Remind You What You Did When You Wake: 1

by Arsenic

Warnings: Let's see. . .violence, torture, rape, character death (not one of the main pairing), and mild bdsm. I think that's everything, I really apologize if there's a squick in here I didn't think to mention.

A/N: Thanks to shaggirl for the beta, all mistakes are willfully mine, at this point.

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The last thing Hermione said--screamed, really--was, "Harry!"

It sounded like his mum's scream.

Harry screamed, "Hermione!" at the same time as Ron. Ron's scream was louder, or at least, it sounded that way in Harry's ears. He didn't even see the green light, didn't even feel it, just heard her and then tripped forward at the impact of her back crashing in to his and Ron's.

There were five Death Eaters at that point. Ron, on guard, had caught one even as Harry and Hermione were working the magic to destroy Nagini, horcrux and all. They hadn't finished.

They hadn't finished, and Hermione was lying at Harry's feet and for once he was mad enough, enraged enough, lost enough to cast the Killing Curse and make it count. He didn't. He could hear Hermione and his mum. And even with them screaming in his ear, he knew that wasn't what they would have wanted.

Ron caught one of the Death Eaters with a Killing Curse of his own and then it was four trained wizards

on two semi-trained wizards, and Harry threw off as many defensive spells as he could remember, left and right and center.

Something hit him, and he thought it should have been green. It was blue.

Harry heard Ron scream his name, but it was just too much effort to answer.

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Harry awoke with a blinding headache, and, for a scant, brilliant few seconds, no memory. Then Hermione's screams blended with the pain and he rolled over and retched. There were hands at his back, then, and Harry tried to shake them off, but the hands were sturdy, stronger than he was.

Ron said, "S'alright, mate, it's just me."

Harry closed his eyes and panted for a few minutes. "Ron."

Ron hauled him upright carefully. Harry opened his eyes cautiously. One of Ron's cheeks was more bruise than flesh and there was a gash at the corner of his mouth. Harry asked, "How long have you been awake?"

"Dunno. A while." Ron's voice was soft, paced, too even.

Harry said, "I'm sorry."

"Don't," Ron said.

"I didn't even--"

"Shut it, Harry."

So Harry did. "You, um-- Did they hurt you?"

"Nothing that can't be fixed," Ron said, not sounding as though he particularly believed himself.

"We have to, erm. . ."

"Can you do it? On your own?"

"I have to be in the same room with Nagini and have enough time."

"But you can do it."

Harry, who was not at all sure that he could, said, "Yes."

Harry winced as Ron buried his face in his hands. "We'll figure something out."

"Sure, yeah." Harry said, "Maybe you should sleep. A little bit."

"Harry?"

"Ron?"

"You can Occlude, right?"

"Probably enough."

"Probably?"

"Enough," Harry made himself say. He would make it enough. Even against Snape. He would.

"Because this needs-- We can't just--" Ron bit his lip. Blood leaked, lazy and thick, from where the gash reopened.

"This won't be for nothing. She-- We're going to finish this."

"Hermione," Ron said. Ron who had been cajoled into, made to say Voldemort's name. Ron who wasn't supposed to be braver than Harry, but who--Harry knew--often was. "Those fuckers can't have murdered Hermione for nothing."

"No," Harry said, sufficiently rebuked.

"Oh fuck. Fuck fuck fuck." Ron rocked a bit.

"Ron." Harry put his hand on Ron's knee. "We're going to take everything from them."

Ron nodded.

"Everything," Harry said, and knew the promise only mattered if they still had each other to hold to it after all was finished.

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Without the aid of food or water or light or anything that marked time, it was impossible to tell how long it had been when Lucius Malfoy strode into their cell. He looked replete and polished and out of place, which Harry found ironic, given that he was probably the only person there who actually belonged in a cell.

Ron looked over at Harry and rolled his eyes. Harry took this as agreement to his unspoken sentiment. At the thought, Harry kicked up his Occlusion just a little. He'd been working at it pretty consistently, but that didn't mean there wasn't room for improvement. Truth be told, Harry wished he was better than he was, but he was fairly certain he could keep out anyone he needed to. Well, perhaps not Snape. Or Voldemort.

