter them again?"

"I know. We've been over this. I have the others looking for anything that might trap, or better yet, destroy them. Does it hurt a lot?" Harry made a motion towards Malfoy's injured back.

"They were created by magic. We should be able to destroy them with magic," Malfoy replied. "Yes, it hurts. There are potions for the pain, but they put me to sleep. I don't like taking them. Plus, they taste vile."

Harry nodded. It was on the tip of his tongue to offer to massage Malfoy's back, but the thought of doing so brought a rush of heat to his face. Harry knew he would never get through such an exercise with his sanity intact. He had barely come to terms with the fact that he was attracted to the prat. Handing that knowledge to Malfoy would be akin to emotional suicide.

"I detest being bedridden," Malfoy grumbled. His grey eyes sharpened and he looked at Harry speculatively. "Do you know anything about falcons, Potter?"

Harry blinked at him, wondering what had prompted the question. "A bit," Harry admitted.

"Good. Will you feed my birds? My mother did it yesterday, but she doesn't like them and... Well, the feeling is mutual."

Harry felt a moment of relief. Malfoy did not know about Harry's Animagus form; he was simply asking about his own falcons. "Yeah, of course."

Malfoy lay back against the pillows once more with a sigh and closed his eyes. "I would have you exercise them, but I'm not certain they will obey your commands. I should be well enough to take them out by Monday."

"I can come back and help, if you'd like," Harry offered.

Malfoy's eyes opened and fixed on Harry, who felt a ridiculous sense of happiness when Malfoy smiled. "I would like. And thank you."

Harry looked away and quickly changed the subject back to dementor eradication, but his pleasant feeling of shared camaraderie never quite left.

~*~*~*~*~

Harry became something of a fixture at the Malfoy residence over the next week. He made it a point to stop in after work in order to give Malfoy a recap of their progress (or lack thereof), and then go out to the broom shed and feed Malfoy's falcons. Harry had been granted access to their Floo and most of the time he did not even see a house-elf when he stepped from the fireplace and made his way to Malfoy's rooms.

By Sunday, Malfoy was up and hobbling around the room, even though his mother refused to let him leave the house. The broom shed was too far to walk, she had insisted, and the Healers had forbidden Malfoy to Apparate for two full weeks.

By Wednesday, however, Malfoy pronounced himself well enough to make his way past the gardens, collect a falcon, and send it winging over the meadow. Harry watched the bird fly in lazy circles and barely suppressed the urge to change and take wing. He mentally snorted at the thought of Malfoy's reaction. Likely he would accuse Harry of mocking his hobby, or worse. Harry still thought it was oddly coincidental that his Animagus form so closely mirrored Malfoy's choice of pet.

Malfoy strapped a leather gauntlet to Harry's forearm and then said, "Let's see if Ayah will come to you."

Harry obediently lifted his arm at Malfoy's signal and watched as the falcon soared in at a high rate of speed, only to rear back and flap furiously before her talons latched onto the protective leather. Harry grinned at Malfoy in delight. Malfoy shook his head, but returned the smile.

"The past few days of feedings must have made an impression on her. She seems to like you, now."

Harry gave the bird a strip of raw meat and stroked the feathers of her breast as she gulped it down. She was a gorgeous specimen, although slightly terrifying. Malfoy attached her hood with a spell and she stopped looking at Harry as though she considered pecking his eyes out.

They spent a pleasant afternoon exercising Malfoy's birds. Harry had sent the rest of the team out on fact-finding missions and headed for the Manor early, ostensibly to discuss a theory with Malfoy, except

that he had not actually brought up anything work-related since arriving. Harry had recently found himself simply enjoying Malfoy's presence, and the disturbing quality of the idea was beginning to erode into friendly familiarity.

The shadows were lengthening and the thickening clouds threatened rain when Malfoy finally locked away Gavin and cocked a pale brow at Harry. "Are you staying for dinner, then?"

"Was that an invitation or sarcasm?"

"An invitation, Potter. Would you prefer it delivered by owl on embossed parchment?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "If your mouth is any indication, you are healing rapidly."

"Was that acceptance or sarcasm?" Malfoy locked the door and they started down the well-used gravel path.

"It was acceptance, prat. I hope your mother doesn't—" Harry's words were cut off when Malfoy stumbled into him, nearly knocking them both over before Harry's got a grip on Malfoy's shoulders and braced his feet to stabilise them. "Oi, are you all right?"

"Cramp," Malfoy said with a grimace. His fingers dug into Harry's upper arms and most of his weight leaned upon Harry. "In my back. Salus said I would feel them now and again."

"Hold on, let's... Can you make it to that bench?" Without waiting for a reply, Harry half-dragged Malfoy to a wooden bench that sat beneath the barren branches of a weeping birch tree. Malfoy sank down gratefully, but his face was pale and he relinquished his hold on Harry only to grip the back of the bench with a shaking hand.

Harry sat down next to him and then pushed him partially away. Malfoy wore a thick wool cloak and Harry lifted the material to expose the lower region of Malfoy's back, covered in cashmere that

overlapped the edges of Malfoy's dark trousers.

"Here, let me..." Harry pressed his fingers tentatively into the tense muscles just above Malfoy's waistband. "Will this help at all?"

"I think... maybe. A little farther to the left."

Harry moved his fingers and carefully massaged the area, using Malfoy's groans and grunts as a guide. After a few minutes, he noticed his left hand was curled around Malfoy's hipbone, holding him in place while his right hand stroked carefully up and down Malfoy's back in a rhythmic pattern. Harry's throat went dry at the intimacy. “How is... um. How is this?" he asked, trying to rein in his suddenly awakening libido. For pity's sake, he reminded himself. He was performing a charitable act, not trying to seduce Malfoy.

Malfoy made another sound that went straight to Harry's cock, despite his stern internal pep-talk. "Good," Malfoy said. "It's good. You have nice hands." The unexpected compliment halted Harry's movements. Malfoy glanced back over his shoulder and their eyes met. Something seemed to pass between them, something that made it suddenly hard for Harry to breathe, and he snatched his hands away in a panicked over-reaction.

Malfoy straightened. "Thank you," he said and got to his feet abruptly. "We should go in."

Harry stood, feeling awkward and wishing he could say something, but his tongue seemed frozen. What would he say, anyway? I know you think I'm an idiot, but I'm disturbingly attracted to you? That would go over well, Harry was certain.

Friday, December 15, 2006

Malfoy made it back to work, mainly because he had been coerced by Harry into attending even though it was a single day before the weekend, and also the day before the Ministry Holiday Gala. To Malfoy’s shock, and possible horror, Tim Clark had decorated his tiny office with a Welcome Back! theme.

Colourful streamers, balloons, and confetti-bearing bubbles wafted about the room.

“I am not going in there,” Malfoy said adamantly upon opening the door.

Harry laughed. “Oh, yes, you are.”

Malfoy shook his head, but before he could protest again the matter was taken out of his hands. A small crowd pushed him from the corridor and into the decorated space. Vic ushered Malfoy to his chair while Tim beamed and Levitated a tray of champagne-filled glasses onto the desk. Rocco looked almost pleased and smirked while sprawling into the only guest chair.

“There is a bit of orange juice in here,” Tim commented as he passed out glasses. “So it qualifies as breakfast. Welcome back, Draco.”

Malfoy glared at Harry, as if the entire event was his fault, but he took the glass Tim held out to him with a smile that looked more like a grimace. “Thank you. This really wasn’t necessary.”

“Yes, it was. You’re part of the team and we… well, mostly I, have been arses and… Well, it’s time we made it up to you. Three cheers for Draco!” Tim lifted his glass and cried, “Hip hip hoorah!”

The other picked up the cry, including Harry, who could not resist smirking at the mortified look on Malfoy’s face when they all repeated the shout.

They all drank and then Malfoy got to his feet and picked up his own drink. Silence reigned for a moment and then Malfoy said, “I could kill you all.” Harry cringed and wondered if the others would take him seriously, but then Malfoy grinned and added, “But thank you.”

Tim actually rounded the desk and clapped Malfoy on the shoulder as the others laughed. Several passers-by paused to stare inside curiously. Brady invited them in for a drink and soon Malfoy’s tiny office was full to bursting with well-wishers. Most of them had doubtless been drawn in by the promise

of alcohol, but at least it was a start.

Harry moved into a corner and sipped at his drink while watching the festivities. The others had surrounded Malfoy and most of the room began arguing Quidditch strategy. Tim Clark's hand rested protectively on Malfoy's shoulder. Malfoy's eyes lifted and met Harry's; amusement sparkled between them before a newcomer shoved his way forwards and welcomed Malfoy back in a way that seemed almost sincere. Vic began the tale of Malfoy's wounding anew.

My team, Harry thought proudly.

Saturday, December 16, 2006

Harry tugged at his tie for the fifteenth time and wished he knew a spell to keep the bloody thing from flopping sideways. Whose bright idea had it been for him to wear a bow tie, anyway? Oh yes, Hermione's. He shot her a glare from across the room, but she was in a discussion with Kingsley that involved much arm-flailing and drink waving (and probably featured house-elves or goblins) and did not notice him. Harry quickly looked away before Ron caught his eye. Harry did not want to be blamed for aiding and abetting in Ron's escape.

Harry turned away and saw a gleam of silver-blond hair. His heart leapt into his throat before he realized it belonged to the wife of someone in Magical Games and Sports. Harry grabbed a drink from a nearby floating tray and told himself he was not disappointed. He wasn't disappointed at all, and yet, where was Malfoy? He had promised he would come.

"Looking for someone?" a familiar voice asked. Harry turned to smile at Vic, but found himself gaping at her instead. She was clad in a skin-hugging red dress that sparkled when she moved and showed off attributes Harry wouldn't have guessed at. She laughed at him. "Why, thank you, Harry. I haven't made anyone speechless in quite some time, although I doubt it will work on Brady. He is ridiculously oblivious."

"That seems to be a common condition," Harry muttered.

“You, too, eh?” she asked. She took a glass from a tray and held it towards Harry. “To clarity,” she said.

Harry laughed at the strange toast. “To clarity!” he echoed and clinked his glass against hers. They drank together and then Harry nearly choked on his drink because another head of blond hair caught his eye and this time it was directly above a pair of smirking grey eyes.

Harry lowered his glass and prepared to smile, until his gaze was drawn to the woman at Malfoy’s side. She looked elegant and polished and every inch an excellent match for Malfoy. The drink Harry had consumed suddenly tasted like dust.

“I see Malfoy made it,” Vic said.

“Do you know that woman with him?” Harry asked, hoping she didn’t notice the odd sound of his voice.

“That’s Astoria Greengrass. Really, Harry, you should come to these things more often. Astoria is the prized pony of the Greengrass stable. Her sister Daphne is rather plain. She’ll have trouble snaring a proper pure-blood husband, but Astoria…. Well, you can see for yourself.”

Harry did, all the while wishing she were anywhere other than hanging on Draco Malfoy’s arm. He barely had time to plaster a smile on his face before she and Malfoy were in front of him.

“Harry Potter,” Astoria said smoothly and held out a delicate hand. She smiled, but it seemed about as genuine as Harry’s, all teeth and little warmth. Her eyes were pale blue, like shards of ice. “How lovely to finally meet you. I have heard so much about you. Honestly, Draco hardly speaks of anything else.”

Harry took her hand, to find it warm and limp, like a damp washcloth. He wasn’t sure whether he was supposed to shake it or kiss it. He glanced at Malfoy, to find the man smirking at him. The familiar expression steadied Harry’s nerves.

“Oh, really?” Harry asked and allowed his smile to become warm and genuine. Malfoy looked stunning.

He was dressed in black, his expensive-looking robes buttoned up tightly, a beautiful package to contain the explosive passion Harry suspected lurked within. The sudden need to unbutton him was nearly overwhelming.

“Are you all right, Potter?” Malfoy asked in an amused tone. The unrelenting black of his outfit was broken only by a white lace cravat at his throat, set off with a single diamond brooch that sparkled with each bit of light that hit it.

“I’m fine,” Harry replied, thinking that Draco’s eyes sparkled more than the diamond.

“Then why are you still holding Astoria’s hand?”

“Oh!” Harry’s attention snapped back to the woman and he released her hand as if burned. “I’m terribly sorry. I’m pants at this etiquette business.” He winced at his own words. “See what I mean?”

Her smile became even more brittle and her eyes flashed. Harry barely noticed, because Malfoy laughed and the sound washed over him, warm and heady. Harry nearly winced at the sensation and the sinking feeling that followed. Malfoy was here with his lovely, socially-suitable pinnacle of pure-blooded culture, class, and elegance, and Harry was utterly, utterly fucked.

“Very amusing, Mr Potter,” Astoria said in a tone that was anything but.

“I need another drink,” Harry muttered. Vic obligingly took one from a passing tray and handed it to him. He gulped it gratefully and tried not to spill any on himself.

“You look ravishing tonight, Victoria,” Malfoy said. “Where is your fortunate date?”

