♠ This Business of Being ♠

The ball gets rolling with Harry in his office in the Auror Department, looking through the files on current cases. This illicit potions business, it was time he got a grip on that. He spotted the name Draco Malfoy and paused, his eyes wide for a moment. Ah, he was down as a witness, not a suspect. Harry wasn't sure whether the shock of his original reaction had been one of satisfaction or disappointment. Malfoy claimed to have seen boxes of the stuff in the suspect's home while there on his work with the Spirit Division. He lost track of what he'd been thinking about suddenly, and struggled to remember. Malfoy, that was it.

Harry went to find Ron, who was sitting behind a desk piled high with miscellaneous objects, testing them for dark jinxes, enclosed in a small field of magical protection. "Do you know if anyone's got onto Malfoy yet?" he asked.

"Malfoy? Should they have?"

"He's claiming to have evidence on Villan, that potions dealer."

"That doesn't ring a bell at all," said Ron. "I thought all we had on Villan was the location results and his background in potions? I mean, great if it's real, but I didn't think he got out of Wiltshire much and, you know, why should we trust him as far as we can throw him?"

"No, no, Draco Malfoy. He works in the Spirit Division, remember, it was something to do with that."

"Who's Draco Malfoy?" asked Ron.

"What do you mean, who is he?" said Harry, taken aback.

"Well, I've never heard of him. Is he some cousin of the Malfoys?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" said Harry, incomprehension and frustration already making him heated. "I'm talking about Lucius Malfoy's son. We went to school with him, how could you forget?"

"Maybe you're getting mixed up with Crabbe and Goyle. They were the only Death Eaters' kids in our year," said Ron, puzzled but still trying to be helpful.

"Of course I'm not getting him mixed up with Crabbe and Goyle. He tried to kill Dumbledore, he nearly killed you, he was in the Room of Requirement when it burned and Crabbe died, he tried to get Buckbeak killed --" Quite a trail of disaster and unpleasantness, Harry reflected, not really one that dwindled from an adult perspective. "Do you really mean you don't remember?"

"Yeah, sorry. I'm just getting nothing." They stared at each other in bewilderment for a moment. "I s'pose you'd better go and see if you can find out if all this real. Because it sounds like there's got to be something wrong with one of us. Or, I don't know, maybe someone's been fucking around with a Time Turner, might that fit?" Ron's perturbed face, trustful yet doubting, was disturbingly familiar from other troublesome situations.

Harry rushed off. He stopped by a few Aurors and, grasping their shoulders, asked in unsubtly urgent tones if they'd ever heard of a Draco Malfoy. He was on his way downstairs to find where Malfoy worked when it occurred to him that surely the case notes were a crucial point. He went to get them, prepared to stick them under people's noses, and was horrified to find that they were altered. Harry stood in his office with the noted in his hand and tried to ask himself honestly (not whether Draco Malfoy existed; he was prepared to defend that knowledge against a great deal more opposition) if he had not somehow misread them. He

was honestly sure he hadn't, and he threw them back onto the desk with disgust.

The Spirit Division unequivocally denied all knowledge of such a colleague as Draco Malfoy, as Harry had really only expected. He made his way to the last hope the Ministry had to offer, the archives. Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy had, apparently, no issue. Ideally, Harry would have investigated Draco's place of residence, but he had no idea what it was, and of course he was quite unable to find any record of it.

Harry looked hopelessly around the archives. He had become unused to this feeling that something was fundamentally wrong. Draco must surely have done something -- mass Obliviation, or, like Ron suggested, meddled with time. Had he perhaps committed a crime he was willing to do anything to cover up -- or was that what Villan had done? And why was he left with the knowledge? Of course, if this was Draco's doing, it was just the petty, knowing-how-to-antagonise sort of thing he would do, leaving Harry with evidence he couldn't use.

Harry got a second wind, swelled with unreasonably optimistic He Won't Get Away With This! Spirit, and got up off the archive floor. Sentimental hope led him to Floo to Hermione, at home with still-new baby Rose, in case one of his best friends could help him, would share his memories as always.

Hermione was holding the baby, half-heartedly whimpering as she made soothing noises while peering at a book.

"Hermione, this is important. Do you have any memory of someone called Draco Malfoy? Think carefully," said Harry, half expecting Hermione to tell him not to be silly, or course she did.

Hermione's thoughtful expression suggested otherwise. "Nooo, afraid not. Why, is it important?"

Harry sighed. "He was in our year, and I mean you'd notice him being in our year. Do you have any idea what it might mean if you know someone exists and did things, you know they did,

except for all you can find, it's like they never existed?"

"I'd say it means someone's somehow implanted false memories in your head. Harry, what sort of memories are they? Is there any way they might benefit someone? Have you felt any kind of ... disturbance in yourself?"

"No. Look, I know it's hard for you to believe, but honestly, it's ... how things are. This person is definitely part of things."

"Don't you think you ought to go to St. Mungo's? Just to see? And I'm not sure what Department it would come under, but there must be someone at the Ministry who'd know about this kind of thing."

Harry didn't feel like submitting to these authorities and admitting he was the fault just yet. "Maybe later. Sorry," he said, and Apparated to his own flat before Hermione could protest.

He sank down into an armchair and rested his chin on his hands. All this wearing himself out, haring around trying to work things out, making it look as if there was something wrong with him -- this was surely what whoever it was had wanted. If he was a different person perhaps he'd have been subtle, realised at once when Ron said the wrong thing that something was up and played the long game to find out what it was. Perhaps other, rarer people could have just shrugged their shoulders and accepted that sometimes people just disappeared from all the world except their own head. Harry superficially considered trying to become those people. But no, he had to get at it, this was so enraging. He had to close in on it, flush it out -- or rather, flush Draco out in this surreal game of hide and seek he was playing.

Harry could only think of one more resource before he was thrown back on other people's attempts to find out just why the inside of his head was so different from other people's.

Harry Apparated just outside the gates of Malfoy Manor and made his way briskly through the grounds. He hadn't been here since the Snatchers brought him and he looked thoughtfully at the building as he approached. Hard not to feel enraged for Dobby all over again. It was somehow a shock to see another house elf when he had rapped the door knocker heavily

several times.

The house elf showed Harry into a drawing room where Lucius and Narcissa seemed to be having afternoon tea. They started guiltily when the house elf said, "Sir and Madam, Mister Harry Potter to see Sir and Madam."

"Do sit down and make yourself at home," said Lucius, as if to comment that he dared not ask Harry to do anything else.

Harry continued hovering. "You have a son. Don't you?" tumbled out finally, breathlessly.

"No," Lucius and Narcissa said together, sharply.

"Oh ..." Harry sat down. "Look, I know you don't believe me, but you do. You're not in on it? Are you sure you can't remember him if you try? He's really important to you."

"We've never had a child," said Narcissa, narrowing her eyes and focusing on the far distance with a fixed expression as if she actually was racking her brain, and sad and angry to find it empty. "I don't know what else to say to you. What's wrong with you?"

"Out of his mind on Thestral, I imagine," said Lucius, sounding somewhat reminiscent of Uncle Vernon. "Confiscate a lot of it, do you, Potter?"

"Please just think?" said Harry.

"I must ask you to remove yourself from my property at once," said Lucius, practically quivering with self-restraint.

Harry supposed he was lucky Lucius didn't feel able to curse him. He left the room without a

farewell and leaned on the door closed behind him. "Shit" he mouthed. Then he looked about him, and decided he should take advantage of being alone to look around the Manor until he was stopped. He trod softly down the hallway and peered suspiciously into more grand reception rooms. Quiet and empty. He was just coming up to another doorway when he heard a girl's voice exclaim from inside, "It's like it's following us around!"

Harry stuck his head round the door in a fierce kind of fashion, his hand on his wand, and saw at once in the mirror on the opposite wall that he looked pretty stupid. He adjusted his expression and saw two people turning to look at him, a girl with red hair and a man touching his bowtie, perhaps with preoccupation or nerves, who looked a little like a stage magician. And then he looked past them to the large, alarming crack on the wall along from the mirror. It seemed to widen as he looked. It was alarming firstly from the standpoint of structural instability, and secondly because it was apparent halfway through the first look that it was a weird, supernatural crack. It glowed in a way that made Harry wonder what was inside it and what would happen if it got out.

The man was rummaging distractedly in his pockets but seemed unable to find what he was looking for.

"Uh -- we're wall inspectors. Stability inspectors," said the girl, looking awkwardly from one to the other as Harry stared in, he saw in the mirror, an unfriendly and owlish way.

Harry decided to try and put them at their ease, the better to understand what was going on. "It's all right, I shouldn't really be here either," he said. "So ... what's this about? Do you know what it is?"

The man sighed and glanced at the wall. "It's a crack in the universe. Not a good thing."

"What kind of Dark magic could do something like that?" asked Harry, half to himself. He briefly entertained faint whispers that Voldemort might have come back, but he couldn't really believe it. "I can't see Draco doing anything like that. Are you sure you don't know who did it? You didn't see anything?" Are you sure you didn't do it? Was what he was really wondering, but his job often required him to assess suspects without letting them know they were being assessed.

"I'm not sure anyone did it," said the man.

Harry had a confused moment of awe looking through at the light gleaming inside the crack, feeling that he was seeing the raw fabric of the universe. Then he remembered that the universe was all around him, that being sort of the point. Harry jerked as he made another connection. "I'm here because I'm looking for someone who's disappeared. This is his parents' house, only they think they don't have a son. Has this got something to do with it?"

The girl's face ... did something strange; it caught Harry's eye but he couldn't read it. Something moved behind her eyes and shone for a moment before sliding out of place. She frowned and shook her head slightly, not responding to Harry, and looked back at the crack.

The man had looked at once to his companion when Harry spoke and still seemed to have an eye on her as if he was gauging something when he replied. "Yes, it's got everything to do with it. The only thing is, it's strange that you remember him. You were close to him?"

"Oh no, he's just someone I used to go to school with. He -- he was on the wrong side of the -- a war. Are you Mu-... non-magical people?"

They looked at each other, as if trying to decide. Trying to decide on a story?

"He's magical," the girl said, pointing.

The man seemed unsure whether he liked that. "I'm the Doctor," he said. "This is Amy. We're time-travellers. Well, this is interesting. Are you magical? How long ago was this war? Do you think you remember him because of strong feelings towards him?"

"Not really. I've hardly thought about him for years. I think maybe it's all because I just happened to be looking at a file with his name in it, for work, when it happened. And I'm a

wizard. So is he."

"What planet is this?" asked the Doctor, swivelling on his feet and looking around the room.

"Earth," said Harry, in a "What else?" tone of voice.

"I thought so but -- I'm not really sure what's happened."

"You've got us lost!" said Amy. "Though I suppose you can blame it on the universe folding in on itself or whatever it's doing."

"I don't know where he's gone," said Harry. He didn't feel able to deal with their puzzlement as well. This was reminding him more of his first meeting with Hagrid than anything else, with its hints of a world outside his own.

The Doctor looked at his face and, obviously trying to be sensitive, said earnestly, "He hasn't gone anywhere. He doesn't exist anymore. He never did. You're -- an anomaly. There's no way to make things different."

"Really?" Harry tried to comprehend it. "He's never coming back?" He saw that there were tears on Amy's face. She must be rather sensitive, to cry for the disappearance of someone she'd only just been told (kind of) existed. "How do you know?"

"No. He can't," said the Doctor, looking again at Amy, worriedly. "Perhaps we should all get out of here for a bit, if we're in someone else's house."

"Yeah, okay," said Harry. They walked quietly out of the room and Harry peered sharply around, making sure the room Lucius and Narcissa had been in was still closed. Then he saw something, felt a stab of surprisingly gleeful recognition, and hissed "Wait!" He pointed at the picture on the wall, a group family portrait of what looked to be eighteenth century Malfoys.

There, in the middle but at the back, was surely Draco, smirking a little more diffidently than Harry was used to.

"They're moving!" said Amy, and she, the Doctor and Harry all put their faces close to the painting. Harry looked hard at the little face, probably too small for him to be sure, but -- he recognised it. You could always tell when you saw someone you knew in a crowd.

"Are you Draco Malfoy?" he asked, pointing at him, his finger just shy of his face.

He looked for a moment as if he wasn't going to answer. "Yes," he said.

"What are you doing there?"

"What do you mean, what am I doing here. I belong here," Portrait-Draco said stiffly.

"Definitely shifty," said Harry.

The Doctor poked him and said, "How long have you belonged there?"

"Oh, you can never get much out of portraits. It's hard to tell how much is really there," said Harry.

They hovered in front of the picture for a while and then Harry, who thought they were making for the front door, was left behind when Amy and the Doctor darted off to the next room.

"So he's not totally gone? He can be got back?" Amy asked eagerly.

"What's that?" asked Harry, confronted by something like a phone-box in the Malfoys' house.