Who, granted, was pretty important.

Harry was startled back into paying attention by Malfoy's, "Good morning, gentleman."

Which answered the question of what time it was. It had been evening when they'd been taken, so Harry guessed they'd been there at least a couple of nights. Probably three.

He didn't really feel the need to answer. Evidently, neither did Ron.

Malfoy made a slight sound of disapproval. Harry wasn't really paying attention. Mostly he was just trying to figure out how distracted Malfoy would have to be for Ron and him to be able to physically overcome him in the moment when he tried to leave and slip out. Probably pretty distracted. They

weren't exactly at their best.

Also, once they were out of the cell, Harry didn't know anything about the structure they were in, or where the structure was, and they were without their wands.

Barring any unforeseen circumstances, escape was going to have to wait.

"I don't suppose you would be willing to share just what it was the three of you were attempting the other night?"

"Finding my lost deck of exploding snap cards," Ron said.

"Yes, I do suppose any material loss would be considerable in your circumstances."

Ron laughed, an empty, bitter sound. Harry wondered if material loss would ever feel important again. Ron was still laughing when Harry felt the first touch at his mind, as silken as Malfoy's voice, as deceptively subtle. Harry pushed. Hard.

Malfoy blinked at him shortly before he smiled. "Very well."

Harry knew better than to find the combination of those words reassuring. He was waiting for Malfoy's next move when the soles of his feet burst into flame. At least, he was quite sure that was happening until he looked at them and saw his skin, white and cold. Harry thought, don't scream, don't but he knew that was a loosing battle when--despite what was in front of his eyes--his skin was boiling, curling, peeling back, exposing the nerves underneath to the flames that only he knew where there.

He and Malfoy.

The intimacy of it made Harry want to retch again. It was this, more than anything, that starting him

screaming.

Ron yelled, "Harry! Harry!" but there was obviously binding magic on him, as he was straining against an invisible wall, trying to reach Harry.

Harry met his gaze, tried shaking his head.

Malfoy said, "I believe you were saying that we found you that evening in the midst of enacting. . ."

The pain lessened slightly, to where Harry could speak, a panting, halting speech. "An impotence spell meant for you and yours."

Lucius laughed, dry and amused.

Then the burning began its ascent.

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Harry woke to Ron's gaze focused on him. He met the gaze and Ron's eyes slid shut for a moment.

Harry said, "You should sleep," knowing, without having to ask that Ron hadn’t since Harry had passed out from the pain. Then he said, "He didn't touch--"

"Not so much as a finger."

There weren't any marks on Ron, but then, there weren't any on Harry, either. Nothing to show for hours

and hours of pain and resistance and fear. "Okay. Sleep. I'll, ah, keep watch."

Ron made a sound vaguely related to scornful laughter. "All right."

Ron's breathing seemed to even out the moment his eyes closed again. Harry wondered how long he'd been asleep but even asking Ron would have done no good. Time had become irrelevant, except to know that it was still passing on the outside, that Voldemort was still gaining power.

Harry listened to the sound of Ron's breathing. It was loud, a little wet, and Harry could only hope that the damp, cool stone floors and walls of their new home weren't making Ron sick. He didn't think Malfoy would call in a Healer.

As if summoned, Malfoy appeared. Only, it was the wrong Malfoy. The one Harry was far more familiar with--and considerably more disgusted by--was standing outside their cell. He smirked and said, "Not looking your best, Potter."

There was something wrong with both the smirk and the statement, but Harry was really beyond caring. "Better than you on your best day."

"Oh, clever." Malfoy was clearly unimpressed by Harry's wit. Harry, on the other hand--given what he was working with--figured it wasn't all that lacking.

"Was there something you wanted? Or is staring at me just your favorite form of entertainment?"

"I have a broom upstairs, and the freedom to use it, Potter. Not to mention plenty of friends, all of them alive."

It hurt to swallow. Harry managed. Then he turned his head to the side and proceeded to ignore Malfoy.

"You asked if I wanted something."