Vic snorted. “You are an insincere charmer, Malfoy, but thank you. Brady couldn’t be arsed to escort me, so I’m meeting him here. I’ll most likely find him under the mistletoe with some floozy.”

“There’s mistletoe?” Harry asked, glancing around warily. The event was held every year at a different location. This year the Ministry had utilized a mansion belonging to a former Wizengamot member. She had died without issue and left the place to some foundation that wanted Ministry backing. Harry couldn’t quite recall their agenda—something about the fabric trade. Hermione had grilled him on it, but her job was magical rules and regulations; politics bored Harry witless

Regardless, the place was enormous and beautiful.

Malfoy chuckled again. “Hoping to get kissed, Potter? I assume you came with the Weas—with Ginevra?”

Harry nodded and nudged his chin towards Ginny, who seemed quite friendly with Michael Corner. He no longer wondered why the sight of them together didn’t bother him. Malfoy followed his gaze and then looked back with one eyebrow lifted. Harry grimaced, not wanting to see the questions there. His relationship with Ginny, or lack thereof, was not a topic for discussion, especially in the company of Astoria Greengrass, who had already wrapped her perfect nails around Malfoy’s arm and was tugging at him.

“Oh, there is the Minister. Do let us go and say good evening, Draco.”

Without a word to Vic and only a disdainful glance at Harry, Astoria pulled Malfoy away. Harry’s hand shot out to grip his other arm and he impulsively leaned close, trying not to breathe in Malfoy’s scent as he spoke. “I’m glad you could make it,” Harry murmured. His attempt at being suave was ruined when Vic bumped into him from behind, knocking him face first into Malfoy’s neck. Harry’s lips dragged over Malfoy’s skin and the mingled odours of his cologne, shampoo, and soap assailed Harry’s senses with the force of a bludgeon. His hand tightened on Malfoy’s arm as he righted himself.

“Brady, you arse, are you drunk already?” he heard Vic ask, and then his eyes locked with Malfoy’s.

“Thank you,” Malfoy returned and then he was gone, the tug-of-war going to Astoria as Harry loosed his hold and let him go.

Harry downed two more drinks on his way to Ginny. She frowned at him admonishingly. “Harry, if you keep that up you won’t make it home.”

“Someone will make sure I get home,” Harry replied, trying not to sound bitter when he realized the only person he wanted to see him home was not on that list of someones.

“Yes, probably me or Hermione,” she said dryly. “Have you… seen anyone interesting?”

He managed not to look over at Malfoy, who was chatting with Kingsley whilst Astoria laughed too-loudly at something. Despite her beauty, she had a harsh laugh that sounded forced. Harry wrinkled his nose.

“Not really.”

Ginny sighed. “Time is ticking, Harry.”

He scowled at her. “I know!”

She rolled her eyes and looked at Michael, who was obviously confused by their strange conversation. “Harry has a few more months to find and fall in love with someone else, otherwise we’re getting back together,” she explained.

Michael blinked at her. “But… you are together.”

She shook her head. “Not really. I could probably go home with you tonight and Harry wouldn’t bat an eye, would you, Harry?”

“That’s not fair, Gin,” Harry said, still scowling, but he knew she was right. The thought of Ginny kissing

Michael Corner, even sleeping with him, left him feeling nothing but residual guilt, whereas the thought of Draco Malfoy cuddling up to that… woman… He shoved down a sickening feeling of panic and lifted his glass to his lips, only to find it empty.

Ginny moved closer and put her arm around his waist. “Hey! You’re right. It’s not fair of me to poke fun. I know you’ve been trying.” She leaned even closer and spoke in a low tone that only he could hear. “I do sort of like Michael, though. I wanted to see if you were going to get jealous if I spent some time with him. And, well, you obviously aren’t.”

Harry sighed and realized there wasn’t enough alcohol in the world for what ailed him. Why couldn’t he simply want Ginny? She was beautiful and smart and had the same interests. Everyone they knew fully supported their relationship. It would be so much easier to just… fake it.

He heard Malfoy’s laugh from across the room, and the sound of it seemed to cut through his soul. No, living with Ginny in a picture-perfect but utterly unsatisfying game of role-play would be cruel to both of them in the long run.

“I’m sorry,” he said sincerely.

She pulled away and nodded before smiling at him. “I just want you to be happy, Harry.”

“I know. I want that for you, too.”

“Um… I think I need a drink,” Michael said. Ginny looped her arm through his.

“Great idea. Let’s go and look at that fountain. I’m sure it contains some sort of liquor. Let’s test it out, shall we?” she said.

Michael looked uncertainly at Harry, who nodded at him encouragingly. As the couple walked away, Harry knew it was over forever between him and Ginny. She had mentioned Harry’s “time limit”, but

even if he hadn't found someone by the end of their agreed-upon deadline, he knew it was done. Harry wanted someone who made his blood pound at a mere touch, someone who made him feel alive just by being in the same room. He wanted Draco Malfoy.

A glance across the room made that seem a ridiculous impossibility. Astoria laughed and leaned close to Malfoy, swaying into him as though it were the most natural thing in the world. The silver gown she wore complimented her icy beauty and Malfoy's black robes. They looked amazing together.

Harry grabbed another drink, pushed his way through the crowd, and escaped to the garden, hoping the cold night air would ease the ache in his chest.

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Malfoy found him there an hour later. Harry was amusing himself by plucking the petals from winter roses; he had accumulated quite a pile of them at his feet. He barely glanced up when Malfoy sat on the bench next to him.

"She loves you not?" Malfoy guessed as the next petal fell from Harry's fingers.

"Just the opposite, I think."

"Really? She seems pretty cosy with Michael Corner in there." Malfoy's tone was guarded, as if he were reluctant to begin an argument.

Harry snorted. "That's not her fault; it's mine."

Malfoy said nothing to that and Harry plucked petals until he held another barren stem. He dropped it. "Your glass is empty," Malfoy commented finally.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. It had been empty for some time, but he hadn’t felt like braving the bright room—and Astoria Greengrass—in order to collect a refill. His time in the cold air had sobered him somewhat, but seemed to have increased his bleak attitude. He should probably have gone home.

“Want some of mine?” Malfoy asked and handed over a tumbler half-full of something dark that might have been amber-coloured. It was difficult to tell in the muted light from the fairy lights in the trees overhead. Harry accepted the glass.

He took a drink, trying not to think about Malfoy’s mouth occupying the same spot on the rim, and failed; the burn of the alcohol was nothing next to the heat of his own disgust. He gave back the glass. “Astoria Greengrass, eh?” Harry asked and then thought wondered about a spell that would extract one’s own tongue.

Malfoy made a noncommittal sound and took a drink of the Firewhisky. “My father would approve, don’t you think?”

Harry’s jaw tightened. “No doubt.”

“But you don’t?”

“I’m sure my opinion counts as next to nothing with you.”

“Then you would be wrong.”

Harry turned to stare at Malfoy, shocked. “What?”

“You don’t like Astoria, do you?”

“I… I don’t even know her.”

“You don’t have to know someone to dislike them. Tell me why.”

Harry was baffled by the conversation. What possible reason could Malfoy have for seeking Harry’s opinion of his date, or girlfriend, or whatever she was? Still, Malfoy had asked, and Harry was just drunk enough not to ponder the consequences for long.

“Fine. She seems mean, and self-absorbed, and fake. She has about as much genuine warmth as that diamond you’re wearing, and when she smiles it never reaches her eyes. She has an agenda that can be spotted a mile away and if she cared at all for another human being I would be astonished to see it.” Harry clamped his jaw shut with effort and looked away. He kicked at the pile of rose petals at his feet, scattering them. “Sorry. Maybe you shouldn’t have asked.”

Malfoy made a humming noise and took another drink.

"Are you going to marry her?" Harry asked and then made a stern mental note to bring some Ton-Tongue Toffee next time he planned to be near Malfoy so that he couldn’t speak.

"I don't know," Malfoy replied and leaned forwards until his elbows rested on his knees. The glass dangled from his long fingers. "I should."

"You should?" Harry echoed.

"Yes. I have certain obligations. As a Malfoy."

Only the bitterness in his tone kept Harry from making a scathing retort. In a rush, Narcissa Malfoy's words came back to Harry. Draco strongly feels the need to live up to his father’s standards, more so now than he had while Lucius lived. It is a pity, at times. I think it keeps him from being truly happy. His father's standards. The truth settled over Harry like a blanket, warming him far more than the Charm

he'd cast earlier. Draco did not want Astoria.

"You don't like her, either," Harry said flatly.

"Of course I don't like her. That isn't the point."

"What is the point, then? Your obligations as a Malfoy? Are you referring to the obligation to marry a woman you dislike? The obligation to parade around like the perfect couple when everyone knows it’s a farce? The obligation to produce even more Malfoys to be as bloody miserable as the rest of you?" Oh fuck. Shut up, Harry. Shut up, shut up.

Malfoy sat up stiffly and glared at him.

"Fuck you, Potter. What do you know about it?"

Harry opened his mouth to apologize, but sharp footsteps forestalled his comment.

"There you are, Draco. Why are you sitting out here in the dark? I've been looking for you everywhere." Astoria's words were light enough, but the annoyance beneath them was palpable. Malfoy might have been sitting alone on the bench for all the attention she paid Harry.

"Just having a difference of opinion with Potter," Malfoy said and got to his feet. Harry longed to reach out and hold him in place, to try and explain. He felt near-panicked at the thought he had lost the camaraderie they had so recently gained. Having Malfoy as a friend was so much better than having him as an enemy. Harry would just have to get past this foolish crush and let Malfoy live his life as he chose.

"Draco, wait," Harry said and stood up as Malfoy moved to join Astoria.

Malfoy paused, visibly startled at the name, but did not turn to face Harry.

"I'm sorry. It's not my place to approve or disapprove. You have to do what you feel is best. I just... I care about you." The words spilled out in a rush. Malfoy did turn then, and blinked at him through wide eyes. Harry felt a momentary sense of relief at having said it, especially when Astoria's face twisted.

Malfoy's hard stare softened and a brief smile curved his lips. "Thank you, Potter. I will see you at work on Monday. Goodnight."

Astoria plastered herself to Malfoy's side and they walked away. Harry watched with a sinking feeling as he replayed Malfoy's words. At work on Monday. The words, while friendly enough, had effectively banned Harry from going to the Manor, as had been his recent habit.

Harry was not forgiven.

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Harry did not even bother to say goodbye to Hermione and Ron, which he knew would earn him some harsh words later. He simply Apparated home, took off his uncomfortable dress robes, and sprawled on his sofa in nothing but his pants. He mulled the conversation with Malfoy over and over in his head, and always came back to the conclusion that he should have kept his bloody mouth shut.

Monday seemed a long time away.

Harry stared at the ceiling for a long while and debated getting up to fix himself a drink, even though his stomach rebelled at the idea, apparently deciding he'd had enough.

He pushed away thoughts of his heated conversation with Malfoy and instead remembered how Malfoy had looked, so elegant and at ease in surroundings that had made Harry want to crawl out of his own skin to escape. They were so different, the two of them. Like night and day. Malfoy was better off with

his ice maiden. They were from the same world.

Although, Harry decided, Malfoy Manor was part of Draco's world and it wasn't so bad. In fact, it had grown on Harry now that he'd spent some time there. He liked the long chestnut-wood hallway on the third floor, and the marble sink, floor and columns in the bathroom nearest the dining room. And Draco's rooms were quite nice, even his strange water-reminiscent office.

Harry groaned and sat up, realizing he was not going to stop thinking about Draco—Malfoy. Oh hell, he might as well give up the fight and let him be Draco. It was getting harder and harder to think of him in less than familiar terms.

Harry decided to go to bed, but once in his room he noticed the window was open a crack. Permanent Heating Charms kept the room from getting cold, so he frequently opened the window to admit fresh night air and then forgot to shut it again.

A scattering of stars caught his eye as he moved to close the window and he was seized with a sudden desire to fly. He debated less than half a second before he Disapparated, changing into his Animagus form the moment his feet touched the ground. A vigorous flapping of wings took him across the Malfoy estate until he saw the familiar form of the broom shed.

Light spilled out from the open door and he realized someone was inside. Probably Narcissa, since Draco was likely still at the party. Harry flew down to investigate, and landed inside the circle of light. Draco was just closing the gate on one of the cages. Harry's movement must have caught his eye, for he turned and stared at him for a moment. Harry considered taking wing, but he was frozen in place at the sight.

Draco was shirtless.

Harry had never fully appreciated the acuity of his falcon-vision before. He had enjoyed being able to see without the benefit of spectacles, but this was something else. He could see every tiny nuance of Draco's skin, from the nearly-invisible hair on his arms to three tiny, almost-healed scratches on his wrist. A faint white line began near one shoulder and crossed his chest in a diagonal, ending on his abdomen. Harry should not have felt human emotions in his falcon form, but he did; he was no falcon, but a human being

in a feathered body.

“Came back, did you? Well, let’s see, then. Did your previous master train you before your escape?” Draco lifted his arm, offering Harry a perch if he were brave enough to take it.