"The TARDIS. I think maybe he might." The Doctor was frowning deeply, which made Harry realise his own brow was knit. As well as the Draco situation, he seemed to have stumbled upon something else very strange. Where had these people come from? The Doctor had an air about him, perhaps just a certain calmness, that convinced one he was an authority, but an authority on what?

"Is there any way that doesn't involve time travelling? I might be able to get hold of a Time-Turner on the quiet but it would take forever if I had to do it officially. Oh God, and all that twiddling."

"Oh, you don't need to worry about any of that," said the Doctor, waving a hand dismissively. He pulled open a door of the blue box with a flourish. "The TARDIS does all that and more."

Harry looked at it suspiciously, wondering if it was a trap, but somehow he couldn't concentrate on thoughts like that right now. He went in and looked at all the gleaming silver and things-that-looked-like-they-did-something. "It's like a spaceship. Is it a spaceship?" he asked.

"You're supposed to say 'It's bigger on the inside!'" said Amy.

"It's --" the Doctor started.

"It's pretty much a spaceship, yeah," said Amy.

"Are you aliens?" asked Harry.

"I am," the Doctor said.

Harry shut up, lost in thought and vague memories of Muggle media experienced via Dudley. He looked so normal -- and then again, somehow believably alien. Harry felt suddenly violently displaced as the floor began to thrum and the TARDIS made a curious noise, and unlike the transplantation heralded by Hagrid, it was more unwelcome than otherwise.

"What's it doing?" he asked.

"Taking us to the time this Draco's ended up in. Should get to the right place, too," said the Doctor, even as the machine shuddered to a halt.

Amy was about to open the door. She seemed like a generally energetic person, but perhaps particularly keen on the idea of retrieving this missing person. Harry wondered if there was any basis for the sum that occurred to him: minus someone equals a desire to add Malfoy. He felt apprehension at the thought that Draco was just outside -- he didn't really want to meet him, he just wanted him to exist -- and wondered if he ought to have mentioned the undesirability of seeking Draco out under normal circumstances.

"Er, I didn't actually agree to go anywhere. You could have asked. And why are you involving yourself in it at all?" demanded Harry.

They looked a little nonplussed. "It's what we do," said the Doctor. "And I'm the one with the best way of finding this Draco." He indicated the TARDIS with modest pride.

Harry wanted to say that he was the one who involved himself in other people's lives to steer them right and save the day, but he always made himself reject anything that smacked of believing his own publicity. "So will we be able to just bring him back and have everything normal?" Harry asked instead.

"No idea," said the Doctor. "We'll find out."

The door opened and Harry's first impression was a lot of dark wood and the smell of coffee. A coffeehouse, he thought, and saw someone leaning back in a chair at the table in front of them, the movement twanging the telegraph wire of recognition. Harry stalked round to the side to get a good look. The table looked to be at least two thirds full of male Malfoys, some young, others prosperously middle-aged. They looked up as they sensed Harry hovering over them. Harry kept his gaze fixed beadily on Draco, whose back was turned towards Harry and had furthest to look up. Harry could not help relishing the moment as Draco's faintly smiling face tilted back, clocked Harry, and became quite suddenly a tense, paranoid face.

Draco leaned forward to address his companions in an undertone and pushed back his chair. Making some bare attempt at a beckoning gesture, he crossed the room and parked himself in a dim corner. Harry joined him, followed by Amy and the Doctor. Draco flinched with irritation as they sat down, as if only just realising they were with Harry. The arrival of the TARDIS and three strangely dressed people seemed to have attracted only nominal attention and Harry wasn't sure if this was perhaps some effect of the Doctor's, or if all this appeared no more than mildly eccentric to the gaze of the wizarding past.

Harry stared at Draco for a few long moments, not so much to take in his clenched doomy face but the long powdered curls of the wig on his head and, as a secondary attraction, the robes slashed to his waist to show green silk breeches. He became aware of the Doctor and Amy sitting quietly and waiting for him to initiate proceedings as the person who knew Draco.

"Well, what's happened?" Harry asked calmly, his mind half-occupied by the singularity of the position, with the fleeting impression he was inviting a meditation on the ineffability of being, or something like that.

"I do not know," said Draco, stiffly, as if making a statement, and with exasperation, as if anticipating doubt. "I bet you don't believe me, but I don't." There was a pause. "I don't really want to know. I don't really want you here, to track everything down and save the day. Can't it just stay as it is?"

Two reactions battled for precedence in Harry. On the one hand, anxiety and instability and frustration with the wrongness of it as it is, and anger at Draco for not helping to make everything right and proper again so he could talk with his friends about what had happened,

and not be left all on his own with shared experiences that weren't shared anymore. On the other hand, well, couldn't it? Was Draco really necessary? Any great loss? He wasn't even lost, just misplaced. His school-aged self would have jumped at the chance to dump him in the past before he was born. Then again, on a third hand, someone else's hand because Harry wasn't the only person in the universe, what about how much better or worse were other people without Draco Malfoy?

"What about your parents? Don't you want to ... not leave them?" Harry asked, with a strident accusatory tone.

Draco looked suitably caught and guilty. "Well. How are they, do you know?"

"You might not know how things are back there without you. It's like you never existed. The memory of you got wiped out of everybody's minds except mine. So your parents can't actively miss you but, I mean, now they haven't got any children. Just because they're not tearing their hair out doesn't necessarily mean it's okay to leave them without you. And they're probably much worse people without you."

"I don't know," said Draco. "You never expect this kind of thing to happen to you. I fell asleep on the sofa at my parents' house and woke up same place, different century. It's been all right so far and I thought I might as well take it as a sign. Like a kind of starting over. Sometimes -- you just get baggage and you get sick of it, and I don't have much baggage here. They --" he nodded over to where he'd been sitting -- "just think I'm some cousin they haven't seen much of. I'm quite good at our family tree so it wasn't difficult. I'm not important to anybody but I'm a Malfoy so everyone's quite respectful, everything's easy. If it comes down to a choice, at the very least the old version's not coming out obviously on top." Draco spoke in a monotone, looking at his hands, probably realising this conversation needed to happen but reluctant to engage with Harry.

"What's happened is," the Doctor said, "you got swallowed up by a crack in time and space. I've actually have no idea why you ended up in another century." He sounded a little surprised to find himself at a loss. "I'd have expected you to be just wiped out, undone, so everything would be as if you never existed. You probably should try to go back, of course, just because of your parents and anyone else who cared about you, and not running away from responsibilities and all that." He met Draco's eyes with a solemnly stern 'You know the right choice but I'm not going to push you except make it very obvious what I feel you ought to do'

look Harry thought seemed familiar. There was something older than his looks about the Doctor. "But also I'm wondering what might happen next. Maybe there's still something unstable going on around you. You might be slowly going backwards, or something might disappear with you, or you might change history in a really bad way. Taking you back home might turn out to be difficult, but I really think we should try."

"So you mean, basically, I have to?" asked Draco. He seemed to get the Doctor's point to an extent, and looked as if he would like to shoot the messenger.

Amy swiped irritably at her face, which was wet again. "Think -- if you'd died normally and your parents were grieving, how they'd feel if they knew you were still alive, in another world, another time, whatever. They'd be overjoyed, it'd be like a miracle and they'd be desperate to get to you. They still have that, even if they don't know they know about you. I bet it's like something buried under their skin, making a terrible itch, only they can't reach it. Don't do that to them." She was leaning forward, eyes fixed on Draco, aggressively set on making him feel her point.

Draco looked into her face and she might have impressed this consideration of the situation upon him, but Harry's attempt to read Draco's face was interrupted by a wizard who came up and bent down to retrieve a pamphlet from underneath the table. "I do apologise, I think I left -- ah yes," he said, beamed up at them, and wandered off.

"I think I want to think about it," said Draco.

"Well, okay," said Harry. "But how long for? And we won't be going away and coming back in a few days or anything like that, in case you've disappeared when we come back -- on purpose, even."

"I suppose there's no point minding about you hanging over me -- and why did it have to be you? Not that you two probably wouldn't have been annoying on your own -- and who the hell are you?"

"One of the mysteries of our time, that," said Amy and smiled, as if she was trying to be more

herself.

"And something I did think about a bit," said Draco, "is all that stuff they tell you about how changing the tiniest thing in the past is a huge catastrophe and will end life as we know it."

"Speaking as, well, someone who's mucked around with things quite a lot, there's quite a lot of things you can get away with, and then there are the things you can't. The problem is spotting when things are part of the big stuff. Normally I'd say us lot just hanging around here isn't going to do anything terrible, but as it is, we probably just have to hope," said the Doctor, helpfully.

"Right. Anyway, I suppose you'd better come and be in my house for a little while until things are ... sorted. I have a nice house here," said Draco sadly. "Three house-elves with it. Well, not exactly mine, it belongs to my uncle or something, but I have the run of it."

Harry sneered inwardly at someone who was tempted to abandon his life for the sake of a nice house and three house-elves, when he had Malfoy Manor and probably a flat back home.

"Well, all right," said Harry. "Perhaps we could stay the night and then do something in the morning."

Draco pursed his lips and glanced over to where his family (ancestors) were sitting. "You've ruined my peace of mind," he said. "I don't want to stay here."

"What, you've already made up your mind?" Harry said, taken aback but pleased.

"I mean I want to leave the coffeehouse."

"Oh right. Is that a Floo over there?" Harry asked, spotting a large fireplace at one end of the

room. "Just throw the powder in the fire and say -- where is it?"

"5 Ashenby Row," said Draco.

"5 Ashenby Row, then step in, and you'll step out of a fireplace at the other end," Harry told the Doctor and Amy.

When Harry staggered out of the fireplace at the other end, it wasn't quite what he expected. He was in a small, shabby room, a large woman standing in the middle of it. The woman was looking at him and Draco with what was certainly surprise, which did not seem quite right, a hand at her bosom.

"This isn't right," said Draco, as Amy and the Doctor toppled out as if they'd stepped in the fire together.

"My fella's going to be home any minute," said the witch. "He won't like to find strange people. Aargh!" she cried, quite bloodcurdlingly, as if she'd been stabbed, and pointed to a clock. A hand marked "Jack" had just moved to Travelling. "Hide!" She threw open a trunk and pushed the Doctor and Amy towards it, physically picking up Amy's leg and trying to put it inside the trunk.

"Can't we just climb back inside the fire?" protested Amy, hopping.

The woman didn't reply but left Amy and the Doctor, now standing in the trunk, to chivvy Harry down behind a settee. There was the sound of a door being opened out in the hall and the woman turned on Draco, hissed, "Get on your knees!" When he'd almost but not quite brought himself to do so, she, under the influence, perhaps, of too much low comedy, whisked her skirts over him and backed up so his bump was hardly discernible. The Doctor seemed not quite decided to go along with it all; Harry met his puzzled eyes across the room where the trunk was still open a crack. The crack closed as the door to the room began to open and Harry tucked his head behind the arm of the settee.

"My wife, has all been well? You've had no visitors, I trust?"

"Oh no, dear," said the woman, trotting forward to greet her husband, a bulky figure blocking out the light, who spoke with an almost falsely bluff voice, faintly reminiscent of representations of Henry VIII. Harry watched her skirt carefully. He thought it fluctuated as she moved a little more than was natural, but otherwise there was disappointingly little evidence of Draco's frantic scrabblings to stay in place.

There was a pause, as if the couple did not know what to say to each other. "Kiss me, wife," the man said at last.

They kissed for some long moments. The man's hand travelled from the small of the woman's back, down over her bum. Harry definitely saw something move under the dress; Draco hunkering down as far as he could. Harry was getting cramped and weary of the situation. He began to consider making a break for it. If only the others were in sight and he could signal to them.

The man buried his face in his wife's cleavage. She burst out laughing even as he hiked her skirt up and Draco, crouching behind her knees, his hair ruffled, became visible. Harry leaned up in consternation, and Draco, becoming aware of his exposure a moment after Harry, caught his eye. Harry tensed his body for flight even before there came a bellow. Draco, stumbling wildly, managed to dodge a hex and fall into the fire before Harry. A banging as if two people were ejecting themselves from a chest at speed let him know the Doctor and Amy followed.

There were fireplaces on all sides but Harry, running after Draco, didn't land in any of them. "Wait!" he called, to no avail. "What are you running away from me for?" he yelled.

"It keeps going even if you stop," he heard the Doctor say behind him.

Harry came to a halt and found that the panorama of fireplaces continued to rush past him at a strange circular angle. He was standing on a narrow blacked ledge, warm gusts of air moving in his hair, like the tube, only a little hotter. Draco had kept running, but perhaps realising he

was alone, now stopped and turned round. Harry waved at him.

"Come here!" called Amy. Fires kept swinging in front of Draco and he stood frozen with one foot forward like someone trying to cross a busy road. Finally he put his foot down and scurried forward as if he was on wheels.

"What the fuck?" he said when he joined them.

"This must be what happens when you get in a Floo without Floo powder," said Harry.