Harry was no longer interested.

"Potter." Malfoy sounded miffed. Harry took some small measure of contentment from this. There wasn't much to be had of it in this place.

"I have food."

"Is it poisoned?"

"I'm not a killer," Malfoy said, and he sounded ashamed and tired.

Harry turned his gaze back to Malfoy. "You did a half decent job on Ron and Katie. And we're sitting targets. You wouldn't even have to stay around to watch. You're a coward; that doesn't make you not a killer."

"It's not poisoned."

Harry just looked at him.

Malfoy took a piece of bread and shoved it in his mouth, chewed and swallowed.

Harry said, "There could be an antidote."

"I'll stay while you eat."

"Why would you bring us food?"

Malfoy pointed his wand at the bars and moved them just enough to slide the food through to Harry. He shrugged and moved the bars back.

"Why, Malfoy?"

"Not a killer," Malfoy said and walked off.

Harry set to waking Ron. He didn't tell him who had brought the food. He didn't tell him he didn't think they were supposed to have it. He didn't tell him anything other than, "Evidently, they want us alive a bit longer."

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Harry couldn't even remember falling asleep, but when he woke up he was in a different room. It was cooler, or perhaps that was simply the new absence of his clothes. He whispered, "Ron?"

No answer came from the darkened space around him. Harry made himself not call out again. He pulled himself up into a sitting position so that he could wrap his arms around his legs to conserve a bit of body heat. Either his eyes weren't adjusting to the dark, or there was simply nothing to see. He quieted his breathing so as to hear if there were any other sounds, but that proved futile as well.

When the room blazed into nothing but light, Harry bit his lip to stop himself from crying out and did his best to keep his eyes open even through the moments of blindness. The world came into relative focus again--his glasses, like his clothes, also missing--and standing before him was Malfoy Senior.

"Round two?" Harry asked.

Malfoy smirked. Harry saw his wand hand move, but the spell was wordless. Harry tensed, waiting for the pain to hit. It was only a binding spell, however, drawing Harry's arms up above his head, positioning him so that he could just barely support himself on his toes. Harry kept his eyes on Malfoy, kept them free of fear. He knew that sooner or later he would give the strained muscles in his leg a rest. He knew that when he did so, his arms would all but pull out of their sockets.

He wasn't willing to let on that he cared.

There was a flash of something and Harry felt something cold and thin press lightly into his chest. Malfoy asked, "Know anything about Runes, Potter?"

Harry didn't, not really, but Hermione had. He had a sick feeling he knew where this is going.

"There are, of course, plenty of ways to wrest truth from a person, but I have always found a certain amount of savor in this method."

Harry sucked in a breath at the first cut. Only when he was certain that he could make his voice even did he ask, "Why am I not surprised?"

Malfoy smiled, happily going about carving the necessary Runes into Harry's chest. Harry couldn't see them, but he knew what they would look like. Hermione had shown him once, had made him and Ron pay attention. Then she had shown them the Runes necessary to counteract the spell that Malfoy would chant when he was finished with his knife. Harry conjured the images, burning the forms into his mind, concentrating on nothing but those shapes.

Malfoy was speaking, not yet chanting, speaking and the sharp/slick pain of the knife was a distraction, but Harry concentrated, breathed the symbols. He kept his eyes open. Malfoy would not know, not until he failed.

The spell began to drip through him, molten and cold unto heat. It twisted and wrenched and Harry held the images, held them even as he screamed. Screaming was fine. Talking was not. Giving up what he held inside was not. But he screamed.

He still heard his screams even after they quit, after the pain was just a dull throb in his chest, his torso, dropping on into his toes. He was holding himself up still. He wasn't sure how, his legs were shaking underneath him, nearly useless. Nearly, but not quite.

The images swum in his head and he held onto them even knowing the danger was past. They felt like Hermione.

Malfoy said, "I see."

Harry hoped he didn't mean he saw what they had done. He was quite sure he hadn't said.

He was entirely sure when Malfoy took hold of his neck and pressed down until Harry's shoulders popped free of their sockets.

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"Harry, Harry."