Harry thought the alcohol had departed his system when he’d changed, but perhaps not, since he impulsively took wing and landed lightly upon Draco’s forearm. Draco wore no protective leather, so Harry was careful not to dig his talons in, although he had to flap his wings a bit to keep his balance.

Draco reached up to carefully stroke his breast. “Well, well,” he said. “Aren’t you the brave one? Pretty Eroe.”

Harry steadied himself and found that Draco was even more interesting up close. His eyelashes weren’t blond, but a curious mixture of pale and dark gold, and the irises of his eyes were flecked with darker specks that Harry had never noticed before. The arm that rose before him bore the remains of a Dark Mark, the ugly lines faded to charcoal, but a still-stark reminder of harsher times.

Draco’s breath reeked of alcohol, however, and he seemed unsteady, swaying in place.

In a swift movement that made Harry emit a startled squawk, Draco shifted Harry so that his wings were trapped beneath Draco’s arm, clutched tightly against his ribcage. A leather hood was quickly tugged over Harry’s head, blinding him. The human side of him felt instantly alarmed while the falcon portion went docile. It was a curious internal battle.

“I can’t leave you out here, Eroe,” Draco said. “I’ve no spare mews and if I put you in with one of the others, they’ll likely tear you to pieces. I’ll decide what to do with you in the morning.”

Harry heard Draco cast the spells to shut off the lights and lock the door, and then the crunching of his footsteps on the path. He staggered a time or two, making Harry’s heart race while he waited for them both to crash to the ground. Draco recovered both times, however, and marched onward. Harry knew the way, so it was with no surprise that he heard the door to Draco’s chambers open and close.

Harry was carefully lifted and his feet dragged over something wooden until he instinctively opened his claws. He clung to the unseen perch, feeling unsteady in the darkness. Draco released his wings and he flapped to maintain his balance.

"Good, Eroe," Draco said. "You just stay right there until morning. I'll be right over here wondering why Harry Potter's disapproval makes me want to smash things." His voice receded a bit and Harry heard him add, "Quietly smash things. In the morning."

Then Harry heard nothing more, so he set about removing the hood from his head. Luckily, Draco had not pulled the lacings tight, so repeated rubbing of Harry's head against his wings helped to dislodge it. He tried to use his talons once and nearly toppled off the perch.

After Harry suppressed many curses for fear they would come out as piercing falcon shrieks, the hood finally parted ways with Harry's head. Never had he so appreciated having hands.

He blinked into the darkened room and his night-vision quickly adjusted to the meagre light falling through the open curtains. Draco was sprawled across his bed, still half-clothed and apparently asleep, or unconscious. Harry flew over cautiously and landed on the bed near Draco's head, ready to fly if he moved. Draco was still, however, and his breathing was slow and even. Harry breathed a sigh of relief as he changed back into his human form.

As the bed shifted beneath his increased weight, Harry remembered he had on nothing but pants. He shook his head at the irony. Here he was, nearly naked in Draco Malfoy's bed, and Draco was fast asleep—or passed out in a drunken slumber.

About to take his leave, Harry paused to admire Draco through more human eyes.

Draco's bare back was smooth and unmarked, curving down to the amazing perfection of his buttocks that Harry had admired on more than a few recent occasions. Draco's legs were still encased in the trousers he had worn beneath his dress robes and his feet... were clad in shoes.

Harry bit his lip. It seemed wrong, somehow, to let Draco sleep with shoes on. Bad enough he was sprawled over his bed and would likely awaken stiff and chilled in the morning. But to sleep with shoes on… Harry grimaced. Ever since his days of Horcrux hunting and being forced to sleep fully clothed, shod, and ready to run, he had hated to sleep in anything more constricting than pants. Even socks left him feeling stifled.

Feeling magnanimous, Harry sighed and walked around the bed to carefully ease the shoes from Draco's feet, thankful that they were wizard-style ankle boots with no laces. It took a few more minutes of gnawing his lip with indecision before he reached beneath the trouser legs and tugged off Draco's socks, as well.

Feeling pleased with himself, Harry turned to go, but a sleepy voice stopped him in his tracks. "Harry?"

He turned back, heart in his throat, but Draco wasn't looking at him. He hadn't seemed to have moved at all.

"'M cold," Draco said and curled into himself, drawing his knees up towards his chest. Harry ached at the sight, something in him humbled at the vision of Draco Malfoy, tough-as-nails Auror, looking small and vulnerable.

A soft-looking blanket was folded atop the wooden chest at the foot of the bed, so Harry snatched it up and shook it out. He draped it carefully over Draco, who made a muted sound of approval. Harry was about to escape again when he saw that Draco's eyes were open and watching him. To Harry's amazement, Draco's lips curved in a smile.

"I'm dreaming again," Draco murmured.

Relief was like warm water running through Harry's veins, thawing his frozen blood. He nodded in swift agreement and leaned over Draco to tug the blanket over one pale shoulder. "You're dreaming," he agreed in a whisper.

He began to move away, hoping to escape before Draco shook off his fog and realized he wasn't dreaming, but Draco's hand reached out and snatched Harry's wrist. Harry looked back at him.

"Where is my kiss?" Draco asked, sounding perfectly lucid. He pulled Harry's wrist, bringing him inexorably closer.

"K… kiss?" Harry asked, flushing as he realized Draco was obviously awake and having him on.

"Of course," Draco replied, sounding slightly petulant. His eyes fluttered shut and Harry was suddenly confused. If Draco was having him on, what was his purpose? Even though Harry's thoughts were tangled, he followed Draco's inexorable pull, placing one knee on the bed and bracing himself with his free hand.

Draco tipped his face up, eyes still closed, obviously waiting for Harry's kiss. Drawing one last shaking breath, Harry shut his eyes and pressed his lips to Draco's. It wasn't much, as kisses went, just a touch of lips to lips, and alcohol-scented breath mingling for long, heart-stopping moments.

Harry pulled away; his eyes snapped open and trepidation returned full-force as he awaited Draco's response. He did not expect Draco's head to drop back to the bed, eyes still shuttered and lips bearing a gentle smile. The hand gripping Harry's wrist relaxed and fell away.

"'Night," Draco mumbled.

Harry blinked for a moment and then scrambled away from the bed. "Goodnight, Draco," he said softly. He strode to the door and paused only once to look back. Draco hadn't moved. Harry opened the door and fled.

Monday, December 18, 2006

Harry was testy and out-of-sorts when he arrived at the Ministry. He ranted for ten minutes about the sugar some inconsiderate lout had spilled all over the countertop and not bothered to clean up. Ron sipped his tea and watched him with one eyebrow lifted, saying nothing. The expression was just Draco Malfoy-ish enough to earn Ron a venomous glare.

The Sunday edition of the Daily Prophet had sent Harry into a rage of cleaning; he had tackled one of the seldom-used bedrooms of Grimmauld Place, Vanishing dust and mouldering fabric with snarled spell as he tried to Vanish the headlines from his own mind. No Love for Harry Potter? The author, while not Rita Skeeter, had clearly taken a page from her book while highlighting photo after photo of Ginny laughing in the company of Michael Corner, and several of Harry standing alone with his drink, looking bleak and lonely.

“It’s just the Prophet,” Ron said. “You know how they are.”

Harry sighed heavily. “Yeah. Bloody hell, is it really too much to ask that someone restock the fucking milk? It’s Monday morning, for god’s sake.”

“I think I’m going to… go,” Ron said carefully. “Come and grab me for lunch if you…” He fled, leaving the rest of the sentence dangling. Harry watched him leave and filled in the blanks. He would stop acting like a prat if he could, but he hadn’t slept well for the past two nights. Draco filled every moment of his thoughts, even when Harry tried to concentrate on other things. Any and all other things.

It was the kiss. He kept tracking over and over it, unable to fathom why a “dreaming” Draco would ask for a kiss from him as though it were the most natural thing in the world. No matter how many logical arguments Harry tried to dredge up, they all came back to the same thing. Draco had been half-asleep and entirely drunk. He hadn’t been in his right mind. Even worse, he hadn’t remembered it; or if he had, he certainly had not bothered to inform Harry of the fact. Harry had spent all of Sunday vainly hoping for an owl, or even an angry Draco to burst through the Floo demanding to know what Harry had been doing at Malfoy Manor in the middle of the night.

Finally accepting that he’d wasted entirely too much time in the break room, Harry made his way towards his office, only to be waylaid by a flying memo from Kingsley requesting his presence in the Minister’s office. He took the stairs to avoid the inevitable stares and whispers from people in the lift,

and made a mental note to stop by the staff Healer's office for a headache potion.

To his surprise, Head Auror Anders and Chief Unspeakable Croaker were in attendance. Croaker looked smugly cheerful, as always, and Anders glared daggers at the man.

"Come in, Auror Potter," Kingsley said. He cast a spell to activate the Secrecy Charms draped around the office, standard procedure when discussing a case. "We have been going over your recommendations and have decided your idea bears merit, however, the standard Auror procedures won't be enough in this case." Kingsley held up a hand to forestall Anders' retort. "Therefore, I've brought in Unspeakable Croaker, who has given us some suggestions on how to trap the dementors."

Croaker smiled lazily and nodded at Harry. There was something about the man that made Harry uncomfortable, although he felt that way about all the Unspeakables, which was exactly what they intended, he assumed.

"Quite right, Auror Potter. We've been working on a spell that will, in theory, contain intangible—and near intangible—creatures."

"In theory," Anders muttered with a sardonic sneer.

"Well, yes, we haven't been able to get our hands on an actual dementor to test it, of course. But it works nicely on ghosts, spectres, and a rare Welsh Wraith we were lucky to track down."

"How does it work?" Harry asked and then spent the next hour listening as Croaker explained far more magical theory than Harry wanted to know. The important bit was that it was a spell and Croaker would send an Unspeakable to teach his team how to cast it. Kingsley had his secretary draft messages to the other members of Harry's team and then dismissed them all.

Harry found himself walking next to Anders as they headed for the lifts. "Keep an eye on that Unspeakable," Anders muttered, still casting suspicious glares at Croaker, who walked blithely ahead of them with robes fluttering in his wake. "I don't trust him or anyone on his bloody team."

Harry solemnly promised to do so and then abandoned Anders for the stairs and a quick trip to the Healer for his exponentially worse headache. It lessened to more bearable levels as he hurried to the indicated training room where the others had already gathered. Harry nodded at them collectively and only allowed his gaze to skim over Draco before he emitted a forced, “Good morning.”

“Good morning, Auror Potter,” they all chimed in unison, intentionally sounding like a pack of schoolchildren. Harry resisted rolling his eyes.

“It’s good to have you back with us, Auror Malfoy, although we do have direct orders from St Mungo’s that you’re not to be flying nor Apparating this week. Do not, however, think that excuses you from field duty.”

To Harry’s annoyance, Draco had leaned towards Victoria and was murmuring to her. Only the snide tone reached Harry’s ears. Harry felt heat rising beneath his collar and he pushed down the urge to tug at it. His thoughts exploded with horrified visions of Draco telling the others how he had tucked Draco in and then kissed him.

“Auror Malfoy,” Harry said sharply, “would you like to share with the class?” As soon as the words were out, Harry could have Crucioed himself. He certainly did NOT want Draco sharing Harry’s worst suspicions.

Vic grinned widely and Draco pointed at Harry with a single pinky. “Just wondering who dressed you this morning, Your Saviourship.”

Harry looked down at his robes and was both annoyed and relieved to find he had missed not one, but two of the pesky small buttons that adorned the front of his Auror Robes. He fastened them and bit back an irritated retort. “Your observational skills are noted, Auror Malfoy. Can we please get on with discussing some valid ideas for the location of our impending plot? If any of you can manage that?” He fixed his sternest glare on each of them in turn. Only Tim flushed and looked away. Draco’s smile vanished and he stared at Harry with uncomfortable intensity.

Harry fixed his attention on Rocco, who was performing stretching and limbering exercises, apparently sensing that they were about to get a workout. There was something to be said for experience.

“We think we have an event picked out,” Brady said. “Why are we in a training room?”

“We are about to be joined by an Unspeakable, who is going to teach us a new Entrapment Charm. Kingsley has decided we need more interdepartmental cooperation.”

Vic laughed. “I’ll bet Anders loved that.”

The door opened to admit a slight figure with a shock of pure white hair peeking out from beneath the hood of her Unspeakable robes. “Hello, I am Unspeakable Salt. Shall we begin?”

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The spell was difficult to cast and even harder to master. They spent the entire day at it, breaking only twice, once to snatch a quick lunch in the canteen and once for a loo-break.

Vic picked it up faster than the others, and spent the rest of the time helping teach. Unspeakable Salt seemed made of patience; she went over the spell and explained the dynamics and theory behind it more times than Harry could count.

By the time they all felt confident enough to cast the bloody thing in the heat of battle, it was nearing dinnertime and they were exhausted. Harry sprawled on the hard floor, panting, and watched as Tim held a bottle in one hand and waved his wand through the tricky motions. They were using a Will O’ Wisp as the “creature” and the poor thing had been bottled so many times it’s floating bob was beginning to look erratic.