"I was told a bear would eat me," said Draco.

"Maybe not enough people are stupid enough to do it," Harry said.

"So is there a house on the other side of all those fires? And it's all right to go through them? Can we try jumping?" said Amy.

They joined hands and bent their knees. "On the count of three," said Harry. "One, two, t-- oh, that one then, now," as the fireplace they'd been aiming at sped up. The one they did try rejected them. Harry sank into the green, uncomfortable but not painful flame, caught a brief glimpse of a floor and slid back out, landing on his knees on a higher ledge. Other attempts had similar results, with them landing on higher or lower ledges.

"We'll be here forever," said Draco, his tone genuine but reminiscent of comedy doom. No one responded. "Shall we just walk as far as we can?"

"Yeah. There could be a way out," said Harry. And so on they trekked. Harry felt quite optimistic to start with, but his feet began to hurt, he felt thirsty, and the mind-bogglingly horrid thought began to enter his mind that they might be here forever, in a fair imitation of hellfire. He didn't share his sentiments with the others (What would be the point? They were

shared.) but kept grimly on, albeit at a slower pace.

"What's that green thing?" asked the Doctor.

It was a man in green robes waving his arms at them. Behind him, incredibly, was a door labelled Way Out. "We got lost!" Harry said when they caught up to him.

"Yes, well, someone has meddled with the Network. I am obliged to take you into custody and make sure it weren't you," the man said darkly.

Harry's heart was still practically singing at the sight of the exit door and he didn't complain as they were ushered through it, across a foyer, through a corridor, and into a small room with benches running around the walls. "You'll have to wait here until we're ready to see you," the man said.

"Oh, come on, we haven't done anything. When can we go?" asked Harry.

"I am not at liberty to be definite," said the wizard, and closed the door. None of them could open it.

Harry sighed and sank onto a bench. In a way it was good that the man's tone had been so unpromising and they weren't constantly expecting their wait to be over. Harry and Draco showed the other two a bit of magic, and Draco took it upon himself to tell Harry's life story in his own special way before Harry stopped him. The Doctor and Amy casually declined to provide a context for themselves.

They all stared anxiously at the door when they heard shouts. Indistinguishable at first, they heard clear the words "The Ministry's fallen! And the pure-bloods' houses! It's a Muggleborn revolt!"

"Let us out, do you hear?" yelled Draco, standing next to the door.

More yelling, so that they didn't hear someone approaching the door and Draco got pushed backwards with a blow to the side of his head as it opened.

"Benedict Popper's lot have done it!" said a different man, apparently unable to contain himself. "I never believed it, but Benedict Popper went and done it!"

"Oh, Benedict Popper," said Draco.

"So you may as well go. Think yourselves lucky. Or not, if you're rich pure-bloods."

"You've heard of him?" Harry asked Draco as they left. "I think it might ring a bell. What happened?"

"Some failed rebellion or demonstration," said Draco, rubbing his head.

"Doesn't seem to be failing now," said Amy.

"Funny time we've just had, wasn't it? Makes you wonder if they were connected," Draco said sourly, clutching his robes and rolling his eyes to the sky in a most melodramatic expression.

"How'd you mean?" asked Harry.

"I had a piece of parchment. I don't have it anymore. I was entrusted with the care of this piece of parchment, because I was supposed to help arrange a sort of conference the heads of the old, great pure-blood families have every year. This piece of parchment has on it details of the security charms and wards of most houses owned by these families, and a lot of Ministry stuff is on there, too. I'm pretty sure it fell out of my pocket in the coffeehouse and

when that man said he'd dropped a pamphlet, he was really picking up my parchment!" Draco's voice became sing-song with rage.

"You mean that man was this Benedict Popper? Or someone on his side? Don't believe in making things difficult, do you? Shouldn't you have had some kind of charm on it so you wouldn't lose it? Were the contents right there for everyone to read, not hidden or anything? What's the point of putting all that on parchment anyway?" demanded Harry.

"It -- You took History of Magic! Try and have a sense of period," Draco said unreasonably. Unreasonably since Harry bet he knew nothing about the period he hadn't gleaned through living in it. "They're all falling over backwards to prove they trust each other and have each other's backs after years of strife. Everyone's supposed to know this stuff so if anything like this happens they might know how to help. And I had to tell everyone who was coming what wards were going to be used so they'd know how paranoid they could be in protecting themselves just in case without setting them off."

"So at once overly complicated and overly simple," said Harry. "Basically you've messed it all up."

"It's not my fault," said Draco, stung. "I didn't ask to come here or have stuff stolen from me."

"You think the fire going wrong was deliberate? So you wouldn't notice the pamphlet had gone and do something to stop them? That couple must have thought it was hilarious," said Amy, as if wishing she also was on the funny side of the situation.

"Yes," said Draco.

"Well, never mind whose fault it is," said Harry generously. "We need to know if everything's all right and not changed. Because I'm wondering how it might affect our time if everything in the garden was rosy for the Muggleborns hundreds of years ago. Like, what if Riddle never became Voldemort and did what he did because people wouldn't let him or there weren't enough of those ideas around to influence him? Would that actually be a good thing? For us as we are? Like if there hadn't been a war, maybe my parents wouldn't have got married and had

me when they did. I might not exist!"

"Such a tragedy," said Draco.

"So, who's this Voldemort you are talking about? Why's he important?" asked the Doctor, who'd been looking thoughtful.

"He was a really evil wizard who wanted to impose an anti-Muggleborn and anti-Muggle regime. I don't know whether he would have killed them in the end or just refused them any rights. There was a complicated thing with him and me as a baby; he tried to kill me and it was a big deal that I lived. Then when I was seventeen he died, more through his own weaknesses than anything else. He changed so many lives; to mess with anything about him and what he did would be huge, even if it sort of sounds like a good idea." Harry told the old story resignedly, though it was novel to explain something as big as Voldemort to someone who'd no idea he existed. He'd done it once or twice to Muggles, but even then he could say, 'Hey, you know that [big disaster Muggles knew of]? That was Voldemort.'

"And all this -- " the Doctor waved his hand "- would create a sufficiently different climate that you think what Voldemort did would no longer happen?"

"Well, if they really do take over, I would think so, yeah. But maybe it's all going to go wrong. This is very early."

"If Benedict Popper had ever done anything that big we'd know about it," said Draco. "We wouldn't be standing here going 'Who was that Popper person, then? I can't remember what he did.' Obviously I've done everything wrong again. Probably if I hadn't been here he'd never have been able to do anything and in the real world he just made a few rabble-rousing speeches." Draco's pessimism and blame turned inwards for once in Harry's knowledge of him.

"I think we should wait until tomorrow and see what happens. And well, I don't know what we should do if we wanted to stop it," said Harry.

"I suppose so. Anyway, in my time we had a safe house in London and I'm pretty sure we'd have had it now so -- I'd better Side-Along you all," said Draco, struggling to hold onto three people while the Doctor and Amy showed a distinct disinclination to get so close, not realising they were being accosted for a reason.

After the squishing feeling of Apparation, they found themselves standing in a scrubby yard on a street of broken-down houses.

"Oh," said Draco. "I think I will have to tell you the address. Our house, Murdingate Street."

"Just 'our house'?" said Harry as the dark shape of a house appeared in front of him.

"No numbers here," said Draco, and taking their arms again, Apparated them the few yards to the other side of the front door.

Harry's impression of the place had been that, even as a hide-out, it all seemed rather too low for the Malfoys to see themselves there. Inside, however, there was silk and lace, little silver tables and paintings on the ceilings. Not to mention a lot of Malfoys who started, wands out, at their arrival.

Draco was greeted, "Ah, Tertius," by a wizard with the air of a pater familias, with Lucius's cold eyes, but heavier. "We were a little concerned whether you knew the address. Not but what you might be said to deserve being left without shelter. By rights you should be cast out of the family, and indeed there were murmurs among us to that effect. But frankly I've no intention of admitting it was a Malfoy who brought the pure-bloods down."

"My conscience shall punish me more than you could, Edmund," said Draco, bowing his head down with suitable shame. "What I wish to know is how shall amends ever be made for my carelessness? How can we halt this chaos?"

"Apparently we've decided we won't," said a younger man, his face twisted in resentment.

"And we'll sit here and watch them take over all our seats of power."

"We can't just go out there and pit ourselves against them. There are so many of them and this is their moment; they're prepared, they're determined to vanquish, hammer us into submission, plunder all the spoils their hearts desire," said Edmund, sounding as if he would like to be in their position. "We must wait, arm ourselves with real knowledge of the situation and the opposition's weaknesses. Most of all, we must not form a 'we' all by ourselves, but fight with the other great families. It shall be a proper battle between the pure-bloods and Mudbloods."

"And the blood traitors," said a witch sitting on a sofa, hand in hand with the wizard who wanted to go out and fight. "There are plenty of pure-bloods standing with them. What if it's like that business in France? This may be the end. I think we should run away to another country."

A girl in her teens yelled "Coward!" amidst a burble of discussion in response. Harry found himself a chair. Nobody had asked who Draco's companions were. Draco had been cornered by a couple of relatives and was nodding along, eyes downcast. Harry looked around to take a better look at the people surrounding him. They weren't all carbon copies of Draco and Lucius (or, Harry supposed, Draco and Lucius weren't carbon copies of them) but there was a tendency to fair complexions and the bone structure was familiar. Harry felt the prospect of being confined with Draco Malfoy's ancestors, listening to them argue, was a dismal one. Amy and the Doctor, leaning against the wall in lieu of chairs, felt likewise, if the Doctor's yawn and Amy's irritable shuffle was any indication.

Harry was beginning to feel hungry, but dinner was apparently a problem. The Malfoys had one house-elf with them -- they didn't know what had happened to the others but they didn't come when summoned -- which they felt scarcely sufficient, and no food for her to prepare. They seemed not to know that their house-elf could Apparate, and therefore had the power to obtain food, and were reluctant to venture out themselves. Harry was not surprised they didn't want to put themselves to the bother but he gathered from their conversation that wizard and Muggle dwellings and businesses were more mixed together than he was used to, and they were afraid of being seen by the enemy. Possibly preferring to volunteer rather than be pressed, Draco Disillusioned himself and went out.

"I'll come with you," said Harry, feeling a snatch of conversation about the real situation would

be welcome.

Draco refused him curtly. Harry might have hoped for the reassurance of alliance with the only familiar face in the midst of all this disorienting strife, but Draco seemed to deliberately carry his consciousness of his grudge with him at all times. Harry didn't quite know why he found it so disheartening.

He found it hard not to let Draco's re-entry with steaming pie cheer him, however. He felt relief, too, when the Doctor showed the family some kind of letter of introduction and the cool, wordless inspection ceased, though really it was beneath him as an Auror to let such things affect him. Edmund promptly began to point out to his son, Ludovic, what a handsome young lady Amy was. Harry was puzzled until it became clear that Lavinia, who'd been holding Ludovic's hand, was only betrothed to him, not married, and Edmund perhaps fancied his son could make a better match. Ludovic was embarrassed and tried to pay Amy polite compliments without seeming too sincere, while Lavinia looked as if she was barely containing an outburst.

"Oh look, a frog," said Amy in tones of relief as a bullfrog Patronus appeared.

"Benedict Popper has been ordained Supreme Mugwump. Half-blood William Lestrange taken their side but passing information," it said.

It reappeared several times through the rest of the meal to give similar updates. The family seemed to have settled down now and could not be roused. After dinner they sank into inane conversation that frequently wandered off the shocking events taking place.

"We'll see tomorrow," said Edmund. "We should sleep early, rise with the lark tomorrow. Then we'll show them what it means to be superior."

Rooms were organised. Space was at a premium and Amy was to share a room with Lavinia, and Harry was to share not only a room but a bed with Draco. Harry thought something about the Doctor suggested a radius of space about him that prohibited cramped room sharing.

When the house was quiet, if not actually asleep, Harry, Draco, Amy and the Doctor gathered in the Doctor's room. "I'll just Disillusion you," said Draco. "You don't really want to be found in a bedroom with three men. If you could try and blend in with that wall?"

Amy raised an eyebrow but was soon ducking and covering her head at the strange squelching sensation.

"I suppose something will have to be done. Not that I'm disparaging them or anything, but I'd rather not leave the fate of the magical world as I know it in their hands," said Draco, nodding his head towards the door. "What if they do go off to another country? My parents might never meet each other!"

"I think if we let this happen things would go very wrong indeed. This Voldemort sounds to me like one of the big things that can't be changed," said the Doctor.