Harry moaned to let Ron know he could hear. Ron let out a breath. Harry kept his eyes closed, as if by not opening them he could stay off waking for just a bit longer. He could already feel the persistent burn of agony running up his sternum.

"Don't move," Ron said softly. "I, er, tried to reset your shoulders."

Harry didn't ask why it hadn't worked. He didn't want to know.

"I need help. You kept moving."

Harry finally made himself crack his eyes. "How long?"

He wasn't sure he had managed to actually form the words until Ron said. "Not sure. Hours, I think. You were gone a long time."

Harry heard the fear. "I'm fine."

"Oh yeah, mate."

Harry smiled, or at least, he worked his lips into an upward quirk. "Thirsty."

"I know. There hasn't been--"

"No," Harry hadn't really expected that would have been. His eyes were slipping closed again when Ron growled, "Get out of here."

Harry managed to tilt his head slightly so that he could see someone approaching--someone with white-blond hair. His breath caught for a moment before he noticed the size of the person. Malfoy Junior, then. The expected voice said, "As you wish, but I'm taking the food with me."

Harry exhaled. Above him, he could see the edge of Ron's glare. Despite the warning, Malfoy handed

something through the bars and said, "Have him drink that."

"I'm not--"

"Have him drink it, or we're setting the arms without the aid of a pain potion. Do you think I have all day?"

Harry bit his lip to keep from making any noise as Ron carefully positioned him so that he could drink. The cup came to his lips and Harry didn't bother sniffing. Malfoy wasn't a killer. And his father still wanted something of Harry, so it would be rather counterproductive for him to discover that aspect of himself now.

The numbing aspect of the potion hit within seconds and Harry had never felt anything so brilliant. Never. He considered, for a moment, being grateful to Malfoy, but then let the thought slide away to hold on to the relative bliss of a complete lack of sensation.

Someone laughed. It didn’t sound like Ron. The voice that said, "Let's get on with it, then," did.

"No, this first."

Harry felt something cold at his chest. He looked down. Malfoy was swabbing at the Runes. Malfoy looked up, caught his eye, and said, "It's not a healing potion, just a cleaning one. They'll scar."

That was pretty much the story of his life, so far as Harry was concerned. Also, the least of his problems at this moment. Ron sneered, "A healing potion was too much to ask?"

Malfoy looked at Ron as though his brains might have fallen out onto the floor. Harry concentrated and strung the words, "He's sneaking," together.

"Still," Ron muttered, but he looked mildly mollified.

Malfoy asked, "Have you done this before?" cocking his head toward Harry's arms.

Ron said, "Just hold him still."

There was an enormous amount of pressure then, from Malfoy's grip and Ron's tug--first at one shoulder, then the other--and Harry was really, really glad he couldn’t feel much of anything.

Ron helped him eat. Harry said, "You first," but Ron just said, "Shut it," and did as he pleased. Harry let him have his way.

Malfoy said, "I've been here too long," and disappeared with much of what he'd brought. It didn't pass Harry's attention that he left them the water.

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On his third try, Malfoy Senior didn't touch Harry. He tore all the parts that mattered out of him, violated the pieces that he hadn't been able to reach with his knife and his spells and his hands.

He walked in to the cell and said, "Mr. Weasley. Perhaps it is time to further our acquaintance."

Ron looked at Harry with eyes that could not have said, "Hermione," any more clearly if they'd reflected letters straight at Harry. Harry reassured him with his own responding look as much as he could manage. It wasn't much.

Malfoy took Ron out of the cell and Harry waited for him to be taken away, where Harry couldn't even

share in his screams. Then something infinitely worse happened. Malfoy bound Ron to the outside of the bars, facing in. Facing Harry.

He pointed his wand at Harry, immobilizing him inches from Ron.

Harry's breath sounded like "no, no, nonono," in his chest.

Malfoy rid Ron of his clothing with a distracted wave of his wand and asked, "Does Potter enjoy watching?"