“Contineo Laquea!” Tim yelled and the Wisp popped back into the bottle. Tim shoved the cap in with a

flourish.

“Excellent. I believe we are done here. Goodnight, Aurors.” Salt gave them all a cursory bow and flitted out. She hadn’t cracked a smile the entire time she’d been teaching, even when Brady’s wisecracks had the others rolling with laughter.

“Pleasant woman,” Harry commented.

“Unpeakables,” Vic said and snorted. “They’re even more egocentric than you, Malfoy.”

“Hard to believe,” Draco said smoothly. He and the others had developed a slightly-stilted camaraderie that had grown during the course of the training session and now it seemed almost as if the others had never ostracized Draco. Harry was now the only one keeping him at arms’ length, although he hoped it hadn’t been noticed that he had intentionally manoeuvred himself to stay as far from Draco as possible.

“I’m heading home,” said Rocco. “Been a bloody long day and tomorrow will be more of the same.”

Tim groaned. “More? But we’ve got the spell down now.”

“I want you to be able to cast it in your sleep, Auror Clark,” Harry said.

“I probably will tonight,” Tim muttered, but he followed Rocco out. Brady and Vic bid the others goodnight and went out. Harry sprang to his feet when he noticed he was the only one left in the room, except for Draco.

“Well, goodnight, Malfoy,” he said quickly and headed for the door.

He didn’t hear Draco move, but suddenly fingers latched onto his wrist. “Potter—Harry, wait.”

Harry turned and blinked at him, shocked at hearing his name for the second time in as many days. His mind immediately returned to the first time he'd heard it and his eyes dropped to Draco's lips. He suddenly seemed entirely too close, encroaching on Harry's space and filling his senses. The fingers on his wrist were too warm, his scent was too tantalizing, and his eyes were sincere pools boring into Harry's soul.

"I want to know—" Draco started and then the door opened.

Brady strolled in and stopped short with a surprised look at them. Draco's hand fell away immediately.

"Forgot my mug," Brady said and gestured at the Aurors Like it Hot! cup that sat next to the wall in one corner. His stare shifted away and he went to pick it up.

"Yes, well, goodnight," Draco said and went out before Harry could think of a way to stop him. Harry wanted to tear at his hair in frustration.

"Everything okay with you and Malfoy?" Brady asked, mug in hand.

"Yeah," Harry said and forced a smile. "Everything's great."

Everything was just fucking great.

Saturday, December 23, 2006

Harry flew carefully, surveying the ground far below and keeping an eye on Draco, who rode his broom nearby, visible even through his Disillusionment Charm thanks to the medallions Unspeakable Salt had given them the day before. Anders had pitched a hissy fit over that particular revelation, storming into Kingsley's office and demanding to know "when the Department of Mysteries had been given

authorization to counter standard Auror spells and undermine the necessity of teaching such spells". Harry had never seen Anders so worked up. He did have a point, though. Harry wondered how many other spells the Unspeakables knew how to counter.

Draco motioned at Harry and then jerked his head. Harry nodded, slightly alarmed at the idea of splitting up, but there were no dementors yet. They hope to insure their presence by casting Cheering Charms on the crowd.

The event they had chosen was a Holiday Parade in Soho and the crowd was already lively. Christmas carols blared loudly from several marching bands, overlapping the chatter of the onlookers.

Harry flew lower and cast a few random Cheering Charms on assorted Muggles who looked less-than-pleased. They immediately pepped up and likely shocked a few of their companions with their sudden bursts of enthusiasm. Harry kept a close eye on Draco as he did the same on the other side of the street. He hadn't had another chance to work with Draco on his Patronus; when they weren't busy practicing the Entrapment Charm with Salt, they were doing paperwork or scouting the parade route. Twice they had been sent out on routine Auror calls. With the holidays, everyone was short staffed.

Harry had not been back to Malfoy Manor. Twice he had opened the window of his room, poised to Apparate and take wing, but the image of Draco with Astoria Greengrass kept plaguing him. What if he went to the Manor and she was there?

He also hadn't been alone with Draco since the moment in the training room. He told himself it was better that way. He had tried to stop the fantasies that plagued him every time his head hit the pillow—visions of himself with Draco, not just in bed, although those daydreams occurred with disturbing regularity, but at other times, too. He pictured them in every room of Harry's house, having tea at the kitchen table, sitting together on the sofa, arguing about the wallpaper in the study… He even had a recurring vision of shoving Draco up against the wall in the shower.

"Bloody hell, Harry, get over this," he muttered to himself. "Do you really want a relationship with Draco sodding Malfoy?" Whatever the case, now wasn't the time to moon over his standoffish partner. He focussed on the crowd below.

They worked their way up the street, staying low enough to spot victims of their next Cheering Charm, but high enough that they wouldn't accidentally bump a child's balloon, of which there were many. Harry and Draco met up with Vic and Brady at the midpoint of the parade route; they had started at opposite ends and worked their way towards each other. Tim and Rocco circled high overhead, alert for any sign of dementors. Unspeakable Salt and one of her departmental cohorts flew somewhere out of sight—they were not authorized to assist or impede the Aurors—except in case of emergency—but had been given leave to observe the efficacy of the Entrapment Charm.

Harry and the others flew up to join Tim and Rocco. Darkness was falling and the multi-coloured lights seemed particularly festive. He had been so busy it was sometimes hard to remember Christmas was only two days away. Harry shivered and cast a Warming Charm as he gave in, just for a moment, to the not-quite-nostalgia of wanting what so many of the Muggles below them had; someone to hold hands with, to share laughter and huddle together against the cold, to enjoy the festive air and then hurry off to warm places, possibly to snog and do even more intimate things.

Harry's glance flicked to Draco, who was watching him. Harry felt a lurch and forced it away with a false smile. "It's sort of pretty, isn't it?" he asked.

Draco rolled his eyes and said nothing, but he didn't sneer, so Harry considered it a victory. Draco was not supposed to be flying yet, but Harry had barely opened his mouth to suggest he sit out the mission before Draco's glare had threatened to turn him to ash. He seemed to be holding his own without pain.

Tim's broom shot upwards a few feet and the others spun in place to follow his stare, squinting into the distance.

"Thought I saw something," Tim said. They waited, hovering silently and scanning the skies. The laughter below became raucous, and out-of-sync clapping joined the shouts and whistles. Harry wondered if the Cheering Charms had even been necessary.

"There!" Brady said and pointed. Harry looked… and then spotted a dark blot of movement against the darkening blue of the sky.

“Showtime,” Harry said. “As we practiced! Let’s stay alert now! Malfoy, don’t wander off.”

“Yes, sir!” Draco snapped, but Harry did not take the time to give him a warning glare. He leaned forwards on his broom and shot across the sky.

The dementor spotted them as they neared, using whatever senses it had to detect their heat or life or souls. Harry pushed ahead of the others and lifted his wand.

“Impellafodio!” he yelled and cast. The dementor halted and floated where it was for a moment. The Aurors circled it warily.

“Do you think it worked?” Harry called to Draco, who hovered next to him. The spell had sent a mental command to the dementor, ordering it to call the others.

Draco readied his wand, possibly to make a second attempt at it, but a nearly inaudible oath drew Harry’s attention. His heart leaped into his throat and he muttered, “Bloody hell.”

A dark mist seemed to mar the sky, visible even against the darkening purple. Dementors. A lot of them.

“It seems to have worked,” Draco said dryly. And then everything erupted into chaos. The dementor moved, lightning fast, skeletal hands outstretched as it went for Tim. Rocco’s Patronus burst through it. Before they could do more than regroup, the other dementors were upon them.

Harry readied the bottle in his left hand and held his wand steady in his right. It was damned tricky flying without hands, but they had been practicing enough lately that it wasn’t nearly as awkward as it could have been.

Vic shouted the incantation first. holding her bottle aloft.

“Come on,” Harry muttered, watching as the spell shot towards a nearby dementor. The creature seemed to shimmer for a moment, almost as though it had gone two-dimensional. Harry felt a surge of hope. It was going to work!

And then the dementor re-solidified and seemed to shake off the spell.

“Fuck!” Tim yelled, obviously having the same luck with the Entrapment Charm. “It’s not working!”

“Dammit! Let’s get them away from these Muggles!”

With the judicious use of Stingers and Patronus Charms, they managed to drive the creatures a fair distance from the Muggle parade. Harry gnashed his teeth with frustration. The whole plan had hinged on the effectiveness of the Unspeakables’ spell. They were hopeless to do anything now other than drive them away. He scanned the area, looking for the two Unspeakables, but they were nowhere to be found; probably already heading back to the Ministry to report.

With a flash of panic, Harry realized Draco was no longer beside him. Spinning his broom, Harry searched the sky frantically and finally located his partner far below, just above the roof of a tall Muggle building. He seemed to be chasing a dementor.

“What the hell is he doing?” Harry muttered. The prat could not even cast a full Patronus yet. Harry angled his broom downwards and then gasped and pushed his broom faster when he saw two Muggle children playing on the roof, laughing and tossing a ball back and forth in a pool of radiance cast by a single electric light. It would be a race to see who would reach the children first—the dementor or Draco. Harry was too far away to assist.

To Harry’s amazement, a white light burst from the end of Draco’s wand and tore through the dementor just as it reached the edge of the roof. The children stopped cavorting at the sight of the silver Patronus. Harry felt a surge of pride even as he groaned. A peacock. Draco’s Patronus was a peacock. That bloody figures.

Harry landed on the roof and trotted forwards in time to see Draco casting a Sleeping Charm on the kids.

Memory Charms were next; they had all been brushing up on them recently, since the case had put them in contact with a large number of Muggles. Harry doubted Draco needed any help Obliviating a couple of small children, but it wouldn't hurt to—

Harry felt the cold first. The cold and then the horrible, soul-draining sadness accompanied by the screaming that seemed to go on and on… He felt a dim sense of horror as he turned, trying sluggishly to raise his wand, cursing himself for his stupidity. He had been so focussed on Draco he'd paid no attention to the dementor stalking him.

The creature was closer than Harry had ever been to one, latching onto Harry's shoulder even as it's dreadful, yawning mouth-hole opened, narrowing everything in Harry's world to a single, yawning hole and infinite sadness. Sirius had nearly been Kissed by a dementor, he remembered dimly, and suddenly felt like weeping at the memory; the pain renewed itself as images tumbled through his mind. So many people lost. So much never-ending sadness. It would be easier to just give it all up, to sink into the icy blackness and fall forever…

Despite Harry's overwhelming sorrow, his hand still moved, lifting his wand by increments as the creature's mouth drew closer.

"Ex…" Harry croaked. "Expecto—"

A blinding flash seared Harry's eyeballs and an otherworldly sound rent the air. Harry's sadness vanished with the bone-numbing cold and then something warm enveloped him. He blinked several times, seeing nothing but spots, and clung tightly to the warmth. His teeth chattered madly, despite his effort to keep his jaw from moving.

"Say something, Potter!" a familiar voice demanded and Harry felt another renewed sense of warmth. Draco. He burrowed gladly into the nice-smelling warmth. "Are you alive?"

"C… c… cold," he managed.

"You were very nearly Kissed, you idiot," Draco said and Harry felt a warm hand brush the hair back from

his brow. A surge of affection warmed him far more than any spell could. “If you’ll let go of my arm for a minute, I’ll cast a Warming Charm.”

Harry let go of what felt like an arm, only to shift his grip elsewhere. He shivered.

“It’s all right. I’ve got you,” Draco said softly and then murmured the words of a Warming Charm. Blessed heat settled over Harry, feeling almost as good as the warmth of Draco’s body. In a moment of clarity, he realised he was sat practically in his partner’s lap. Draco’s lips brushed against his temple. It did not seem accidental. Harry made a sound of contentment.

"Cho... chocolate. In my pocket," Harry said.

"I have some, too." Draco fumbled for a bit without releasing Harry, and then peeled away the paper wrapping with his teeth. "Here." He held the dark bar up before Harry's lips. Harry took a bite and chewed. He felt a lump of coldness dissolve within him when he swallowed. He took another bite.

"Better," he said, but made no move to rise. He felt infinitely comfortable. "What was that spell? The one you used. That was no Patronus."

"I panicked. It's another spell I've been working on. I don’t trust my Patronus."

With returning warmth came drowsiness. Harry wanted nothing more than to drift off to sleep in Draco’s arms, content with the knowledge that Draco’s words had warmed him more than the body Harry was nuzzled up against. Draco had panicked when Harry was in danger. It was a curious thought. “I saw you cast one, though. Glad you finally found a happy thought.”

Draco snorted and Harry didn’t think he imagined the slow slide of Draco’s thumb where his hand currently pressed against Harry’s back.

"What sort of spell?"

“I’ll tell you later,” Draco replied. He sounded amused.

Harry sat up with a gasp, pushing away from Draco's tantalizing warmth, even though it felt like tearing a plaster from a raw wound. "Oh god, the others!"