"But we really get into deep water if we go back where we've just been and try to stop that parchment getting into the wrong hands," Harry said, almost protesting. Despite having managed to pull it off once, the inadvisability of travelling back to the past and meddling had been well drummed into him and he felt superstitious about it now. "Like if there are two of you too close in time and space and your self, or soul if you like, doesn't know where to be, doesn't it just fold in on itself? But what I'm worrying about is -- all this stuff happening, it's good. If wizards sorted equality out three hundred years earlier, wouldn't that make wizards so much better? Like removing a blot? And I'm not saying oh, let it happen, let our time be changed, because it affects everyone and I don't have the right to say that. But maybe it would technically be better if we and everything at home didn't exist." He thought of things like Ron and Hermione and therefore could not actually entertain the idea that a whole timeline, a whole world, should nobly give up its place for another. At the same time it was hard to remove his mind from the soothing blank there might be instead of Tom Riddle's birth.

The Doctor lay down on his bed and crossed his arms under his neck. "It wouldn't be better because it would probably make another crack in the universe and no one would exist anyway," he said calmly.

"Isn't this like how people always say would you prevent Hitler being born, and you probably shouldn't because you don't know what would have happened otherwise?" Amy asked.

"If good things happened for Muggleborns now, bad things might be ready to happen again by your time, and what stopped them in your real time wouldn't be there. And you defeated this Voldemort, didn't you? That's important, you shouldn't get rid of that. There need to be heroes."

"But there wouldn't actually need to be a hero if -- well, it wasn't needed, if you see what I mean," said Harry.

"You could say," said the Doctor, "That it's worth it, for humans, to need someone to be a hero, if it means they get proof they or someone else would do it if necessary. That they know there's a cut-off point, that good is stronger than bad. It's good for species morale." He spoke slowly, lingering on the words.

"Have you ever been a hero?" asked Harry, feeling it to be a faux pas when the words were out, but curious as to the source of what seemed a particular interest in the Doctor's voice.

"Me? Nah."

I certainly lay no claim to hero-hood," said Draco, who no one had asked. "Keeping to the subject at hand, if we can't sort this by going back to the past, what about the future? Can your box do that? Or, I suppose from our perspective there's three hundred years ahead of this we could go to and still be in the past, so not exactly the future."

"We should talk to Benedict Popper," said Amy. "Explain it all to him. It makes sense to get his take on it, doesn't it? And if he understands and sees it's all for the best, maybe he could run away or something so all this will be a flash in the pan."

"I would feel so much better about it if Popper knew. If it was his decision too," said Harry. He

didn't want to be the puppet master in the wings.

Draco looked thoughtful. "I suppose we have to do it now, don't we?" he said, in tones that indicated he was open to being convinced otherwise. "We don't know what'll happen tomorrow and we'll be able to make it go according to plan better if we have more of a plan."

There was a pause. Harry imagined they'd all been looking forward to bed after all the stress.

"We'll do that then," said the Doctor.

They stole out of the house -- Harry realised as they tiptoed downstairs that they could just Disapparate, but the other two seemed to have forgotten, and the stairs didn't seem the most suitable place for a reminder -- and then Apparated to the coffeehouse where they'd first made their appearance in this century. It was closed to business and closed also to Alohomora and other charms, but not to a strange little device of the Doctor's.

"Is that like a wand?" asked Draco. "You're probably an alien wizard; you just don't see it like that."

"I'm a Time Lord," said the Doctor. "I suppose you could put it like that."

The coffeehouse felt eerily deserted and Harry was glad to get into the TARDIS.

Draco peered around him more than Harry had done, trying not to look too interested, naturally. "How difficult are they to get hold of, these things?" he asked.

"She's one of a kind," the Doctor said firmly, in a tone that disinvited further questions.

"So where do we want to go? A week from now? His old age?" asked Amy, her fingers hovering

over buttons.

"Let's say two years. Everything should have settled by then," said Harry.

When the TARDIS was fully arrived at their destination, Draco turned to Harry and said fiercely, "We have to remember what we're going to say. We have to make it good."

The problem with remembering was that they hadn't decided what they were going to say in the first place, but Harry was unable to instigate a quick conference as someone opened the door from the outside. "What --" the person said, but was cut off by the Doctor strolling forward and shaking his hand.

"Mr. Popper, I assume? We've come to talk to you about a very important matter," he said.

"Come from where?" asked Popper, gazing blankly into the TARDIS. He was an ordinary, pleasant-looking wizard in his early forties, and Harry was almost sure he was indeed the man from the coffeehouse.

"We're not assassins or anything," said Harry, watching proper awareness of the situation creep into Popper's face as he took a step backwards in the direction of his desk and, no doubt, his wand.

"We're from the future. We're not dangerous, we just want everything to turn out how it should, so can we have a talk about it?"

"What a terrible idea," said Popper. "Unless advances have been made in time-travel?"

"Not in the wizarding world. This --" Draco indicated the TARDIS "-- isn't anything to do with wizards. I think going back to the past is still a pretty bad idea, but it was involuntary. Something's already gone wrong and now all we can do is patch it up." He conjured up four

chairs, pushed ones next to Popper's desk and sat down, waving his hand at the chair behind the desk to indicate that Popper should follow suit. "This is the Minister's office, isn't it? You're doing well, then?"

"We've come to change all that," said Harry, feeling it was only decent to make their business plain.

"You could put it a bit more positively," said Amy. "You've had two good years, Mr. Popper."

"Yes, look at it this way. You've had the chance to see what it would be like if things went your way," said the Doctor, looking earnestly at Popper. Harry wondered if there were perhaps too many of them trying to take charge of the interview. The Doctor and Amy were hovering over him and Draco's manner suggested the office was his own. "Is the country doing well?"

"Yes," said Popper, looking on the verge of saying, "Now look here."

"Then you know that you are a fit person to govern, and many people with power could not say the same. You know that people saw you were right when you protested," the Doctor said, taking the See The Positives line even before revealing their agenda.

"It took a lot of protesting," said Popper.

"You're obviously a good leader. We're asking you to be a better leader and give up what you have achieved for the sake of a wider scheme. You need to do so much that people will not know of you and praise you as they would if you do less. Can you make a sacrifice?"

The Doctor's lead-up went unnoticed. "You're a Malfoy!" cried Popper, Draco's face having apparently just caught his attention, raising his wand.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry said automatically, and Draco growled in irritation at the word. So much

had been made of a mere Expelliarmus beating Avada Kedavra that Harry felt self-conscious whenever he had cause to use it.

"I'm a Malfoy from the future, that's the point," said Draco in heavy, patronising tones. "I ended up in the past where I shouldn't have been, had been given that parchment for you to steal from me, and you went on with your rebellion. Without me that wouldn't have happened, and me and Harry here are the products of a world where it didn't happen. If the past changes so much, our present is going to be destroyed and we might not exist, which we find a bit worrying if you can believe it. Also, when you think about it, even if you didn't go along with it and our twenty-first century selves disappeared, we might be left hanging around here unable to belong anywhere else, and that would be untidy. So we want everything put back as much like it was as possible." He sounded exactly like a pure-blood who considered the lives of those beneath them an inconvenience whenever they crossed their own. Harry winced, both because it was unhelpful in the situation and because he felt a little embarrassed when Draco let himself down and reverted to type.

Popper didn't look like the consideration of Draco and Harry's non-existence was going to bother him much.

"Malfoy, if you're going to be rude you can go and wait somewhere else while we're discussing it," said Harry. As well as his own irritation, he felt the conversation deserved as much sensitivity and gravity as they were capable of giving it. These things were hard enough to produce on demand and in a hurry.

"It isn't just me and Draco," he said. "What this is really about is a wizard called Voldemort. He was incredibly Dark and tried to oppress Muggleborns. There were two wars. A lot of magical history was made -- he split his soul into seven parts, I didn't die when he cursed me because my mother died to save me, our wands had the same core and we found out what effect that had. I was a Horcrux and didn't die again when he tried to kill me, I ended up with all three Deathly Hallows. He affected so many people's lives. It's just that it's a really important time. It needs to happen because the world needs it; even though so many terrible things happened, we found out so much. And it's not just that we wouldn't have that time, it's that not having it would mess up everything else, it would be so unstable." He felt his voice echoing with projected sincerity, and hoped Popper could feel the real sincerity. Voldemort was a hard sell, and not one he'd ever thought he'd have to make.

"And how, exactly, am I supposed to not exist?" asked Popper. He looked more intelligent and history-making now he was putting his mind to bear on the situation rather than blinking, too astonished even to be wholly outraged.

"One of the reasons we came here was to ask your opinion," said Amy brightly.

"So you're allowing me my choice of death? Very gracious," Popper said sardonically.

"You don't have to die," said Draco. "All you have to do is get rid of this rebellion of yours. It's less complicated if you stop it after starting it, if you look at it from the time angle. But then sometimes stopping is harder than starting. One of the things we wanted to ask is, when would you like to do it? Do you think two years is still too much?" He turned to face the others.

"But I can't," said Popper. "I'm a leader." The Doctor opened his mouth and Popper forestalled him. "It's not about my moment in the sun. It's the people. How can I do this to them? I didn't get here --" he indicated his office "-- all by myself. It was a movement of the people. Wizards and witches, Muggles too, they all wanted something and they decided I was the person to help them do it, to be the first to take pains to achieve our operation, to be the first casualty in case of failure. When we got what we wanted, many more people became accustomed to our way of thinking. We made progress, we showed the right way. I -- I am for being here, for them. I don't have the right to throw it away."

"So you want us to do it for you?" asked Draco.

"I know it's hard," said the Doctor. "I know it's hard to tell which is wrong and which is right. But what you were saying about being here for the people -- you still are, it's just that what you're there to do is harder than anything you've done yet."

"But how can I not be betraying the trust that gives me the power to betray it?" asked Popper.

"Authority is a tricky thing. You have to make decisions for other people sometimes that they

wouldn't want you to make, and sometimes those decisions are the right ones. And that's why you're in authority, so you can make those decisions," said the Doctor.

"I take it you're the highest authority, as you're the one telling me to make them," said Popper.

Harry didn't think the Doctor liked that. "It's more just that we're outside the situation and have a different perspective," said Amy. "Me and the Doctor aren't even from the time with Voldemort in it. I know you're going to feel really angry about all this. But we only want to do the best thing and so do you." It was obvious she would have liked to conclude, "So we can all agree" but this self-evidently wasn't necessarily true.

Popper sighed and did not immediately reply. "I suppose it is a question of big and small, personal and impersonal. Sacrificing your conscience to do what you know to be the right thing is not sacrificing your conscience if you have a broad enough scale." He looked for confirmation and they nodded. "So what would you have me do?" he asked, running his hands down his face.

"You could disappear," said Draco promptly. "Though things would probably go on as they are without you. You could do something awful that put everyone off you and your ideas. There are probably more opportunities if you went back to just after it all happened."

"Nice for you, a Malfoy, that I have to undo all my work, is it not?" asked Popper.

"Oh, don't worry. We get ours," said Draco. Get a small setback, thought Harry.

"Perhaps you could leave back when it first happened. And like, what did you do when you were taking over? Did you put spells on things? Maybe you could take some of them off to make your side weaker?" said Amy.

"There were a lot of spells involved," said Popper. "I could go back to when they were cast and set timers on them. So they give out on us and so lead to our defeat. It's all so difficult. I would rather I wasn't killed, if it's all the same to you. I could try to pass off the spells giving

out on some quality innate to the pure-bloods' wards. But how should I not get us all killed or imprisoned? I wonder if I could arrange it so we lost a few Manors as a warning and when it became obvious how things were going we could flee or go into hiding." He spoke musingly, working things out.

"Good plan," said the Doctor, beginning to scrape his chair back.

"But I can't do it, I can't," Popper burst out, more instinctively than consciously refusing, as if he feared he literally couldn't make himself go ahead, looking a little like he might cry. "I can't sabotage the Muggleborn cause, my own cause, my life's work."

"Perhaps we could make some of the arrangements for you?" suggested Harry.

"Oh no. If I'm going to do it I won't shrink from my part in it. I'm ready. If I must be."

"Where do you want us to take you?" asked the Doctor.

"When I'd obtained the parchment I went home to tell my wife," said Popper. "So just when I arrive. I could tell her and then set up a strike against the great institutions as I did before, but while making those arrangements."

"Oh God," said Harry. "Your past self is going to be in your house at the same time as you. Your past self is going to be there for two years, doing everything you've been doing. We can't do it." He felt, for the first time, personally endangered. He really might never go home. "And all the other people who did things these two years! It's impossible."

"It's an emergency," said Draco. "It's no good abiding by all those rules about how you shouldn't go back in the past and drop a pin in case you kill your own grandfather. We go to Benedict's house. We drop this Benedict off. We snatch the old Benedict before anyone sees there's two of them. We kill him -- oh, that would kill you. No, we explain to him what's happening, Imperio him if we have to. He goes somewhere and keeps out of the way." His voice was feverish but decisive. Decisiveness was one of the tenets of Auror training, which made Harry

inclined to latch onto what Draco was saying. Auror training also stressed the importance of good decisions, though.

Popper, who had looked briefly hopeful at the idea the plan couldn't go ahead now said, "Perhaps I could be a lighthouse keeper. I have a distinct recollection of seeing an advertisement for a wizarding lighthouse keeper around that period."