Harry kept his eyes locked on Ron's as Malfoy drove into him, no warning except the question, no preparation at all. Ron bit his lip unto bleeding. He didn't look away from Harry. Harry said, "Ron, Ron, Ron," under his breath, because if he didn't he was going to scream, and he would not give Malfoy that pleasure, not if he could avoid it.

Ron's knuckles were white, his hands twisting at the bars so hard Harry almost expected to see them crumble, fall to the ground. If only they would, Harry would break the spell on him, even if he had to destroy his own magic to do so. No matter what, he would break it and get to Ron.

The bars held.

Malfoy was saying things, things about Harry's kinks, how this must excite him, how if he wanted it to stop all he need do was tell. Whatever they had been trying to do, they had failed, what difference could it make?

Harry bit his tongue, trying to stimulate his own pain. It was nothing compared to what he was watching, not enough, not near to enough. He thought, "Hermione," and that helped a little. Just the thought was still enough to open a separate ache inside him, one to rival the one playing out in front of him. He kept silent.

Malfoy was also whispering things to Ron, things Harry couldn't hear, things that made Ron focus even harder on Harry, his gaze flicking from the marks on Harry's chest up to his face, to what Harry was sure was a pained, wild expression. He thought he might be crying. His cheeks felt heated, wet.

Eventually, long after Harry thought humanly possible, Malfoy pulled out and said, "Perhaps your kink runs a bit more toward the exotic?"

Harry said, "Or toward the less sadistic, you inbred bastard."

Malfoy simply smiled and tapped the handle end of his cane. It flattened into a disc with the raised representation of a snake. Then, to Harry's horror, it began to glow. Red.

Malfoy said, "I do like to leave my mark."

Without being able to see wholly, Harry saw the way Ron's chest pressed further into the bars, one of Malfoy's hands holding to his upper back. He knew that when Malfoy said, "I suggest you take a breath, Mr. Weasley," that he was about to place the brand not just anywhere, not on a shoulder blade, or the base of Ron's neck, but in the hollow of his back, where the nerves were most delicate.

And Harry knew, from the absolute loss of color, from the way Ron threw his head back, his neck too taut to allow any sound, his scream lost in his own agony, exactly when Malfoy had moved his hand that extra inch and held the ultra-heated disk to his best friend's bare skin.

Harry bit his lip hard enough to break the skin and choked on his own blood.

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Harry didn't bother with insults when the younger Malfoy showed up this time, he just said, "I think he's

running a fever."

Malfoy nodded. "I've got something for infection; help me with him."

Harry positioned himself between Malfoy and Ron, though, and said, "Just give me the stuff."

Malfoy opened his mouth, as though to argue. Then he shut it and nodded. "This one first."

Harry took the potion from him and rolled Ron from his stomach slightly on to his side. Ron mumbled, "H'ry?"

"It's me." He pressed the flask to Ron's lips. "You have to swallow."

Ron didn't question him. Harry had a brief flare of the ability to really, really hope that Malfoy wasn't screwing them over but when he looked at the other boy, his expression was simply expectant. Harry understood why, when a moment later Ron's breathing evened a bit.

Malfoy traded him one bottle for another. "Now this."

Harry fed Ron the second potion, and then, when Malfoy handed it to him, a third.

"Water?" Harry asked, and Malfoy gave it to him.

Harry slowly gave Ron the water, waiting until he had imbibed a substantial amount to give into Ron's pleas that he was, "Tired, really tired, mate."

When Ron had fallen asleep, Malfoy gestured towards the food he'd brought. "You should eat."

Logically Harry knew his body must be hungry. They'd been captured at least a week ago and the only times they had been fed were when Malfoy had snuck down or one of the house elves brought a few pieces of bread or some such at one of the Death Eater's orders. He was too nauseated to contemplate food.

He said, "Thanks, but no."

"Potter--"

"I said no," Harry said, wishing he had the energy to make himself sound a bit more committed.

"At least drink a little."

"Look, Malfoy, if you want to keep bringing us medicinal potions and water, obviously it does me no good to tell you to stop. But quit acting like it somehow matters to you whether we die or not. So long as it's not at your hands, you're perfectly fine with the outcome either way, and we both know it."