"They're all right," Draco said and jerked his chin towards the sky. "I've been watching." He got to his feet and walked to his broom, abandoned near Harry's.

Harry looked skyward. The dementors had broken up and were drifting away. The other four Aurors circled lazily, casting Patronus Charms at stragglers. Harry picked up his broom. They would have to patrol the area carefully for some time, to make sure none of the creatures had dropped down and attacked unsuspecting Muggles.

"Potter."

Harry looked over and then lifted a hand to catch the chocolate bar Draco tossed at him. "Thanks," Harry said. "For this and... you know."

"Saving your arse?"

Harry grinned. "Yeah, that."

"My pleasure." Draco stepped over his broom and smirked. "It's nice to return the favour, finally. Now I see why you do it so frequently. I trust you’ll see to the Muggles." With that, he lifted off the roof and went to join the others.

Harry walked over to check on the kids. They were sleeping peacefully, so Harry cast a quick Memory

Charm or two that would erase the memory of anything magical they might have seen. He cast Ennervate to awaken them and then shot into the sky before they began to stir. It was far too cold out to leave them sleeping on the cold roof.

He regrouped with the others and smiled at Draco, who returned the expression, causing Harry's heart to flip over in a ridiculous manner. He wrenched his eyes away and scowled at the other members of the group.

"Well, this was a right debacle. I'm going back now to report to Anders. I'm sure he will be ecstatic that Croaker's people did not provide a solution, although what we are going to do next is anyone's guess."

"We could try destroying them," Draco said.

"There is no spell that can—"

"There is now. The spell I used earlier."

Harry frowned, trying to remember what effect it had had on the dementor. He could only recall cold and mind-numbing darkness. "What did it do?"

"It unmade the dementor. Completely destroyed it. Did you not see how the others scattered and fled? They must have sensed its destruction."

"It unmade?" Tim stared at Draco.

"Draco, come with me to the Ministry. The rest of you lot make a few passes to make sure none of the dementors circled back to grab a Muggle straggler, and then go home and get some sleep. We'll regroup on Wednesday. Thanks for working on your day off again."

“Day off?” Brady questioned. “What is that, exactly?”

“That’s when you wank on your own couch, instead of using the loo at the Ministry,” Vic said.

Brady gave her the two-fingered salute and Rocco laughed loudly.

“Unmade?” Tim asked again.

“And have a Happy Christmas!” Harry clamped his hand on Draco’s arm and Apparated them back to the Ministry to the sound of returned season’s greetings.

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Harry poured a drink and looked over his desk at Draco, who for once was not rifling through Ron’s desk or turning items to glittering marvels.

Harry Levitated the glass and sent it winging to Draco, who took it out of the air and half drained it.

“So. What do you think we should do? Anders won’t thank us to rouse him at home, even to deliver the news that Croaker’s Unspeakables have failed us.”

“We should go home and enjoy the holidays,” Draco said, but he did not sound convinced.

“But…?” Harry prodded.

“But Anders will have us mired in boredom again, looking for alternative solutions and accomplishing little. Trying to get approval to use an unstested spell will take weeks, possibly months. This bloody case

might never end."

The idea of having Draco as his partner for another month or two was anything but unpleasant, but Harry shoved his confusing personal feelings aside and focussed on the case.

"So what do you propose we do?"

Draco leaned forwards, eyes bright. "I say we use my spell and take them on ourselves."

"Ourselves? Like, you and me?"

Draco shrugged. "You, me, and possibly the others. There are quite a lot of dementors, you know. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. I think that Muggle event in Trafalgar Square might be perfect for a renewed attempt."

"Do you think the others would be willing?"

"Rocco isn't doing anything until Christmas Day when he's going to his brother's house for dinner. Tim has been complaining all week about the fact that his new stepfather is an arse, so I think any excuse to escape an excruciating social event will be welcome. Victoria's siblings are all out of the country this year and her roommate has a new beau. She is annoyed at having to listen to them having sex every few hours. Brady is the difficult one; he will be with his daughter, but perhaps he can leave her with her grandmother for a few short hours."

Harry stared at him. The team had been more accepting of Draco after Tim's rescue, but Harry hadn't realized how completely they had included him.

"Brady's daughter?"

“Honestly, Potter, don’t you pay attention? Brady’s daughter, Francis, six years old, loves Quidditch and all things purple.”

“Yes, I know, but…” I didn’t think you did remained unspoken. Harry hurriedly said, “So, aside from Brady, we should be able to gather the team tomorrow. How difficult is that spell to learn?”

“Not difficult. Would you like to see it now?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, but in Training Room Four. I don’t want anything rebounding and wrecking my office.”

“Very well.”

It was a short walk to Training Room Four, which was only half the size of the room they normally used. The walls were spell-reinforced plasterboard rather than stone.

Draco lifted his wand.

“This isn’t Dark Magic, is it?”

“If it gets rid of dementors, does it matter?”

Harry scowled. “No. Yes.” He sighed. “I suppose it depends.”

Draco shook his head and chuckled. “I was only baiting you. It’s not dark magic. In fact, I was trying to determine why the Patronus dissipates and drives away dementors. The spell is compiled of happiness, the very thing on which they feed. It occurred to me that a Patronus is concentrated happiness; too much for a dementor to assimilate at once.”

Harry blinked at him. Magical theory was something he usually left to Hermione. She had been far too busy with house remodelling, and then with Ron's return and planning for Christmas, to do more than give Harry cursory assistance. And he had not burdened her with the case after she had dragged them to Muggle library.

"Think of it as eating a piece of treacle tart," Draco went on. "You like a slice now and again, but you wouldn't want to eat eight servings. And if you consumed fifty servings…"

"You might actually die, or feel like you were dying."

"Exactly. Although you probably wouldn't die from treacle tart. Tea, however contains caffeine. A few cups of tea per day won't hurt you, but if you drink a hundred cups… Your heart might explode. Dementors thrive on happiness, but an excess of happiness will kill them. Hence, Saturo Redundo Laetani. To overfill with joy. Also known as Dementor Death."

"Catchy. So it's similar to a Patronus?"

"Similar, but not the same. With a Patronus, you are pulling forth your own happy memories and turning them into a tangible creature. With this spell, you can use something as simple as a sense of well-being, which is then magnified a thousand-fold."

"How does that work?"

"With a simple Magnification Charm. The Patronus is complex – it has shape and substance and can even carry messages, so its form must be stable enough to maintain for long periods of time. This is far less complicated. Raw emotion, amplified, in a very short burst. It will only last a moment or two, but it doesn't seem to take much to overload a dementor."

Harry shook his head in amazement. "It's brilliant. Show me."

Draco paused for a moment, as if surprised by the compliment, and then he lifted his wand.

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“A simple Magnification Charm,” Harry muttered and glared at Draco. Simple for him, maybe. Magnifying tangible items was not particularly difficult. Magnifying intangible emotions, as it turned out, was, at least for Harry.

“I don’t understand why you can’t do this.” Draco’s voice was edged with frustration.

“Neither do I!”

“You must be doing something wrong.”

“Or maybe you’re just a crap teacher!” Harry burst out, annoyed.

They glared at each other and the old animosity reared its head with an almost calming familiarity. Annoyance was easier to deal with than the confusing attraction Harry had been experiencing lately.

Draco stalked over to stand behind him. “Fine. We’ll try it your way,” he said. With that, he pressed himself close to Harry and reached over his shoulder to wrap his fingers around Harry’s wand hand. Harry’s animosity fled, instantly replaced with a new emotion—heart-stopping anxiety.

Draco’s other hand curved around Harry’s hipbone, exactly the way Harry’s had when he was trying to teach him the Patronus. Turnabout is fair play, Harry’s brain supplied unhelpfully.

“Now, relax,” Draco said against the shell of Harry’s ear, guaranteeing the exact opposite. Harry felt as

stiff as a Muggle mannequin and he could not seem to gather a rational thought as Draco's warm breath shivered into his ear, sending his heartbeat racing.

"Relax," Harry repeated.

"I'm not going to bite you." Draco's tone was amused and Harry firmly refused to follow the path his words beckoned. He forced himself to relax, instead, at least outwardly.

"Yes. Fine," he said and focussed on his wand. The spell, he reminded himself sternly.

"Good, now think of an intense emotion, the stronger the better. Try to feel it and not just think about it."

Like lust? Harry thought and had no trouble at all feeling it. He suspected he would be able to feel little else at the moment. It throbbed through his veins with every heartbeat.

"The wand movements are subtle," Draco continued and moved Harry's hand in a gentle back and forth motion. "Swish, swish, slow spiral, point. Saturo. Redundo. Laetani."

It was almost like dancing with their hands, Harry thought in bemusement. Draco's voice had gone low, into a husky sort of whisper, and the words seemed to slide over him and into his blood, gliding like silk as Draco dragged out the last word in a rumbling purr. Harry had never heard anything sexier.

Draco repeated the words twice more, until Harry thought his bones might liquefy. The heat of Draco's fingers seemed to burn into Harry's and he leaned back into Draco's chest, unable to stop himself.

"Now, focus all of that emotion into the tip of your wand as soon as you hit the centre of the spiral. Then let it fly."

Suppressing a shudder of desire, Harry took control of his wand, even though Draco's hand was still wrapped around his.

"Saturo Redundo Laetani," he said and focussed the lust that felt so thick it should be pooling around his feet by now. He sent it at the tip of the wand with the final syllable and then stared when a gigantic burst of violet light exploded from the wand tip and cracked against the wall on the far side of the room.

Draco's chuckle was warm on Harry's ear and his body shook against Harry's back as it rumbled through him. "And that's why you're the Saviour."

The teasing tone penetrated Harry's shock at having blasted a hole in the wall. He turned his head and felt Draco's lips slide over his jaw. Somehow Harry twisted around, although he later had no memory of moving at all, and then his lips were on Draco's.

Draco did not stiffen in shock, as Harry had half-expected, and there was no pulling away. Instead he made a needy sound and opened his mouth, as if all the spell-casting had been foreplay and Harry's response was exactly what he had been waiting for.

It was almost too much, as though his explosive release of lust had left a hole that only Draco was able to fill. Harry's kiss was desperate, needy, and altogether glorious. Draco's tongue licked at him, sending shudders of delight coursing through Harry's already super-charged nerve endings.

His free hand clutched at Draco's shoulder, trying to pull him even closer. His other hand, still wrapped around his wand, was caught between them—Draco's hands were on Harry's waist, gripping just as tightly.

They kissed for what seemed hours, as though time itself had been suspended, or perhaps Harry was only dreaming, every taste, every lick, each glorious bite and nip, and gasping, panting breath nothing more than a fiction conjured by Harry's overheated imagination.

A shudder seemed to shiver through Draco, pressed so tightly against Harry there was no room to misconstrue his desire. Harry was just as hard, and each accidental brush of their groins had been

heart-stopping. Draco's hair was soft—Harry's hand had travelled up to tangle in the strands in an effort to pull him closer, closer, possibly close enough to never get free.

Draco broke the kiss, grey eyes going wide. It was like a shock of cold water. No, Harry thought desperately, No, no, don't go.

Draco pulled away so violently he left several strands of hair in Harry's fingers. He stumbled back and almost went down. Harry stepped forwards, hands outstretched, desperate to keep him, but Draco scrambled to his feet unassisted.

"No," he said, not meeting Harry's eyes. He looked dishevelled and lovely and far-too-terrified by what they had just shared. "No, I can't do this. I can't."

He turned and strode for the door while Harry's heart thudded in his throat, echoing Draco's no in a repeating litany. Without thinking, Harry lifted his wand and cast a Locking Charm on the door.

Draco spun to stare at him. His grey eyes were wild.

"Don't," Harry said, not caring that the desperation in his voice was obvious. "Don't go." He stepped towards Draco, who backed away like a skittish deer. Harry stopped.

"I can't do this!" Draco said. "I have… things I need to do. Responsibilities as a—."

Harry's frustration welled over. "Why?" he demanded. "Your obligation to your father ended when he died," Harry snapped. "Why can't you see that? Why is your Patronus a peacock, Draco? When will you stop trying to live up to the impossible standards of a bigoted, narrow-minded dead man?"

It had been the wrong thing to say, of course. Draco's grey eyes, warm and soft with passion only minutes before, flashed with fury. "That bigoted, narrow-minded dead man was my father. And this was

a mistake."

With that, Draco lifted his wand and exploded the door. He walked calmly through the rubble and out.

Harry's paralysis lasted only a few moments, but Draco was in the Atrium by the time Harry caught him.

"Malfoy! Draco, wait!" he called before Draco could step into the fire and Floo away. To his relief, Draco paused, but his impatient stare told Harry he only had moments. "I'm sorry," he blurted. "I was out of line. You have to do what you feel is right, but… Please." Harry took a shaking breath and tried to keep his voice steady. "Please, just… consider it." He did not bother to define what it was; he did not even know himself, but whatever was between them, Harry wanted more. The few short minutes that Draco had let him in—really let him in—had felt right. Harry thought it might quickly grow to become necessary. Despite everything, he was willing to give it a try.