"All right," said Draco. "So we grab that Benedict, keep him somewhere, and he can go off to be a lighthouse keeper. And either he'll disappear when as much time passes as originally got you here or he'll live there forever. It'll be fine. And there won't be lots of other past versions running around doing different things if we get Benedict in time, because we're going back to the moment when he makes things happen. Yes?"

"I think that is correct," said Popper. "I would like to explain it to myself, though. It is me having to go through that, after all, though I don't imagine I'll be much comfort."

"So, substantially different good plan. Let's try it," said the Doctor.

Harry was surprised to find he felt almost pleasantly keyed up, tapping his heels waiting for the TARDIS door to be opened. It opened on an empty room and they all gazed out at it with feelings of anticlimax. Then Popper Apparated in.

"Get him!" cried Draco, Harry and Amy already physically pulling him into the TARDIS.

"I'll just take us somewhere quiet," said the Doctor, and the TARDIS moved on.

Past Popper had backed away so his back was against the wall, his face pale. Present Popper advanced uncertainly towards him and patted his shoulder, his past self shrinking away. "You're going to have to go away for a bit; I'm going to take your place. Can you just do as you're told without making it difficult?" Present Popper said helplessly, begging for the inadequate to be accepted as adequate just this once.

"Are you really me? Or someone Polyjuiced?" Present Popper whispered in his ear. "But what's happening?"

"For reasons I really do not feel myself equal to explaining, I have to stop what I'm about to do, and I have to get rid of you. Just remember that I am you, really, and you want what I want."

"You have to be a lighthouse keeper," said Draco.

"A lighthouse keeper?"

"On an island, perhaps, where you won't affect much."

"But I don't want to," said Past Popper, confused and as if pointing out an inescapable obstacle.

"Please," said Present Popper. "It's for the best."

The Doctor moved the TARDIS on, and when it arrived at its destination he put a hand on Present Popper's back and nodded at the door like a teacher encouraging a parent to go while the child isn't crying.

Present Popper opened the door without thinking, then halted. "Just be all right," he told his past self. "Just go off and like it." He looked at the people who'd just ruined his life and frowned. "Goodbye," he said, as if he'd like to say more if he could think of it.

"So what do we do now?" asked Amy.

"We wait until we've gone out at Murdingate Street, and then we go in and go to bed," said the Doctor.

This meant a wait of a few hours. They explained things to Past Popper at a little more length. He seemed to grasp the reasons for his removal, but could not wrap his head round the suggestion he should become a lighthouse keeper. It was too out of the blue and seemed surreal to him. It seemed a good idea though -- a way of keeping him occupied, provided for and out of the way, and they intended to stick to it. Harry slumped down on the floor and closed his eyes, but couldn't manage to dose off. Draco was talking to Amy and the Doctor, belatedly having the kind of conversation people have when they first meet. He asked a lot of questions about where they came from and what they did. Harry gained a confused impression, but he decided all this was probably in a day's work for them.

Harry felt a sensation of bliss that the day was over when they entered the house. The Doctor left the TARDIS downstairs, with Past Popper inside it; apparently there was a bedroom in there. Harry collapsed into bed and stretched out his limbs, pointing his toes, and smiled, hardly noticing Draco thumping about next to him as he got settled. He wasn't thinking of the day just past, but softly sailing away into the waters of Lethe.

Draco said, "I can't believe you tried to offer up our world, our whole existence, just in case it would be better."

That had been early on in the Don't Break the World planning process, and it took a moment for Harry to recollect it. "Oh, that. I was hardly offering, I just wondered if it was the right thing."

"But the way you said it. Oh, you think it would be the right thing? Take this three hundred years off my hands, then, I'll just disappear."

Harry didn't know what was bothering him. "If I sounded casual, I didn't mean to be. But -- maybe it's a little like some people feel about house-elves -- I didn't want everything to be built on suffering for our sake. I know you're you, but doesn't everyone have moments where you just do seem smaller than a greater cause, like you don't consciously decide one is more

important than the other, you just know it and have to do what you have to do?" This was part of his "'I'm just normal" says the Boy Who Lived' spiel, not all of which he got to voice as often as he'd like in the normal way of things.

Long silence. "I don't think I've ever had one." Another pause. "So you're actually good then, are you? Funny thing, I don't think that ever occurred to me. I suppose that's why you've always stood out. You don't often get real people who are good like people in children's books or religious people. It's unnatural." Draco's tone was a mix of curiosity, jealousy, and deliberate disdain.

Harry could feel himself blushing a little in embarrassment and annoyance. Strange how being called good always did feel a little like being called a weirdo, with or without the tone. He was unsure whether to ignore Draco, put him down, or say something diffident.

"What does it feel like? Do you decide or does it just ooze out?" Draco's tone was now undisguised morbid curiosity, which made Harry even more uncomfortable. He did not want Draco Malfoy to be sharing his bed and demanding the source of his virtue.

"It feels like being an ordinary human being," he snapped, and rolled over.

"Or are you just a busybody? You came here just to make me do what I should be doing, after all."

Harry ignored him.

*

Over breakfast, Edmund announced that, "The great families are to congregate in Heckbury Hall at nine of the clock to discuss our campaign. Women and children shall attend; all, even those too young to wield a wand, must be prepared. All must come face to face with the

wickedness of insubordination and understand how to fight it,"

"How come they've still got a Hall?" asked Harry.

"The Whippers have several estates at their disposal, and keep one under the Fidelius Charm. It was not on the fatal parchment and has been disclosed to families in a similar position since this revolt began."

Edmund's teenage daughter Camilla and her younger brother Augustus had been passing a parchment back and forth and scribbling on it. Augustus now waved it under Edmund's nose. "Papa, we've drawn up a battle plan."

Edmund kindly dedicated the rest of his breakfast to pointing out the plan's childish faults, while his children scowled and with would-be cunning offered to demonstrate what they'd had in mind.

Harry, Draco, Amy and the Doctor were obviously expected to attend this meeting. This was concerning when they considered Past Popper's welfare. On top of everything else that was being thrown at him, it seemed cruel to leave him on his own for hours, still hardly understanding what was happening. The Doctor popped in to see how he was getting on, and said he wasn't too bad and kept saying "Lighthouse keeping. All right. All right."

The meeting was tiresome, partly because Harry's sympathies were on the opposite side, and partly because the problem with a meeting of "great families" was that everyone thought they were in charge. Harry ended up sitting next to Draco, in the third row of seats squeezed round a long table. He tried not to speak to Draco, lest he should appear too forgiving, too innocently set on finding the good in people. Not that Harry hadn't tried yesterday to treat him like anyone else instead of allowing himself the automatic snarls and jeers his face and name could have brought forth. He felt Draco looking at him for a while.

"It's strange how I've got used to people not being like this," Draco said, waving at the room.

"How'd you mean?"

"You know. Pure-bloods being all into themselves about it. Pure-blood pride, our place is at the top, above everyone else and all that. I've got brainwashed by the climate we have back home now; I don't know how it happened. I didn't really notice it had until I came here and things seemed a bit odder than I might have expected."

"It's good, though," said Harry, because it was, but not too enthusiastically because he knew that a lot of things people said to him they said because they were talking to Harry Potter.

"So. When do you think we can go home?" asked Draco.

"Oh, you want to go home now?"

"Now I want to go just to see if it's still there." Draco looked thoughtful; Harry thought he'd managed to remind him that maybe going home wasn't his only option.

"When the pure-blood families have their power back and we've sent Past Popper off. I do hope Present Popper and the rest of them manage to get away okay."

Harry was apprehensive about the course of action the pure-bloods would settle on. He hoped the idea wherein the pro-Muggleborn party managed to flee before their enemies even knew things had gone wrong for them would come off, and it wouldn't if the pure-bloods managed to defeat them under their own steam ahead of time. But then if it wasn't for Popper doing things differently he'd have remained in power. Luckily, the pure-blood faction favoured waiting.

"Make them think we are beaten," said some Black. "We must be seen to lament and bewail the fruitlessness of our attempts to rally. Then, when they begin to settle into the complacency of victory, we strike like a snake."

"Why must we conduct ourselves like cowards for any cause whatsoever? We have might and right on our side!" cried Ludovic Malfoy, quite distressed at the restraints his manly valour was to be placed under. Harry could have made snide remarks about how aghast he would be to witness his descendant's conduct when faced with Dementors or, indeed, anything alarming. But he didn't.

*

The next days or so were fairly dull. Draco could get along with his ancestors pretty well, but felt self-conscious, a little unwilling to do so in front of people who disapproved of them. Harry found them, if anything, better than he might have expected, so it was Amy and the Doctor who found Murdingate Street most difficult to flourish in. Having grasped that their sentiments were the wrong ones, they found it almost as difficult as Ludovic to subdue their oppositional impulse. Something about the Doctor made Harry think he ought to be good at playing the long game, but apparently not.

Things livened up when Harry was woken by Draco in the early hours of the morning. "Someone's calling your name!" he hissed agitatedly.

Indeed someone was, and Harry fell out of bed in excitement and haste to get himself to the window. "It's Hermione!"

She was in the street outside in the grey light, looking around her and calling "Harry? Harry?" louder and quieter alternately.

"We must let her in!" Harry started out the door.

"But what is she doing here?" came Draco's voice, more indignant and annoyed than excited, from behind.

"What are you doing here?" asked Harry breathlessly, appearing, from Hermione's point of view, out of nowhere.

"We found out something funny was going on; I can't say too much. What are you doing here?"

"I was looking for Draco, remember? Or do you? Remember him now? He turned out to be in the eighteenth century!"

"Oh, so Draco Malfoy does exist? We speculated he might. Well, hello, I'm sorry I don't remember you," Hermione said, holding out her hand.

"You don't like me much," said Draco, shaking it.

"But why have you come all the way here?" asked Harry. "And Rose --"

"To make sure you're all right, of course. Why are you still here? You've found Draco and everything."

"I thought time would stand still without me ... or something. Am I publicly missing?"

"No, no, it's just us. No one will know you've been away if you come back to where you left off."

"But --"

"It's a mystery," snapped Hermione.

"Oh, you mean the Ministry sent you?" said Harry, taking that as a reference to Hermione's usual work as an Unspeakable. "They worked out something was a bit off, then?"

Hermione's face registered a certain acknowledgment but she didn't reply. "So, what's keeping you here? Heaven knows all that twiddling is something to put off, but ..."

"It's a long story," said Harry. He kept noticing Draco out of the corner of his eye as he told it, wandering around them in his bare feet.

"That is what Benedict Popper is known for," Hermione said. "Staging an almost successful pro-equality rebellion and either messing it up or being outwitted by the pure-bloods' wards. How sad if he really had to pretend to mess it up. It must have hurt his self-respect a great deal."

"Don't rub it in. So as well as making sure everything turned out right, we've got Past Popper to settle down quietly."

"Past Popper? Oh, you did it that way. That's a bit of a shame, going the complicated route."

"That's what you get when you keep the better way a mystery," Harry retorted. In the wake of his earlier excitement, he was wondering if she was just what they needed. "Draco, you tell her the address, you're a Malfoy."

*

The Malfoys were not nearly as put out to see an extra face at breakfast as they should have been. Too preoccupied, apparently, to read loose morals into things, yet too careless to worry

about their secret spreading or the possibility that Hermione may be a spy.

Later in the day, they finally found out where Past Popper should inquire into opportunities for wizarding lighthouse keepers. Harry, the Doctor and Amy accompanied him, leaving Draco to tell Hermione "all about yourself, and it might jog my memory." These opportunities were not oversubscribed, and they were able to leave Past Popper behind them, about to embark on a new path in life. Harry could not have said they felt no guilt, but Past Popper was as aware and consenting as could be expected in his shell-shocked condition, and they felt just about able to leave him.

When they got home, Draco and Hermione were standing in the hall, looking edgy and expectant.

"The Ministry's been recovered!" said Draco. "No sign of the dissidents, they've all disappeared."

"Thank God for that," said Amy. "Isn't that the last thing we were waiting for? We can get going now!"

"Oh," said Draco, looking a little taken aback. "Now?"

They all looked at each other. "Might as well," said Harry.

Harry felt a little discombobulated himself as they all got into the TARDIS. He wondered, just as it became too late to decently say something, whether Draco ought to leave a note so as not to leave his ancestors always wondering. But as soon as the TARDIS took off, Draco yelled and flapped as something seemed to drag him across the floor and he actually passed through the walls. The Doctor stopped the TARDIS in a hurry and they got out to see what was wrong. Draco was getting off the floor, clutching his ribs. "What the fuck was that?" he demanded.

"I think you must be stuck to this time and locality," said the Doctor, pulling his hair a little

and frowning.

"I wonder what it was exactly that rejected you?" said Hermione.

"Is he really stuck?" asked Harry. He hadn't seriously considered the idea of going back without Draco, to a world that was entirely ignorant of Draco, and considering it now rather threw him.