Draco sneered, but Harry could not be sure whether or not it was directed at Harry or himself. They stared at each other wordlessly for long moments and then Draco said, "I will contact the others and meet you here in the morning."

Harry swallowed and nodded. One way or another tomorrow would decide everything.

Sunday, December 24, 2006

The entire team gathered at 4:00 p.m. in the Cauldron, despite the holiday, even Brady, who waved away Harry's thanks and explained that his mother was watching his daughter until he returned. Harry hoped to have them all back home by 8:00.

"Draco will teach you the spell," Harry said briskly, face flaming when he recalled his own experience with that. His gaze darted to Draco and then away, but Draco was expressionless. "It's powerful, so be careful where you aim it."

Harry had spent an hour the prior evening filling out a Damage Report to explain his demolition of Training Room Four. He had also spontaneously dropped in on Kingsley and explained their plan, hoping to get last minute clearance. He didn't mind breaking the rules and putting his own position at risk—and obviously Draco was on board with that decision—but he wasn't comfortable allowing negative repercussions to fall upon his other teammates. Thankfully, Kingsley agreed to permit Harry's "experimental spell test" and accepted Harry's bald-faced lie that he had been unable to contact Head Auror Anders at face value.

Harry assumed Kingsley's house full of guests and festive in-progress party helped to speed the decision, along with the fact that Kingsley was well in his cups by the time Harry had knocked on his door.

Victoria successfully cast the spell first, picking it up with ease, and then helped the others. Rocco took the longest and Harry wondered at the emotional connection to making the spell work. Harry was able to cast his simply by channelling his unrequited admiration for Draco, thankfully with less force than he had used previously.

Within the hour, all of them were comfortable enough in their casting ability to feel ready. “Let’s go!” Tim said and bounced in place. “I’m ready to fry those creepy bastards! Have some Christmas cheer, dementors! Ha!”

Harry shook his head and chuckled. Vic laughed, Rocco rolled his eyes, and Draco and Brady each cast one more practice spell before declaring they were both ready.

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Trafalgar Square was packed with Muggles. A bank of fog had rolled in, making everything below hazy and dim, which suited Harry just fine. The fog would help mask any spells they used.

The festive mood was tangible, even from where Harry and the others hovered on their brooms. The air was cold, however, and Harry’s steadily renewed Warming Charms barely kept the chill at bay. There was no sign of a dementor. Had they chosen the wrong event?

Harry expelled a breath, forming a cloud in the air before it dissipated. He lifted his arm and gave a signal. The others spread out in groups of two and began to search the outlying areas. Draco flew with Harry, but remained far enough away that conversation was impossible. Harry tried to focus on the job, but his gaze kept lingering on Draco.

Draco did not seem to have any difficulty focussing. He pointed with his wand. Harry followed the direction of the movement and squinted into the fog. For long moments he saw nothing, and then he picked out a shadow, backlit for only an instant as it passed over a streetlamp.

Harry glanced at Draco and they both started towards the shape. When they got closer, Draco cast the spell before Harry could, ordering the dementor to call its brethren. Harry hoped the creature obeyed and had not learned to do otherwise from their previous encounter, during which one of their number had been lost.

The dementor paused and then glided towards them. Draco's wand rose.

"Wait," Harry called. "We need to see if it worked."

"I know that," Draco retorted. He cast a Stinger and the dementor halted again. Harry heard voices below—a group of Muggles was approaching; the sound drew the creature's attention, or perhaps it was the giddy emotion.

Harry called to mind his kiss with Draco and allowed the emotion to flood through him, pushing away the regret and focussing on the moment of blissful happiness it had conjured at the time. He cast a burst of concentrated emotion at the creature, not enough to kill, but only enough to lure it closer as he rose higher into the air.

Harry laughed low, drawing the creature's attention, as well as Draco's. "Come on," Harry said tauntingly. The dementor glided forwards with a sudden movement, quicker than thought, but Harry's reflexes sent him spinning away on the broom, giddy with the sheer joy of flying. He laughed again.

Draco rose also, matching his pace, but keeping a fair distance from the dementor, wand held ready.

Harry drew the dementor higher and higher, until the glow of the streetlight far below became nothing more than a muted ball of pale light, gleaming through the fog.

Black shapes suddenly appeared around them as more creatures emerged from the darkness and the mist.

Draco flew closer. Vic and Brady were suddenly there, obviously having noticed their downward plunge earlier. Brady cast a Patronus, not worried about the Muggles for the time being. The swan sped away to call Tim and Rocco closer.

“Let’s do this!” Brady said in a delighted voice.

The first dementor seemed slightly confused by the presence of the four of them, as if uncertain which one to go for.

Vic dropped down suddenly, pulling a pouch from her robes. She took out a handful of powder and scattered it into the air. The mist became an ally as the Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder billowed and spread, clinging to the fog in thick clumps rather than spreading out; it would last far longer and help to mask their activity from the Muggles below.

Draco joined her and they scattered the powder over a large area while Harry and the others kept the dementors at bay with select Patronus Charms and Stingers. They milled semi-statically at first, as if communicating silently with one another and working out a plan of attack.

Without warning, several of the dementors sprang forwards. Harry lifted his wand and his spell crackled straight at the nearest creature. He felt a surge of satisfaction as the dementor seemed to explode. That satisfaction helped to fuel the next spell and he magnified it accordingly. Draco’s spell worked brilliantly.

The creatures began to flee almost immediately, obviously sensing the destruction of their fellows. The other Aurors threw themselves into the fray, sending spell after spell sizzling after the dementors as they twisted and dove in the air.

Far below, the Muggles carollers sang merrily, unaware of the battle taking place above them. The music was a strange accompaniment to the fight; the fog and the lilting tones of the Christmas songs became a surreal backdrop to the carnage they wrought amongst the magical creatures.

Tim and Rocco had joined them just as the original attack began. Rocco seemed to delight in using the command charms on the dementors, demanding they call more and more of their brethren to the battle even as they strove to flee. The creatures flew erratically, seeming confused by the mixed messages.

Harry was surprised at his exhilaration each time one of his spells destroyed a dementor. He thought he should feel some sort of remorse, but he could not help but recall the Inferi crawling from the pool where Voldemort had hidden Slytherin's locket; they were not living creatures, but constructs of magic, existing only to feed. His lack of pity became reinforced each time one drew too near; the flickering despair and flesh-crawling cold gave him the impetus to cast spell after spell.

The others seemed to feel the same as they relentlessly pursued every last dementor. The team followed orders and remembered their training, staying with their partners during each manoeuvre. Draco stuck close to Harry's side. Vic and Brady were an amazing team, as always, and seemed to anticipate one another's every movement. Tim and Rocco were meshing into and excellent duo, as well. He was less certain of his and Draco's interaction, but that might have simply been Harry's tension with Draco's presence feeding into his reactions. Despite his misgivings, there were no mishaps.

They pursued the creatures in pairs, leaving Trafalgar Square and chasing down as many dementors as they could locate, taking care not to be too obvious to Muggles once they left the concealment of the Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder. Disillusionment Charms were utilized and they didn't worry overly much about random Muggles catching the flash of Draco's charm. They would most likely explain it away as a flash of electricity, or even an unknown ghostly phenomenon.

If any of the creatures had escaped, it would be a simple matter for the team to stake out random Muggle events and destroy any stragglers. It was a satisfying thought to believe that soon there would be no dementors at all.

Eventually, there were no more to be found in the darkness and Harry called the others together high above Nelson's Column. Flushed with victory and laughing exuberantly, Harry watched with surprise as

Brady leaned over and planted a kiss on Victoria's mouth.

She punched him in the shoulder, but immediately laughed and said, "It's about time, you stupid prick."

Tim burst into raucous laughter and even Draco joined in on the chuckling that followed. His eyes met Harry's for a moment and something seemed to crackle between them. Harry's throat went completely dry before Draco looked away.

"I think our splendid victory calls for a drink," Draco said. "If you don't mind, we can all Floo to the Manor and I will crack open a vat of my father's prized Armagnac. I might even be able to conjure some mistletoe for the lovebirds."

There was no dissention and they all Apparated back to the Ministry and put away their brooms before gathering in the Atrium. Harry sent a quick Patronus message to Kingsley to let him know what had happened, and promised to produce a full report as soon as the holiday break was over. Anders would most likely be unhappy that they had not consulted with him prior to embarking on the mission, but the fact that the Unspeakable's spell had proven useless while one of his own Auror's had come up with the solution would probably appease him. Anders would be able to gloat at Croaker for quite some time to come.

The plan was quickly enacted and soon they had all gathered in one of the fancy parlours inside Malfoy Manor, this one bedecked with a huge Christmas tree decorated in icy white and deep violet. It was an unexpected combination.

Draco went to the sidebar and poured the aged brandy into large snifters. Narcissa Malfoy appeared wearing festive-looking robes of burgundy trimmed in green and gold. She accepted a glass from her son and smiled at the others.

"Happy Christmas, everyone. You all seem to be particularly pleased with yourselves this evening."

Tim launched into an explanation of what they had been up to, embellishing at will, and making the others laugh at his increasingly outlandish descriptions. Narcissa seemed riveted by the tale and

exhibited evident pride when Tim revealed that Draco had been the one to invent the spell that had taken down the creatures. Draco only rolled his eyes.

With the alcohol pleasantly warming Harry's insides, and Draco sitting far closer than Harry had expected, he allowed himself to bask in contentment. He was meant to have dinner with Ron and Hermione later, but for now he was happy enough to enjoy the company of his teammates and his enigmatic partner.

Harry was surprised Draco had chosen to sit next to him at all, considering how standoffish he had been since he had ignored Harry pleading words in the Ministry Atrium just after their molten kiss.

True to his word, Draco even conjured mistletoe and sent it hovering over Victoria's head, until Brady finally laughed and gave in, leaning over to plant a kiss on Vic's lips.

The sight prompted Rocco to recall a strange case involving enchanted mistletoe and soon they were rolling with laughter again. Auror stories descended into tales of the oddest things they had seen. Rocco had seen the most strangeness, including several incidences involving rare creatures. During one case, a large-scale fire was found to have been caused by pet fire crabs.

"Why would anyone keep fire crabs as pets?" Vic asked.

Harry met Draco's eyes for a moment; he knew they were both thinking of Hagrid.

"Maybe his Animagus form was a fire crab," Brady suggested. "I once knew a Dane whose Animagus form was a sea slug." He laughed at their expressions of disbelief. "Yeah, he rarely transformed and was nigh unto useless when he did. The Danish magical scholars loved to study him, trying to find a correlation between personality and Animagus forms. He was rather slug-like."

Harry laughed with the others and sipped his brandy.

“What is your Animagus form, Harry?” Narcissa asked, nearly causing Harry to choke.

The alcohol burned as it trickled down his windpipe. He coughed until he could speak again and goggled at her. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, “Is it a secret?”

The others were staring at him. “Well, it was,” he admitted.

“You’re an Animagus?” Tim asked, sounding awed.

“Yes, Potter, tell us what your Animagus form is.” Draco’s voice was borderline purring and Harry looked at him with a glare.

“No, thank you,” Harry said flatly.

“Oh, come on, Harry!” Tim coaxed. “I’ve never known a real Animagus!”

“How long did it take you to learn?” Brady asked, sounding awed.

Harry twirled the heavy glass in his hands. “Two years,” he admitted. “Practicing nearly every day. It was tough.” He looked at Narcissa, uncertain why she would bring it up. “How did you know?”

“I have a friend in the Improper Use of Magic office. She did not say what your form is, only that you were registered. I do hope she won’t get in trouble for my speaking out of turn. I should not have had that last glass of wine.”

Harry's eyes narrowed. If Narcissa Malfoy was drunk, Harry would eat the Christmas tree. He could not determine her angle for bringing up the matter.

"Hey, wait, I thought Animagus registry was public information!" Vic said.

"Not for Aurors," Draco replied. "They lose much of their usefulness as spies if the enemy knows what their Animagus form is."

"The Department of Mysteries is exempt, also," Harry added. "For the same reason. The Minister knows, and the Head Auror. Very few others."

"Surely you can tell your own teammates," Tim said. "We all have high level security."

Harry sighed with a sinking feeling. "Yeah, I suppose," he admitted. In truth, he had never utilized his Animagus form in a work capacity. Falcons were not exactly subtle creatures and his usefulness as a spy was limited. An insect form like Rita Skeeter's, or even a rat, would have been more advantageous.

Draco's hand dropped to Harry's wrist. Harry glanced at him in surprise. "Don't," Draco said in a low tone. "It isn't necessary."

Strangely, the warm touch had the opposite effect. Rather than calming Harry, he was suddenly annoyed at the whole situation. He wanted Draco, who was determined to marry Astoria Greengrass and have little Malfoy heirs and make his dead father proud. It was foolish to act like he had anything to lose.