"What's this twiddly wizard thing you were talking about?" asked Amy. "Should we try that?"

"So long. So bloody long," said Hermione vehemently.

One of the children came out to ask what the noise was about, and why weren't they talking with the other grown-ups? So it seemed best to postpone going into the problem for a while in order to go into the other room and join in the excited talk.

The first thing the family wanted to do was go back home, so it had to be postponed further until they were all settled somewhere. It was strange, being in the Malfoy Manor of three hundred years ago. It was only subtly different, and the effect was surprisingly disconcerting. The Malfoys rampaged all over the place looking for evidence of enemy occupation. Draco seemed to find its familiarity soothing, and looked around with a faint smile. As soon as they tried to talk to him he made an excuse to go and find an eighteenth-century Malfoy. Eventually the Doctor cornered him, seeing which the others flocked over.

"So what are we going to do about this, then?

"I don't know," said Draco. "Do we have to do anything?"

"It's our duty to make sure all is well," said Hermione, whether meaning the Ministry or their

duties as individuals, Harry didn't know.

"I don't know," Draco repeated. "I don't even know where I want to be now. Except, I can only be here, so maybe I might as well just want to be here." He sounded blank and unsure. They all squinted at him, sympathetically and as if sizing up the problem.

"There'll be a way," said Amy. "Well, okay, I go in for rash promises. But I'm sure there'll be a way!"

"It's not some terrible tragedy if there isn't," said Draco, hunching his shoulders in an unconscious, impatient shrug. "I don't need to be saved. At the end of the day, we're only talking about where I'm going to live."

"Your parents, though," said Harry, conscious of how he kept banging on about them, making them a rod to beat Draco with when he wanted to crack his composure.

"Oh ... everyone has parents who mind. I mean, apart from the people who don't. It's a bit telling, isn't it, that all you can say about going back is, 'your parents will miss you'."

"Obviously," said Hermione firmly, "We will look for a way to solve this problem. That is the first thing."

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It was a bit awkward, getting hold of books. The important ones were all spread out among private owners, not yet in centralised libraries. It was this, as well as a sense of duty, that encouraged Hermione to report to the newly reinstated Ministry. The Department of Mysteries was somewhat distant from what it became, and they were delighted by Hermione, as if she was some sort of angel sent to herald their achievements.

"They're all wizards," she said. "I thought the wizarding world was better about that than the Muggle. And they keep clutching my hand and entreating me to 'go on, dear lady'. It's rather tiresome and I don't know if I want to tell them too much. I mean, If we only made advancement because I went and told them all about it -- it's all so complicated and anyway, it seems like cheating, doesn't it? Not making a discovery properly."

"Did they help you track down anything useful?" asked Harry.

"Well, they've found me some books. And someone suggested that looking into the theory of Apparition might be rewarding."

Hermione pointedly handed Harry and Draco a couple of books. Harry dutifully slogged through a bit of his. He thought he was actually managing to understand it, but as he understood it, it was a lot of hypothetically, deliberately paradoxical ruminating about space and presence and being and not being. Draco, looking boring and depressed, pushed his away and seemed to descend into his own thoughts.

The Doctor picked up a book, read a lot, fast, and asked awkward questions. Hermione was pleased and stimulated at first but became flustered, even angry, her face pink. "I can't know everything. I only have one life and I've only spent it one way." She leafed busily through her book as if looking for something, rounding off the conversation, recharging her politeness batteries. She spotted something. "Now this is the kind of thing I was thinking of. Hmm, early Apparators soon abandoned this method, why's that?"

"Explain, then," said Draco.

"I think the idea is you have to remake yourself -- not so much physically as mental and magical reconstruction -- to set yourself down in another location. It suggests it's like using yourself as your mode of transport, making a bridge of yourself, stretching between one place and another. Or like using your imagination and concepts as fuel. It's interesting, but when you think of the Splinching risk with ordinary Apparition --"

"Let me see," said Draco. After frowning over the page for a few minutes he said, "I think I'd like to try it. Just to see if it works, in a way."

"I wonder if you could do it on other people's behalf," said the Doctor.

"I'm sure it would be illegal," said Hermione. "Draco, you were just saying you didn't feel the situation was very urgent. As a representative of the Ministry --"

"So am I!" protested Harry and Draco together.

"-- I don't know if I could condone this unless someone is able to file this under desperate measures. When you think about it the consequences might be Horcrux-like. Or you might end up like you'd been Kissed by a Dementor. This is not something you do as a casual experiment," Hermione finished, placing almost equal importance on professional and personal concerns of conscience.

Harry caught Amy's eye and they both looked away. Harry guessed they were both feeling the same thing; apart from the notion Draco ought to be in his proper place, a guilty desire for Draco to go ahead just to see what would happen.

Draco was silent for a long while. He raised his eyes and looked earnestly at Hermione. "Well, sometimes when I'm at a loss in a situation, I prefer to appear like I don't care about the situation. I don't like revealing too much about myself or being open about my feelings. So getting home may mean a little more to me than I suggested."

"I'm not that much of a sucker for anyone who talks my talk," said Hermione. "But. You're really prepared to do this, knowing the consequences may be dire? You should probably sign something."

Draco brushed his hands together, a little nervous now. "I really want to do it."

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"You do it," said Hermione, nudging Draco and lowering her wand. A little black number floated out of sight. Draco took a piece of parchment from her, on which numbers were written, time and space coordinates apparently. They were supposed to reach though the years, the first one from Hermione's wand ending up just outside twenty-first century Malfoy Manor. The last number was sent out and hovered just above Draco's head.

"So. This is it," said Draco. Harry felt suddenly struck by the knowledge that he might never see Draco whole again.

"Draco," he said, and stepped forward to shake his hand. Draco laughed shakily.

"So it's kind of like a Pensieve?" Harry had asked of this next bit.

Draco pointed his wand at the side of his head and swallowed, like someone about to shoot themselves. Harry hadn't noticed he'd done anything, but the quality of the air about Draco's head changed; a dim nimbus of orange-yellow, like the light from a street-lamp, perhaps. Then something seemed to ignite. Draco was monochrome; the white very bright as if a light was shining through him. A torrent of something -- light, energy -- poured from him, a stream stretching as far as Harry could see. After a first shot of luminous white like an unformed Patronus, there was a lot of dinginess, shades of grey and brown. Then a ribbon of jade green wrapped among them as the grey faded to a ribbon entwined with the green, almost drowned in great bursts of sun-bright yellow and red. Lapis lazuli blue, purple and bronze, swirling into delicate almost shapes that blurred on the verge of forming patterns. It reminded Harry of mixing concentrate juice and water. There was a startling force about it all that made them stand back as if from a bolt of lightning, in suitably wary admiration.

Harry remembered to look back at Draco. He was thin, almost gone, like when you could still

read the writing on the parchment in the fire just before it went black and flaked. Harry could see furniture through him, though the black and white outlines were still fiercely delineated. He looked back to see a cloud of charcoal grey like exhaust fumes, just in time to miss Draco vanishing altogether. And then nothing. Harry felt an odd sense of shame, whether at letting him do it or seeing it he didn't know.

"I wonder if that was his soul," said Hermione.

"Wonder if everybody's looks different," said Amy.

Harry stuck his hands in his pockets and they shuffled a little.

The Doctor clapped his hands. "Well, that's done. Only thing to do now is to get ourselves to the other end and see if he's there to meet us."

They weren't quite ready to jump into the TARDIS at once. They'd somehow neglected to get themselves and their things, such as they were, together.

"It's like a weird sort of coming back from holiday," said Amy.

"Like someone's died," said Harry, gloomily, getting everyone down.

"It does seem weird we won't be here again," said Hermione, hesitating on the street outside the TARDIS. "I think maybe just because we so definitely won't."

The Doctor held the door open for her. Harry thought, somehow, that leaving and not coming back to places was something he did.

Harry wished, as he heard that noise again, that the TARDIS took longer, like a train journey.

There ought to be a journey between two points. Or perhaps he ought to be used to that. Perhaps it was the travelling so quickly through time that disconcerted him. Maybe he wouldn't be able to bear the tension, anyway. He remembered that Draco never did leave a note for the Malfoys.

The sun was shining brightly back home in the early autumn, this particular year of their own. It got in Harry's eyes as he opened the door and stepped out. He shut them for a moment, not wanting to look around and have to see or not see. He opened them. There was Draco, scuffing his feet in the road outside the Manor.

"Draco!" exclaimed Harry in relief, looking forward to the cosiness of them all going somewhere to talk it all over and then returning to their lives.

"Where?" asked Amy.

Draco looked up and Harry went to meet him. "Oh," said Harry. "So you didn't get it quite right."

One side of his face looked smooth and cool and milk pale, more like ivory or marble than skin. On that side, an eye with an iris so silver it seemed to shine nestled between almond shaped lids. There was a faint, vulnerable purple shadow underneath. There was a shadow underneath a high, sharp cheekbone. Other parts of his face were pallid, pasty in an oddly dingy way, the tone not solid white but showing veins and blotched. This eye was smaller and the flat grey of a pigeon without the sparkly green and purple bits. The lips were thin and the chin an aggressively pointing triangle. His body was hidden by robes, but seemed to struggle to be both weedy and scrawny and willowy and lithe.

"Your face isn't quite right," said Harry. "I mean," he added, not wishing to be alarmist, "You've still got features and everything."

"Your face isn't quite right," said Draco. His tone wasn't quite right either, a generic drawl, not snappish enough.

The Doctor came and waved his arms around like a windmill. The tips of his fingers sort of hit Draco's shoulder, and sort of didn't. They didn't entirely impact, and they didn't visibly go through, as if through a ghost, either. It was more like the Doctor's fingers and Draco's shoulder were in the same place at the same time, unable to have any influence on each other. "So what's happening, then?" asked the Doctor.

Harry reached out and gingerly prodded Draco's chest. It felt like people usually did through clothes. "Draco's here. He looks a bit damaged; it's hard to describe. I'm not sure how he is in himself. I don't know why you can't see him."

"He must still be erased in some way from the history of this world. That's interesting."

"I remember him!" said Hermione. "Goodness, it feels so strange to have all these old memories come up after meeting someone."

"So is he going to get back properly?" asked Amy. "Can he hear me? Can you hear me talking, Draco?"

"I can hear," said Draco, screwing his face up at them all standing around him in a circle, sort of looking at him. His face crumpled a little, like a child about to cry. "Something difficult happened, didn't it? I can't handle it!" He put his arms over his head.

"I think we should go and see if everyone's still forgotten about him. Let's go in and see his parents. Maybe they'll see him," said Hermione.

They started to trot up the path to the Manor, leaving Harry awkwardly facing Draco. "Draco, would you like to come inside?" he asked, wondering if he'd have to take his arm and guide him. He felt miserable. If Draco had become permanently fucked up, not just his existence, but his actual wholeness -- it was so ugly and upsetting, that someone could get broken in an accident like a piece of china.

Draco looked around. "I'm at home, aren't I?" He set his shoulders back, set his head high and marched towards the house. Harry followed him feeling shocked from the impact of a disaster not yet confirmed. He also felt the strangeness of having travelled so far and come back to the same time and place he'd been in the middle of, so long and not so long ago, but at any rate not now like he thought it was. It was like being coming back to a half-drunk cup of tea and being disconcerted not to find it cold.

Up ahead Harry saw Lucius himself opening the door to Hermione, and quickened his pace. Lucius's face was screwed up in the confused beginnings of distress, like his son's.

"You were just here?" Lucius said. "About Draco and I'm sure -- we didn't say we didn't have a son, did we? What was it you wanted to say about him?"

"That's Father, isn't it?" said Draco.

"I'm afraid it's rather complicated," said Hermione.

"I hate it when he worries about me, because I'm not doing what I should, or he thinks life isn't being good enough for me. It doesn't make me feel guilty as much as sad. He's only really suited for life a certain way and he hasn't got what he wanted. It feels like we're in decline; and we're important enough that it'll say somewhere in some book, you know, when we stop being important, and he's got quite a long time to live through the end. It's all right for me; I can adapt and be part of other things if I have to." Draco said all this in a sad, thoughtful tone that yet had no feeling. A recording of a feeling, something robotic. Harry was glad it was robotic and no one else could hear to respond to it, because it was a little embarrassing. He felt he had more of a handle on what Draco had done to himself.

"So you mean he's actually here now?" asked Lucius, after Hermione had explained.

"Well, Harry says so. And presumably he actually is."

"Hello, Father!" said Draco, waving his arm as a gesture.

"He says hello. He's waving," said Harry.

Narcissa, who had been leaning silently against the doorframe, waved back. "Darling, hello." Harry glanced at Draco, but he didn't seem moved to give voice to his feelings on his mother.

"It all seems very unsatisfactory and half-finished like this," said the Doctor. "I think we should go inside and see if we can sort it out."

"So what's wrong with him then?" asked the Doctor when they were all sitting in a drawing room. "Apart from being invisible?"

"It's like ... I think he tried to think what things were most important about himself. And he was exaggerating about some of it, like his physical appearance. Some of him looks like he'd hope he was at his most arrogant and vain, some of him looks like if he was looking at himself all depressed and picky. So he really looks quite weird right now. And he hasn't said much. He's confused and not very in the moment."

"I hate feeling I am at a disadvantage," said Draco. "Sometimes I try to be humble and love the world and be happy that everything exists, but mostly I just want the world to love me. No one ever gives me enough so I have to pretend I didn't want anything anyway. So in the end I have to be bitterly resigned and I actually quite like that." He was looking at Harry.

"Fascinating," said Harry.

"I wish I knew more about your magic," said the Doctor. "But I think it might be a good idea to find people who know stuff about Draco. It might have to be just you lot, but maybe other people have remembered him as well. And maybe we can come up with a way to put all the

bits together."

"We could use a Pensieve," said Hermione.

"But what if people aren't just parts? What if there's something in the middle that makes it all real? What if he'd just be a better quality robot?"

"Better quality is still better quality," said Hermione. "I find it hard to believe he's worse off than Voldemort and you know, even Voldemort wasn't hopelessly not right. He could have repented. If he really had, he'd be whole."

"He's got to be okay now. He's almost there," said Amy. "Souls are indestructible, right?"

"They can't be hurt physically," said Hermione, which was not an unconditional assurance.

Normally Harry would have looked on the bright side, and pointed it out to those who needed it most. He'd been trained to do so. Now he felt an urge to dwell on the worst and make others admit it. He'd been trained to deal with irretrievable disaster. He'd been trained to be imperturbable. These had been beautiful gifts for his life in general, like religion was for some people, he supposed. He didn't know why he now felt sullen instead of smooth.

Hermione went to find a Floo, so she could see if Draco officially existed at the Ministry. She cried out in surprise as she entered the next room.

They all went to see what the matter was. Everyone stopped short at the doorway and Harry, bringing up the rear, had to peer over their shoulders. The room appeared to be not a room, but outdoors. Except this outdoors had a ceiling. Or was it after all the sky, a square patch brought somehow low? More likely it was a Hogwarts ceiling affair.

"This room is where we came in?" said Amy. "I said I'd like to see dinosaurs and he --" she faced

the Doctor -- "said that never ended well and he'd show me Earth before humans if I liked. I said go on then and we ended up in a room, a proper room here. Then in another room we found that crack. And we never had time to work out what that was all about."

The room was thick with trees. The floor was earth, oozy with swamps and brooks and most of it impossible to stand on without sinking.

"I've never seen it before," said Narcissa. "Where did it come from?"

Amy ventured past the door, squidging mud over her boots. She peered through the trees. "It's got four walls, normal walls. Weird, isn't it?"

"It's the crack. I'm sure it's the crack," said the Doctor. "It's like this space doesn't know when it's supposed to be anymore. Or this bit of time doesn't know where it's supposed to be. Either way, the old version is squishing itself inside the new. No wonder Draco got lost."

"So this is the ground before the Manor used to stand on it? I see. Would you like to sort it all out, since apparently you know everything?" Lucius said.

"Probably best if everyone just vacates the premises for the time being. It must be incredibly unstable," said the Doctor, pulling Amy back into the hall and seeming not to notice Lucius's tone.

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A little later Harry found himself sitting with Draco in a lounge in a posh wizarding hotel. He wasn't quite sure where the others had gone.

"So what's gone wrong, Potter?" asked Draco. "What did you do this time?"

Harry said nothing.

"Swallowed your tongue, Potter? Why won't you pay attention to meee?" asked Draco plaintively.

Harry couldn't reply, as a heavy, middle-aged wizard sat himself down in Draco's chair. They both seemed undisturbed, but Harry didn't want to reply to Draco in case the other man thought he was talking to him.

Hermione made a brief appearance, but only to leave Lucius and Narcissa with Harry.

Lucius cast a Muffliato and asked, "Where is Draco?"

"He's sitting on the same chair as that man. He's fine."

Harry felt awkward, spending time with the Malfoys. He could take Narcissa and Draco as two not particularly nice but ordinary people, but he was not really willing to deal with Lucius on a social level. It was awkward, too, that Lucius and Narcissa kept bobbing forwards to peer round Harry at the wizard who in some sense concealed Draco. They scrutinised him as if he were one of those snakes that swallowed goats, and they might discern the form of their son in his bulk. The wizard seemed unperturbed, but Harry felt happier with his head buried in a magazine, gritting his teeth every time the corner of his eye picked up those blonde heads craning forwards.

"Where have you been?" Harry asked crossly when Hermione, Amy and the Doctor finally turned up.

"Well, you have to talk to people a bit," said Hermione. "We booked a suite, by the way, come

on."

"I take it he sort of exists now?" asked Harry.

"It seems that when he came back the knowledge of him switched back on. Everyone who knows him found they suddenly just happened to think of him with particular clarity. I said what we wanted was to flesh him out, different angles, the ways people see him, what he seems like to the casual observer, what people like about him, what they don't like, all those little bits you're not going to get yourself. I've got Ron, people from the Spirit Division, teachers from school, Goyle and Parkinson, an ex-boyfriend, not many friends, I have to say, and of course everyone here. I want them all to come here in a few hours and see what they have to say before putting the memory into a Pensieve. Basically it's This Is Your Life, Draco Malfoy. Then we'll play it by ear, maybe he can go inside the memories or just drink it all, people with amnesia do that sometimes. And then we'll see. Hopefully it'll be like magical healing except you know, spiritual. When wounds are filled in," said Hermione.

"I don't need your healing," said Draco. "I stand alone. I am aloof and self-sufficient. I am a stoic. I never show my weaknesses. I have no weaknesses."

Draco had certainly brought his idealism with him, thought Harry. Or whatever you called that.

"What makes you think it'll work?" asked Harry. "Is it a proper thing? Is it in books?"

"Not often that you ask if something's in books," said Hermione.

"I think magic is probably more about doing the right thing than anything else. What feels right. What you really need in a particular time. What you think ought to be the answer to the question whether it's a proper answer or not. Poetic justice, maybe," the Doctor said as if he was feeling his way, curious as to where he'd end up.

"Actually, it's often very scientific and logical," said Hermione. "But sometimes it's like that.

Some of the big things are, to be fair. But you think scientifically, don't you?"

"Sometimes you have to get into the spirit of things," said the Doctor.

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Alcohol flowed freely. There might have been a party mood if it had not been to foster Dutch courage. As it was, the undercurrent of urgency and curiosity was not unpleasant, though no one was looking forward to Narcissa and Lucius's reaction if the attempt failed. Harry wondered how Draco would feel about it if his properly knowing self was there. It was not a birthday party, nor yet a deathday party, or even a come-back-to-life party, quite. Harry wasn't sure what people were going to say. He was sat on a couch at the back of the room, next to Neville -- "You can give an insight into his bullying side!" Hermione had said enthusiastically -- watching Hermione organise things (there was a schedule, apparently) while the Doctor seemed to be talking to a lot of people. Galvanising them into spending their evening giving speeches about Draco Malfoy with feeling, hopefully.

"Alright," said the Doctor. "Let's start. He clapped a hand on the shoulder of a woman from the Spirit Division, dark-haired and in her early thirties. "Let's have you facing Draco. Where is he, Harry?"

"Lying on his back on the floor. Draco, do you want to sit up or something?" Harry wondered if he ought to try and get Draco over to the front.

"Go fuck yourself, Potter."

"He's still lying on the floor, about there."

"Just say how he seems to you. Anything's a help, nothing's the wrong thing to say," said

Hermione.

"If you're sure then, to start with he has his coffee black with two sugars. He's late almost every morning," the woman from the Spirit Division flung out a little nervously as if worried she wasn't getting it right and pointing out that they'd asked for mundanity. "He can be quite funny when he lets himself go but usually he's a bit, I don't know, like someone's put a medium sized curse on him and won't take it off until he's finished a task. I think he's conscious all the time that what he's got isn't what he was expecting, and it all went wrong. Like he feels ill-fated. It's not like I mind that much about what he thinks about his job, but sometimes you particularly notice it and get irritated. He's pretty good at the job but it's funny how much he minds the ghosts when they're disturbed, and of course that's most of the ones we see. I suppose it helps him want to get rid of them. When he started he tried to hide it but in the end he had to say yeah, I really I don't like them and he didn't even mind that it became a joke that Draco would be shaking in his boots every time he was sent on a job. I guess he's like most people, there's good things and bad things. I'm used to him being about, we get on fine." She shrugged and looked at Hermione for permission to stop. When Hermione nodded she stepped back, first with an expression of relief but then worried, as if anxious Draco wasn't going to be okay.

A little later, Pansy spoke nervously, wiping her hands on her robes. "I used to have a crush on you. Obviously. When I was about fifteen I was sure I was going to be the next Mrs. Malfoy. Then I thought maybe we'd just have a smaller thing and I'd see how it went. And then obviously things went wrong with everything anyway, but even apart from that it became obvious that sort of thing wasn't actually going to happen. I thought we probably wouldn't be friends anymore, that our friendship wasn't really that strong to cross what seemed like a natural break, and we were all thinking about our reputations and I thought we'd probably bring each other down, or at least that you'd think so. And we haven't been like, best friends since then or anything, but we do catch up regularly. You made the first step after the end of, well, the end, and you still do, often. It's nice that you want to keep that connection. It's like a bridge between who we were and who we turned out to be for both of us, I think.

I suppose I should talk about what you're like, but somehow it's harder to say particular things than I thought. When you were younger you were very self-assured and you were good at sweeping people along with you. You were always trying to do things, get people on your side, get house points, bring the people you didn't like down a level. It was like a game for you, and I think it's actually quite stressful, looking at life like it's a game. You're more relaxed now, even if it is because it's like being permanently embarrassed -- or, I suppose people want it to be worse than embarrassment, if you were on the wrong side. You still take against people but it's more like the way some people enjoy complaining but they don't mean much by it. You

accept things how they are and I don't think you're as -- miserable is maybe too strong -- dissatisfied as even you think you are." She tried hopelessly to make Draco out, talking, Harry noticed, directly to him, as few others had. When she finished she gave a little wave in Draco's general direction.

The ex-boyfriend -- no one Harry knew, said, "I don't know if I'm going to be much good. Things ended pretty badly and at the time I literally didn't have a good word to say about him. Like, sometimes you just have enough of a person, it's like you're allergic. He was so hard and mean and difficult. He had to get his own way all the time. He had to have the last word on everything. You always had to give in. And he was always putting you down. You'd talk to him about it and he said he didn't even know why he did it, he couldn't stop himself, but he didn't mean it. It took the joy out of a lot of stuff."

He took a deep breath. "Okay, I need to say something good. He always paid you a lot of attention. Sometimes negative but not always. He gets interested in you. He remembered all the details. It felt like he knew you better than anyone else and it's surprising how good it feels that someone really knows you; they don't even have to like you. And he wasn't one of those people who makes everything difficult as soon as you want to go anywhere or do anything because they think of all the things that are bound to go wrong. He thought everything was easy. Not that that means he could actually do them."

"Harry, you go," said Hermione.

Harry was startled; it had been over an hour and the coming and going of the speakers had become a little hypnotic.

"Er. Okay," he said, unsure whether he should stay where he was, nearer Draco, or go to the front of the room, and ending up scuttling to the front, because he wasn't sure he wanted to talk about Draco to his face. "I know him from school, obviously. Actually I first met him in Diagon Alley and I could tell at once he wasn't my sort of person. He was patronising even if you were friends with him, from what I saw. And obviously we were rivals all through school. If you know someone doesn't like you and is going to be happy if you fail, it's going to make you hate them and want to beat them even more." Harry decided maybe he actually did want to talk to Draco. "Draco, I don't know if you're actually listening -- if you want to know what I remember most about you it's that you weren't that bad, take it whatever way you like. You didn't really make good choices but you had the chance to make worse choices than you did.

You've got a moral compass and you could have made everything so much worse if you didn't. And I mostly felt sorry for you after the bathroom thing, because you obviously weren't coping with it all. So in the end I thought you were a pretty ordinary boy, all told. I haven't found it that hard to get along with you just recently, I suppose."

It felt like he should have said something more or different, but it was difficult to think in the heat of the moment. Perhaps he should have written something down.

"I think that's it," said the Doctor not long later.

"Oh. The moment of reckoning," said Harry. He went and stood by Draco, who he'd thought might be asleep. Draco cracked a (pigeon grey) eye open and stared at him suspiciously. "He doesn't look improved so far."

"He's really here, is he? And he's going to be his own self if it goes well?" asked the ex-boyfriend, sounding as if in that case he might leave early.

"Possibly," said Hermione distractedly. She seemed unhappy now that it had come to the pivotal moment. "I believe you can copy Pensieve memories, perhaps we should do that first."