Harry shook off Draco's hand. "It's fine," Harry said and got to his feet. Knowing it would be the death knell of whatever had been briefly between them, Harry set down his glass and shifted into his Animagus form.

A moment later, he fluttered over to the chair where Tim sat and perched on the backrest, careful not to

scratch the wood with his talons.

”That’s amazing!” Tim cried. He reached out to touch Harry, who took wing with a piercing cry and went to land near Victoria.

She smiled. “That’s very impressive, Harry. Maybe we should all start working on that ability.”

Harry lifted off again and fluttered over to land next to the Christmas tree. He turned back into his human self and studiously avoided Draco’s eyes. Instead he looked at Narcissa, who looked smugly satisfied. Harry wondered at her ulterior motive. She obviously knew more than she was letting on.

With perfect timing, Rocco said, “Well, it’s been fun hanging around with you nitwits on my day off, but I’ve got a bottle of Firewhisky with my name on it. I plan to get some shuteye while the night is still young. Draco, thanks for the invite. Narcissa, you’re a damn fine woman to look at, and gracious, too. Goodnight.” With that, he grinned at Narcissa, whose blush was a sight to behold, and disappeared into the green flames.

“I need to get home to Francis,” Brady said and followed Rocco to the fireplace. He paused and looked back at Vic before holding out a hand. “Would you like to come along?”

She shrugged nonchalantly and got to her feet. “I suppose it won’t kill me to spend some more time with you.” She winked at Harry and bid Draco and Narcissa a polite goodnight before joining Brady in the fire and leaving.

Tim sighed heavily. “I suppose I should get home and listen to my stepfather tell my mother what a terrible job she did raising me. It’s a tradition, you know. Thanks for the drinks, Draco. Mrs Malfoy. ‘Night, Harry.”

Harry felt somewhat awkward being the last one to remain, but it would have felt cowardly to rush out with the others. Narcissa came towards him and held out her hands. Harry took them as she leaned in and placed almost-kisses on both of his cheeks. “Thank you for coming, Harry. I am sorry to have made

you uncomfortable. It was not my intention."

He wanted to ask what her intention had been, but he was entirely too conscious of Draco watching him. He nodded. "Thank you for your hospitality. Happy Christmas." He made to step away, meaning to enter the fireplace and flee, but Draco's voice stopped him.

"Harry. Wait."

The words rooted him to the spot, mainly because Draco had used his first name.

Narcissa moved to the door. "Well, goodnight, Harry. Goodnight, Draco. Happy Christmas to you both." She smiled fondly at Draco and went out.

When the door closed behind her, the silence was absolute but for the crackling of the flames in the fireplace. Harry struggled for something to say, some words that would enable his escape, but then Draco was walking towards him and all possible linguistic combinations shrivelled away.

He focussed on Draco's clothing to avoid meeting his eyes. Draco's Auror robes had been unbuttoned to the waist to expose a plain white vest beneath. Only twenty more buttons and the robes would fall open completely, ready to be pushed away from broad shoulders…

"I remember the first time you came here as a falcon, Eroe," Draco said.

Harry opened his mouth to explain, to make excuses… something.

"I knew you it was you right away," Draco admitted.

"I—what?" Harry goggled at him, meeting Draco's grey eyes for the first time since the word "Animagus"

had entered the conversation.

Draco smiled. “I knew it was you. You have a rather distinctive pattern of dark feathers… here.” He lifted a hand and drew a long finger over the scar on Harry’s forehead. “Did you know?”

Harry shook his head. He had looked at himself in the mirror a few times, as a falcon, but his mind as a bird had been more intent on preening than picking out small details – he had been far more riveted by the pattern of light and dark on his breast, and the wicked sharpness of his talons.

Draco’s hand did not fall away, instead, his fingers traced down the side of Harry’s face, causing the breath to catch in his throat.

“But… how could you know it was me? You didn’t know I was an Animagus.”

“I did know,” Draco said and his fingers touched Harry’s cheek. His thumb moved over to swipe lightly at Harry’s bottom lip. “I knew shortly after you registered. It’s the reason I took up falconry.”

Harry’s thoughts were sluggish. He was having a hard time processing Draco’s words with the languid heat that began to steal through him from the touch of Draco’s thumb on his lip as it caressed one direction and then the other.

“You… knew?” he breathed.

“Borrowing books from the Auror library and cheating on my admissions exam are not my only transgressions, Harry. I’ve been known to bribe a Ministry employee or two in order to get what I want. Knowledge is power, after all.”

“You knew,” Harry repeated.

Draco nodded. “I knew the first time I saw you in falcon form, and I knew the night I took you to my room and you transformed and then kissed me. I thought I’d dreamt it—except I found a feather on the floor in the morning."

“You were such a prat the next day,” Harry said and mourned the loss when Draco’s hand fell away.

“I knew you had been there, I knew you had kissed me, but I didn’t know why. Why come to the Manor at all?”

“I wanted to see you,” Harry admitted, somewhat heartened when Draco’s hand did not go far; it dropped to the front of Harry’s robes and toyed with the golden buttons.

“Why?”

“Because I wanted to Crucio Astoria Greengrass and thought that might land me in Azkaban. You were the next best thing,” Harry admitted, suddenly finding his tongue again.

“Lovely Astoria? Why would you want to hurt her?” Draco asked, sounding innocent.

Harry reached out and grabbed Draco’s hipbones fiercely. “Because she was touching you. Because you spoke so casually of marrying her, and I could think of nothing but you in her bed… I wanted to… Well, it was a bit of a shock at the time. What are you doing?”

Draco’s fingers had been busy opening more of the buttons on Harry’s robes. They were uncomfortably close to Harry’s crotch now, much to the interest of Harry’s cock.

“Undressing you,” Draco replied in the same tone he’s used in the past to ask Harry if he’d signed paperwork. It was disconcerting.

“Un. Un… wha—?” The power of speak having apparently deserted him once more, Harry could only stare as Draco sank to his knees.

“I’m undressing you, Harry.” And there was the tone Harry had been waiting for, the sultry purr that had turned Harry’s blood to flame before their kiss in the training room. Draco’s eyes locked with his and the intensity there took Harry’s breath away.

The last of the buttons came undone and Draco’s stare left Harry’s, his attention diverted back to Harry’s clothing. Draco opened Harry’s robes to expose the waistband of his trousers, held in place by a thick leather belt. Harry watched as Draco’s nimble fingers pushed the leather through the loop and then tugged it free of the centre pin of the buckle.

“Okay. Um, why?” Harry wondered why he was still talking, when he had no problem with allowing Draco to carry on with what he was doing—except on a logical level, and really, logic was starting to feel vastly overrated.

“Because I want you. I want to see you naked, and I want to touch you. I want to taste your skin. I want your cock in my mouth.” As Draco spoke he worked the rest of the leather through the metal buckle. When the belt hung free at last, Draco’s fingers moved to the button of Harry’s trousers.

Although his mind was half-blown by Draco’s words, niggling doubt demanded to be heard, forcing words into Harry’s mouth. “But, what about Astoria?” Harry wished he could have bitten his lip in time to forestall that question, because he really, really did not want Draco to stop. His cock was in full agreement with that, straining painfully at the material so close to Draco’s hands. But Harry’s conscience had a mind of its own and, unfortunately, control of Harry’s vocal cords.

“What about her?” Draco asked impatiently, tearing at the button and forcing it through the loop. Harry’s trousers opened and his cock seemed to burst through to freedom; stretching the fabric of Harry’s blue briefs almost comically.

Draco seemed to fixate on the sight and a sudden rush of discomfiture caused Harry to reach down and grab Draco’s blond hair. “What about her?” he repeated. “You’re planning to marry her, remember?”

“Potter, I assure you, releasing me will be to your benefit at this point.” Draco’s eyes were intense and gleamed with amusement.

Harry’s hand loosened almost reflexively and his body made an approving shiver, but then he tightened his grip once more. “Draco,” he said warningly.

“Potter…”

“Harry,” he corrected.

“Harry. I am not marrying Astoria.”

The answer was brilliant, blissful, but Harry did not let go. Undaunted, Draco trailed his fingers over the fabric concealing Harry’s cock. It made Harry’s words an octave higher than normal. “Why not?” he asked before telling himself to shut up, just shut up.

“She’s not my type,” Draco replied and then pushed forward, heedless of Harry’s hand in his hair, in order to mouth Harry’s cock. Harry’s fingers relaxed—went completely nerveless, really—and he made an undignified whimper. The sound seemed to energize Draco, who nipped and bit and licked at Harry’s hard length until the material of Harry’s pants was a tortuous barrier.

With a quick yank from Draco’s hands, Harry’s trousers slipped to his ankles. Harry, lost in a daze of sensation, blinked at the whisper of sound. “Oh god,” he said, “What if your mum comes back?”

“She won’t,” Draco said matter-of-factly. He backed away from Harry’s cock long enough to pull his wand from his wrist-sheath and cast a spell. A thick rug slid across the floor from the fireplace to bump into Harry’s feet. “Lie down.”

“How do you know?” Harry asked as his knees buckled of their own volition. His hand left Draco’s hair and he braced himself as his arse hit the cushioning wool of the rug. Draco tugged at Harry’s left boot, pulling until it came free of Harry’s foot.

“Because that whole Animagus conversation was her way of telling me to get on with things.” Draco tossed the boot aside and then worked the second one free. As soon as it joined its mate, Draco grabbed the hem of Harry’s trousers and dragged them off, as well. Harry should have felt more self-conscious, wearing only his Auror robes, a shirt, and pants, but the eager-intense look on Draco’s face left no room for anything other than desire… and confusion.

“Get on with what things?”

“These things,” Draco growled and crawled between Harry’s legs. He lifted the waistband of Harry’s pants and pulled until Harry’s thick, rigid cock sprang free. “Fuck,” Draco said on a breath, and Harry hoped to hell that meant he liked it, which seemed to be the case as Draco’s head descended and then his lips wrapped around it.

Harry fell back onto the rug with a guttural sound, unable to formulate further questions with Draco doing that—oh god, his tongue was enormously talented. It wriggled delightfully over every sensitive ridge on Harry’s cock as Draco’s lips moved up and down the shaft.

Harry’s hips shifted upward, unconsciously driving himself deeper into Draco’s hot mouth, but Draco’s hands clamped abruptly onto his hips, stopping that nonsense. Harry whimpered and his fingers dug into the thick fibres of the carpet, desperately seeking purchase in an attempt to hold himself still.

“Oh god, oh god, Draco,” Harry half-sobbed. He tipped his head up to watch and the sight was nearly his undoing. Draco’s blond hair fell messily over his forehead and Harry’s cock disappeared and reappeared into Draco’s mouth with each stroke that sent quivers of delight shivering through Harry’s entire being.

Their eyes met for a moment and Harry could feel the smirk. He nearly laughed aloud until another swipe of Draco’s amazing tongue sent his eyes fluttering shut, blocking out that penetrating stare.

Harry didn't last long after that. He had wanked mercilessly over the past few days, but even that had only taken the edge off his overwhelming desire. He reached out blindly and touched Draco's soft hair, clutching it as he whispered a warning. "Draco, I'm—"

The words seemed to urge Draco on and he sucked harder, took Harry even deeper. The back of Harry's head thumped on the carpet as his back arched and his body convulsed. His fingers twisted in Draco's hair as he choked back a scream of delight. He came explosively and felt the shuddering tingle all the way to his toes; the orgasm went on and on, spurred by Draco's continued motions until Harry's pleading gasps begged him to stop.

The smile that curved Draco's reddened lips was well-earned and Harry pulled him up to kiss him hard, not caring that he could taste himself in Draco's mouth. He thought himself lucky to still have the use of his lips—every other part of him seemed to have been drained of energy; he wanted nothing more than to curl up on the rug, wrap himself around Draco, and doze off.

He wanted nothing more than that until he felt Draco settle himself atop him. Draco's erection was hard and hot against Harry's skin, even through the confines of Draco's clothing.

Harry broke the languid kiss. "You. I need to touch you." His hands pulled at Draco's robes—they were too thick and far too in the way. Harry wanted them gone.

"Yes," Draco breathed. He rose slightly to tug at the buttons, but Harry tugged his wand from his sleeve with a determined grin.

"Evanesco," Harry said.

Draco snorted on a soft breath. "I hope you can bring those back, Potter. Auror robes are expensive."

"I know. I've had to buy six of them already." He would buy a dozen more if it meant he could see Draco Malfoy naked. The vest was still a problem, though. He lifted his wand.

“Don’t! I like this shirt.” Draco sat up and dragged the vest over his head. Harry admired the play of muscles as he moved. Draco was ridiculously fit. His stomach was flat and his chest was… bloody hell, his nipples were perfection. Harry wanted to fasten his mouth on them and… He was momentarily distracted by the faint, pale line of a scar that traversed Draco’s torso, but Draco leaned in and kissed him again, quickly eradicating all emotion other than lust.

“You,” Harry said between frantic, biting kisses, “Gorgeous.”