"Can't you just see first?" asked Narcissa, looking crushed at the thought of a delay.

"Look, Draco. Come here," said Harry, making up his mind.

Draco got up off the floor. "What is it, Potter?"

"Drink this."

"Oh, the high and mighty Potter speaks. Poisoned it, I daresay," said Draco, taking the basin

nonetheless.

"The basin's gone!" someone exclaimed.

"Is he doing it?" asked Amy as Harry watched Draco, his lips at the basin, thinking go on, go on, barely breathing.

Draco began to drink steadily and Harry felt a surge of triumph as a milky blue haze at once surrounded him. It swirled round him busily, hiding him from view. Then there he was, looking so particularly like himself, giving the basin a puzzled dirty look and brushing fragments of mist away from his sleeves.

"What the hell was that?" he asked just before his parents stepped forwards to hug him.

"Thank goodness, I was convinced it was going to go horribly wrong. How lovely to see you!" said Hermione.

Draco's aghast face looked over his mother's shoulder at all the people mostly beaming at him proudly. "Weren't you just talking about me?"

"I wouldn't think about that if I were you," said Harry.

Now that Draco was all present and correct, people welcomed the chance to relax and talk about something other than Draco. Draco, frozen in horror, was handed a drink by Harry. "I'm nothing like that! Nothing at all!" he protested.

Harry almost pointed out that he wouldn't have been here if there hadn't been plenty of truth told, but it seemed kinder not to. Few would like to have their noses rubbed in the cold hard reality of the figure they cut in others' eyes.

"Time for you to go, isn't it? Now you've saved the day?" asked Draco. Harry thought he was talking to him before seeing the Doctor at his side. "That's the point of you, isn't it?"

"I'm not sure I've really saved the day," said the Doctor. "I don't think I can do anything about the crack in your house. Which might eat the universe next. And come to think of it, I haven't been terribly useful, have I?"

"Well, who shines next to Potter and Granger, here?" said Draco. "Do you think all this will get into the books?" he asked Harry abruptly.

"I don't think we should tell people about the Benedict Popper bit, it'd probably worry them. But I expect the crack thing will, and you ending up in another century, and how you came back and got put back together. Why, do you want it to?"

"I was just thinking how it compared to anything else people will say I did. I should have done something brave and redeeming, shouldn't I? Somehow I didn't think of it."

"You still could," said Harry, but Draco looked unenthused and shook his head slightly.

"Be a bit of a nuisance for your family if you have to just fence the Manor off and leave it alone," said Harry.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe the change will be good for them. We should hand it over to the Department of Mysteries, and the Unspeakables can all jump in the crack and see where it takes them. Oh God, they should, maybe then I'd get to do Hermione Granger: My Verdict."

When most people had gone home they stood outside the TARDIS and both sides said how interesting it had been to meet each other. Harry felt a pang as he watched the TARDIS fade. The Doctor seemed like such a long story and he'd have liked not only to know more about what had already been, but to follow it in hope it didn't go too badly wrong when, as surely it

must, some kind of final reckoning or downfall came. He felt as if he'd missed an opportunity, not finding out more about him and Amy. The last few days spent with them as hastily accepted colleagues hadn't even allowed him to properly put his original suspicions to bed. Now he felt as if these days had been a comet that had flashed past almost too quickly to make an impression and he was left squinting at the fading tail. So many things he could have paid more attention to and wouldn't see again!

Harry went back to his own flat. He walked around it before going to bed, looking at everything in absurd puzzlement. It would take him a while to get used to familiarity and predictability. He felt oddly solitary, too. No longer did he have the sense of danger and responsibility he and only a few other people shared and could share. The end of the war had been similar, he supposed, though bigger, but that had faded away more gradually and he still shared almost everything with those people. Now the Doctor and Amy were gone and Draco, like a coachman turning back into a rat, was no longer a companion but Draco Malfoy. Oh well. Work was always, or at least often, exciting and he'd soon get back into the swing of things.

The next morning, beginning the process of getting back into the swing, Harry remembered where it had all begun; Draco was part of his job. He should drop by the hotel; see how Draco was getting on and possibly, if he was up to scratch, interview him regarding Villan.

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"So how do you feel?" asked Harry. "Reborn or just badly put together with scrap metal?"

"I feel physically well, I suppose," said Draco. "I'm wondering how I can make a plan to be as different as possible to everything they said."

"I'm sure it was hideously embarrassing, but what did people say that you hated that much? Wasn't it mostly 'he's pretty normal, sometimes he's nice, sometimes he's nasty'?"

"That was it, really. This was it, the ultimate weighing up of what I'd done, what I was to people, and it just wasn't fucking good enough. All, he's not that nice but there's not that much harm in him, not like it's something to give me credit for but just that I couldn't manage to do much harm. So now I'm gnashing my teeth, thinking, I'll show them, except as you've probably guessed, I can't think how." Draco was obviously brimming to the point of overflow to be sharing this with Harry.

"Nobody's really that great. Nobody you know, anyway. It'll probably piss you off, using me as an example, but nobody could say anything especially impressive about me if it wasn't for Voldemort. And to go on about what people might say about me some more, people might say things I did were good for other people. Why do they care about the people things were good for? Because they just were them, and that's all people really need. They don't care about the things that might make someone sound like they were the most a person could be, they care about individual okay people."

Draco said, "You must be saying it wrong. That sounds incredibly depressing. Okay is okay, that's your message to the world? No wonder Snape said you were mediocre."

Harry shrugged. "There you are then. I'm Harry Potter and I'm fine with being mediocre." Having intended only to be polite and cheer Draco up a little, he'd got embroiled in an argument veering to the philosophical, and he didn't know where he wanted to go with it. "Do you want to talk about Villan today?"

"I'd forgotten all about that. Oh go on then, while you're here."

Draco had been at Villan's house to exorcise a ghost -- "I don't think it was his murder victim or anything, but you never know" -- and while there, he had seen boxes piled up under the stairs, boxes labelled "Thestral Bliss" (The Aurors had decided that Villan had probably genned up on Muggle drug terminology for inspiration. It was usually shortened to Thestral, which suggested some kind of opening of the doors of perception) that Villan had quickly thrown robes over. Later, reading in the papers about the wave of addiction sweeping the wizarding world, and the dangerous new drug behind it, he'd thought it his duty to get a few brownie points by adding his two penn'orth.

"I think that's everything we need from you. You'll get a date for the hearing, and then you just have to turn up at the Wizengamot and say it again."

"All right," said Draco, looking a bit wistful as Harry left.

The next thing Harry had to do was place tracking spells on Villan, to make sure he didn't leave the country before his trial. This involved tracking Villan down in the first place, and he found him in the yard outside the hotel where the Malfoys were still staying at the Ministry's expense, Malfoy Manor in the process of being accepted as a donation to the Department of Mysteries. Harry stood by the big metal bins, and listened to Villan and Draco Malfoy making gruff farewells on the other side. When Villan had left Harry almost forgot the tracking spell and quickly aimed it at his back before stepping out.

"Just agreed to be bought off?"

Draco crossed his arms and raised his eyebrows at his feet.

"To prove something to us all, I suppose? I'm afraid being bought off by drug dealers is mediocre even if you're trying to go bad."

"Well, there you are. I'm just being my mediocre self."

"The good news is you don't have to abide by promises made to criminals that break the law in themselves. Hand me the money and turn up to that hearing. You can testify that he attempted to bribe you as well as the rest."

Draco's face moved about in a slightly odd way, tugged at the corners by conflicting emotions. Sullenness, defiance, surrender, resentment, and also a certain gratification. Or not gratification but a wanting. He took a bag of Galleons out of his pocket and pushed it hard into Harry's hand. "You know what, Potter? I've always fancied you a bit, and I think you have too, at times. Fancied me, that is. Yourself, always," said Draco, disintegrating into

awkwardness as he went on.

"Is this some kind of -- I just implied. I wasn't going to tell anyone, what -"

"No, just for fun, not some kind of manoeuvre. Want to sleep with me?"

Harry stared at Draco, in shock and in consideration. He had been mysteriously pleasing to the eye ever since the malfunction a few days previous; so thoroughly himself. Harry found his eyes drawn to the misleadingly tough line of his mouth. Maybe it would be fun. He could do with some misguided sex after all the worry he'd had recently. Rolling around naked would be an amusing epilogue to his association with Draco Malfoy. Drops of rain began to fall, as he was making up his mind. "Go on then," he said, and began leading the way though Draco, probably on purpose, overtook him on the way up to his room.

Draco wasn't a bad kisser. A bit too gentle and cautious. Harry went in with more attack to encourage him. They sat on the bed next to each other, knees facing each other, mouths sliding. Harry's hands were firm on Draco's shoulder blades and Draco's hand was warm on Harry's lower back. It was surprisingly long before they took their clothes off. Harry fell on top of Draco once they were naked, taking his cock in his hand without actually doing anything and rocking his pelvis against Draco's, so Draco moaned and pushed up into his hand, hoping for more stimulation. Apart from the novelty of getting Draco Malfoy naked, he really was pretty lithe and appealing -- possibly better looking with his clothes off than on. When Draco turned onto his stomach, knees drawn up and apart, his fingers splayed on the pillows, Harry prepped him and eased into him while lightly biting his earlobe.

"Come on Potter, harder, faster," said Draco, putting on a bossy air and shuddering with pleasure after the word "harder".

Afterwards they lay uncovered by the duvet, mostly silent and listening to the rain. Harry drifted off for a while, feeling complacent and smug.

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It was not really the epilogue to their association, because they did it again several times in the next couple of weeks. Harry enjoyed it; their interaction was surprisingly calm and low pressure. They didn't talk much about the knowledge they already had of each other, keeping it as a wry awareness making everything they did say and do vaguely amusing. Harry began to find he had urges of physical fondness towards Draco; smoothing his hair, putting his fingers between Draco's, kissing the back of his neck.

He hoped, of course, that Draco would turn up to Villan's trial and say his piece. The Auror Department had managed to dig up possible links to murders and it seemed more desirable than ever that they should at least get him for the manufacture and distribution of illegal potions.

One evening when Harry was at home, he got an Owl. "Why do you have your Floo and Apparition fucking blocked?" he read in Draco's writing. Harry would have thought the answer to that question was obvious. "Come to me, it's an emergency." Dreading whatever new trouble was about to descend, Harry Flooed to the foyer of the hotel and went up to Draco's room.

Draco was sitting on the edge of his bed. Also on the bed was a comb. "What's the matter?" Harry asked impatiently as Draco just continued to look tightly contained.

"There's been a bit of a problem. I'm not really sure how much of a problem it is. Can you try to have your personal hat on before your Auror hat?"

"What have you done?" asked Harry, groaning.

Draco took this as encouragement. "Villan came round here to make sure I was still on board. I think he was getting more nervous about his chances. He wanted me to leave the country. I said no, but tried to convince him I was still going to lie for him. I obviously didn't do it well enough because he tried to kill me. I was already backing away from him and I fell over and his curse didn't hit me and I was able to curse him before he tried again. So then he was dead

and I panicked; he was taking up a lot of space and I didn't want to look at him and I was worried in case someone else came in. So I transfigured him into a comb."

"Oh, what," said Harry, looking at the comb on the bed.

"Then I wanted to see if I could change him back, and I couldn't. Then I didn't know what to do, so I Owled you."

"Well, it was self-defence. You probably won't get done for murder. But transfiguring the body makes things a bit more complicated, and was really fucking stupid."

"I thought you could see if you could change him back," Draco said pointedly.

Harry tried, looking gingerly at the comb, expecting it to transform into a corpse spread out over the bed. Draco quickly got off the bed, expecting the same thing. But nothing happened.

"I expect I fucked up the transfiguration process; my mind wasn't really on what I was doing," said Draco. They both looked at the comb.

"I think we should see if Hermione can sort it out," said Harry.

Draco hesitated. "Oh, all right. No doubt she'll do it in the blink of an eye."

The comb was accordingly laid before a bemused Hermione and Ron. (Draco tried not to have Ron in the room but Harry overruled him.) Hermione did not actually sort it out in the blink of an eye. She did run some tests on it, and found out that the problem was indeed the way Draco had transfigured it. "I'm not sure anyone could undo it," she said. "They'd have to be a proper expert, anyway."

"So what do you think I should do?" asked Draco.

"Maybe we could just leave it?" said Harry. It didn't seem as if that would be the recommended course of action, but would it actually cause any harm? "Wouldn't it be easier if Villan just never turned up for his trial?"

"But they wouldn't know where he was. They'd be thinking other things could be his doing. It would be better if the case could be closed properly," Hermione said.

"Nah," said Draco, encouraged by Harry. "Let's just leave it. It'll be all right."

And here the ball slowly comes to a halt, with them wondering what to do with the comb, as they turn to each other and feel a kind of falling in, not exactly love, but falling into each others' pace. They'll be all right.

* * *

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