“Mmm,” Draco agreed and pushed into Harry’s hand, which had found Draco’s cock, still criminally covered by dark silk. His other hand still gripped his wand. “Don’t you bloody dare,” Draco murmured, breaking the kiss long enough to wriggle out of his pants.

Harry watched with delight as Draco’s cock finally became visible, jutting from a tangle of pale curls. It was as beautiful as the rest of him, long and slender and curving just enough to be unique. Harry dropped his wand and wrapped both hands around it, earning a lovely groaning sound from Draco.

He felt amazing in Harry’s hand, but his expression was even better. Draco’s eyes were closed, as if to savour the feel of Harry’s hands exploring his cock. His mouth was partially open to emit soft, gasping breaths. His lips, already red, seemed to beg for more kisses. His eyes snapped open and Harry thought he might drown in them.

Please, he thought desperately, please don’t let this be a one-time thing.

Draco moaned when Harry twisted his wrist and then sent one hand questing lower to stroke over Draco’s testicles.

“I want you,” Draco said throatily. “I want you so much, Harry.”

Harry shifted his hips in acquiescence. He was up for anything Draco wanted, without question. “Yes,” he

said aloud, leaving no doubt.

Draco's eyes fluttered closed again and he bit his lip. His throat moved as he swallowed and Harry lurched upwards to attach his mouth to the slender column; he pressed desperate kisses to Draco's pulse point before capturing his lips again.

Draco used his hands to capture Harry's and linked their fingers for a moment as they kissed. Harry fell back to the carpet again and Draco followed. His mouth teased eagerly at Harry's.

"Are you certain?" Draco asked when they broke apart to breathe.

"Yes, god yes."

Draco located his wand and sat up. He touched the tip of his pale wand to the hollow of Harry's throat before slowly trailing it down over Harry's breastbone. Harry had never thought of a wand as an erotic instrument before, but he supposed it was a day for revelations.

"What sort of wood is it?" he asked, curious.

Draco blinked at him for a moment and then looked at the wand as it continued its path over Harry's skin.

"Larch," he replied. "It was a bit tricky to use at first, but I think it likes me now."

Harry smiled at him and Draco smiled back. "Are you going to…?" Harry asked and shifted.

Draco shook his head. "I don't think you're ready for that. Is this your first time with a man?"

“Yes, but—”

“Don’t be such a Gryffindor. We can save it for next time. Now, come here.”

Next time. Harry nearly collapsed onto the carpet with relief at the words. Next time. Draco grabbed his shoulders and pulled him into a sitting position. Harry immediately renewed the motion of his hands, tugging and stroking at Draco’s cock with greater ease of movement. Draco cast a spell and suddenly all was slippery beneath Harry’s fingers.

“Oh, that’s better,” Harry said approvingly.

“So much better,” Draco agreed as his head lolled back.

Harry drank in the sight of him, torn between staring in fascination at the head of Draco’s cock slipping in and out of his clenched hand, and admiring of the rest of his long, lean body.

Soon Draco was holding Harry’s shoulders with both hands, fingers digging in deeply enough to bruise, and gasping breaths caused his chest to hitch with each inhalation. Harry delighted in every quiver and he moved his hands faster, knowing how he liked it, and only vaguely wishing he had given Draco a blow job. The more he considered it, the more he wanted to.

Next time, he thought. Next time and all the next times to follow.

“God, you’re beautiful,” Harry said impulsively and Draco’s eyes flew open just as he came. If Harry had thought him gorgeous before, it was nothing next to watching him come undone beneath Harry’s hands. He made a mental note to buy a Pensieve so that he could watch it over and over again.

Draco fell against him, knocking them both back onto the carpet. Harry was breathing almost as raggedly

as Draco and his arms ached pleasantly. The motions had been familiar, but the angles had been all wrong.

Draco's weight, sweaty and panting, felt brilliant atop him and Harry would cheerfully have remained there for possibly the next epoch, except for the niggling knowledge that Narcissa Malfoy was in residence and could push the door open at any moment.

Thinking of her reminded Harry of his earlier confusion. "You said your mother wanted you to get on with things," Harry said.

"Mentioning my mother is a terrible way to ruin the afterglow, Potter."

"I'm sorry, but I'm very confused."

"It is your natural state," Draco said and Harry pulled his hair. "Ouch, do not make me prematurely bald. Fine, if you must know, she caught me practicing my Patronus Charm. It caused her to take an unwelcome interest in my love life. Or lack thereof."

Harry wrinkled his nose, even more confused. "Your Patronus?" The horrible peacock Patronus that was a glowing reminder of Draco's loyalty to his father?

"It has changed," Draco said.

Harry's breath caught. "It changed?" He cast his mind back to the battle, but could not recall Draco using any Patronus Charms. All of his spells had been Stingers or Dementor Death.

Draco sighed heavily and levered himself up onto one elbow. "You know, we could give up conversation and go up to my bedroom to do some more interesting things, and then sleep."

“Or you can cast a Patronus right now,” Harry said resolutely, silencing the screaming voices in his head that yelled a definitive affirmative at Draco’s suggestion.

Draco muttered under his breath, but he sat up and located his wand. He pouted in a lovely manner before casting the charm. He watched Harry through half-lidded eyes as the bird sprang free of the wand and flew lazily around the room.

“A falcon,” Harry said, awed.

Draco threw down the wand as though disgusted. “Yes. I’m fairly bloody sure it’s you.”

A smile threatened to split Harry’s face in half. He thought it might become his new default expression.

“You need not look so smug,” Draco said.

“Yes. Yes, I think I do.”

Draco sighed and then leaned in for a kiss, which Harry happily supplied. When Draco pulled away he looked slightly more pleased and said, “Mother questioned me mercilessly about the change, apparently already suspecting I was smitten with you. She finally told me to stop living in the past and… Well, she said several other unflattering things and told me I should do what I wanted or else she would take matters into her own hands.”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“Well, you saw what happened when she was merely meddling. If she had actually decided to do something, it would likely have involved the newspapers, several illegal spells, and possibly a few different governments. I consider myself lucky.”

“Not as lucky as me,” Harry decided and wondered what sort of Christmas gift Narcissa might like, because Harry apparently owed her a very nice one. “Now, what were you saying about your bedroom?”

Monday, December 25, 2006

Harry checked his appearance for the fifteenth time and tried to tuck a wayward hair into place again. It slipped right back over his ear and he gnashed his teeth.

“Harry, you look fine,” Hermione said. “Stop fussing.”

“Malfoy,” Ron moaned again, “Does it have to be Malfoy?”

Hermione gave him a stern look. “Stop it, Ron. It’s Christmas. Ginny was very supportive, so the least you can do is stop caterwauling.”

Harry snorted. He knew Ron’s protests were half-arsed. Harry had spent far too long gushing over Draco’s good qualities, prior to sitting down for Molly’s excellent Christmas dinner, for him not to have realized Harry was serious.

“I know, I know, it’s just… Merlin, the git is going to be smirking at me every bloody time I see him.”

“He sort of does that anyway, Ron,” Harry said.

“But it will be worse now, all right?”

“Ron,” Hermione warned.

Harry laughed. It had been good to spend the day with his friends—he had Flooed Hermione to cancel Christmas Eve dinner the night before, which had prompted Hermione to nearly choke holding back her questions. Harry had only told her he was spending the night with someone before closing the Floo connection and hurrying back to Draco's bed.

He glanced at himself once more and shook his head; it would have to do. He wiped his hands on his trousers and tried to still the butterflies in his stomach. Had it been a fluke? Draco had been perfectly wonderful last night (the memory still gave him heart palpitations and brought an instantaneous warm glow to his cheeks), and even this morning when they had spent a ridiculous amount of time kissing each other goodbye prior to Harry hurrying home in order to change and head for the Weasleys', but what if a few hours of absence had caused him to rethink everything?

"I guess I'm ready," he said and let out a breath.

"Good," Hermione said and gave him a sturdy clap on the shoulder. "Off you go."

"He's not going off to battle, Hermione," Ron said dryly.

"It's a very good thing you got me an excellent gift, or you would be sleeping on the sofa tonight," Hermione told him.

Ron leered at her and nudged Harry with an elbow. "No sofa for me," he said in a low voice. "She gushed over that necklace for an hour. I'm pretty much guaranteed a satisfying—"

"I think I'll be going now," Harry said in a loud voice, having no desire to ever picture Ron and Hermione's sex life. He suppressed a shudder.

"Goodnight, Harry. Happy Christmas. And… say hello to Draco for us."

"Hello and Crucio," Ron muttered, but Harry pretended not to hear him as he tossed the powder and

Flooed to Malfoy Manor.

A house-elf was waiting for him when he stumbled out of the fireplace, feeding Harry's anxiety. "Welcome, Mr Harry Potter, sir. Please to be accompanying Crassly to Master Draco's study."

Harry swallowed and nodded. Draco's study, not his bedroom. Harry tried not to be disappointed. They couldn't spend all their time in bed, even though Harry still held out hope for many upcoming next times.

Draco lowered the newspaper he had been reading and Harry's heart thumped in time with his growing relief when Draco's gaze turned warm and inviting.

"Hi," Harry said.

"Hi, yourself," Draco replied and gave Harry a slow once-over that made Harry glance at the house-elf, hoping it would leave so that Harry could drag Draco over the desk and divest him of his clothing in the next ten minutes or so.

The elf ignored Harry's pointed stare. "Is Master Draco needing Crassly to be bringing anything, Master Draco, sir?"

"No, that will be all."

"Thank you, Master Draco, sir. Goodnight and Happy Christmas, Master Draco and Mr Harry Potter, sir."

"Happy Christmas, um… Crassly," Harry said, but the elf had already disappeared.

Draco tipped his head and frowned. "There is something wrong with your appearance," he said.

Harry froze and then reached up to push at the errant strand of hair. “It won’t stay! I’ve tried everything.”

Draco chuckled as he got to his feet and rounded the desk. He reached out and grabbed a handful of Harry’s shirt in order to haul him closer. “I meant you are wearing far too many clothes. Let’s do something about that, shall we?”

Before Harry could do more than nod, Draco Apparated them to his bedroom where he adjusted Harry’s appearance into something more to his liking. Apparently his liking was dishevelled and panting, which was just fine with Harry.

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Sometime later—still Christmas, but barely—Harry yawned and then blinked when Draco placed a small, wrapped box on his chest.

“What is this?” Harry asked, struggling to sit up. The mound of pillows on Draco’s bed was immense, even though many of them had fallen to the floor.

“Your Christmas gift.”

“I thought I already got my gift,” Harry replied and leered.

Draco rolled his eyes. “Sexual favours, while always an excellent gift, are no substitute for a thoughtfully chosen and tastefully wrapped present.”

Harry sat up completely and held the box as he frowned, suddenly serious. “I didn’t get you anything.” It sounded terrible said aloud, but he hadn’t known Draco was going to… Well, he simply hadn’t known, and buying Draco a gift would have felt pathetic and sad.

“You didn’t get me anything yet,” Draco said and smiled.

“Yet,” Harry agreed with a vigorous nod.

“The shops will be open again tomorrow. Now, open it.”

Harry obediently tore at the wrappings, somewhat surprised that the paper was gold instead of silver. He tossed the paper aside and slowly opened the box.

“It’s a bracelet,” he said in surprise. He reached in and picked up the length of braided leather. It looked too large, and had several short, dangling bits of leather attached.

“Sort of,” Draco said and reached out to take it from Harry. The item was attractive, fashioned of multiple strands of leather in dark brown and green, with small silver rings dangling from the laces. He lifted his hand to take it back, but Draco held it out of reach. “It’s an ankle bracelet.”

Harry frowned. “An ankle bracelet?” he asked dubiously.

Draco nodded. “And when you turn into a falcon, the bracelet becomes your jess.”

“Oh.” Harry’s eyes widened at the implication. “Oh!” He looked at the leather and felt a surge of something warm and unexpected. A leather jess; basically a mark of ownership. The silver varvels would be engraved with Draco’s name. Harry would belong to Draco as both man and falcon.

“It is a bit presumptuous,” Draco said quietly and took the box, as though to put the bracelet away, but Harry covered his hand and then extracted the item.

“Will you put it on for me?” Harry asked and kicked his feet free of the confining sheets.

Draco nodded and a pink blush tinted his cheeks. It heartened Harry to see it; despite his confident demeanour, Draco was obviously not entirely certain that Harry wanted to be with him.

Harry handed it back to Draco, who loosened the leather and slipped it over Harry’s foot before tightening it around his ankle. It resembled a shackle, but Harry had no problem whatsoever with being so bound. In fact, the thought of actual shackles was anything but disturbing and Harry pushed the idea aside for later, wondering just how kinky he was underneath his bland exterior.

“Now you’re mine,” Draco said and let his fingers trail from Harry’s ankle up over his calf to curl around his knee. “All mine.”

“I’ve been yours for quite a while,” Harry admitted.

“Good, let’s see that it stays that way, Eroe.”

“Your wish, my command,” Harry said and kissed him.

THE END!!!!

Don't forget to go back to H/D Holidays on LJ and leave feedback!