"What you know and what I know, Potter, are two entirely different things. Drink."

Harry was tempted to refuse on principle, but the voice in his head that always, always sounded like Hermione said, "Don't be stupid, Harry James Potter." He ignored the grief his own inner monologue was currently causing him and took the advice.

The water was cold and more needed even than the last dose Malfoy had brought. It washed away a bit of the nausea, not enough to make him want to eat. Malfoy motioned at the food vaguely and asked, "You sure?"

Harry nodded. He rather seriously doubted he could keep anything down.

"Very well." Malfoy collected what he had brought and stood to go. He was at the door to the cell when Harry stopped him.

"Malfoy."

He didn't turn around. "Potter?"

"Thank you."

Even if he didn't know what it meant, Harry knew he hadn't imagined the way Malfoy's back stiffened, or the tightness of his words when he answered, "Don't mention it."

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The elder Malfoy didn't return. Sent in his place was Grayback. Ron--still lacking all color and only just able to sit up on his own--snarled.

Grayback laughed, but largely ignored Ron for Harry. He told Harry, "Lucius is too subtle for his own good," as he looped his wand, ropes spraying out in the wake of its intricate motions, tying Harry in a position that seemed to tear at every muscle he possessed. Harry's shoulders, still not fully recovered, all but screamed with the agony of the process. The rope burnt into Harry, literally burnt, and he realized that it was spelled to provide additional discomfort.

Somewhere along the way, when he had stopped to think, Harry had begun to realize that Voldemort should have known precisely what the three of them had been doing, so he asked, "Tom run out on you? Leave you to play by yourselves?"

Grayback tightened the ropes and said, "You really think the Dark Lord would miss watching this?"

Which was when Harry realized that somewhere along the way, a mistake had been made. If Voldemort truly had no idea what they'd been up to--or, at least, wasn't wholly sure--then Nagini wasn't important, or at least, wasn't a horcrux. Which left one out there, one that only Voldemort knew the location of.

Either that, or Voldemort hadn't traced the destruction of the other horcruxes to them, but that seemed unlikely at best. Whatever else he was, Voldemort wasn't a fool.

Harry nearly gave up right then, nearly taunted Grayback--whom he suspected could be goaded into killing him. Then the ropes swung slightly, and Harry caught sight of Ron. He kept his mouth shut.

He shut it even more tightly as teeth sunk into one of his balls, then the other. Closed it and tried to breathe through his nose. Tried to breathe at all.

Grayback's teeth were inhumanly sharp and he knew just where the nerves would most react to penetration, to skin being sawed into, splitting open.

The intimacy of it, the presumption of those teeth was even more insanity-inducing than the pain itself, although Harry had reason to doubt that when Grayback spelled him with something that increased his nerve-sensitivity. He found, though, that if he let go, let the pain take over, let himself be nothing but the pain, that it was easy enough not to talk.

He wouldn't have known how to form words if he'd tried. Certainly not the right words, not the words those teeth were waiting to hear.

It occurred to Harry that in this place, if pain was not necessarily friendly, then it was at least a constant, trustworthy. There was nothing else he could quite say that for--well, Ron, but Ron was a friend and something else beside. Malfoy was certainly neither a constant nor trustworthy, even if Harry could admit to perhaps liking him more than the pain. Still, the pain was easier to accept, to lean on.

He leaned, and let it take him far enough away that even the sound of his own screams was soft, background music, nothing for Harry to worry about.

Nothing at all.

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Harry jerked back at the feel of hands on him but relaxed at the sound of Ron's, "Harry, let us. . ."

Harry opened his eyes to see Ron huddled over him, his skin drawn but less yellow-gray than it had been last time he'd seen it. To the side, Malfoy was watching without watching, his eyes noticeably avoiding looking at the wasteland of Harry's skin, nothing but flesh-scores in the shape of not-quite-human teeth overlaying an only slightly-less-recent landscape of precise carvings.

Malfoy handed Ron a bottle. Ron brought it to Harry's lips, and to be honest, at this point, poison couldn't make Harry feel any worse than he did, so there was not even the brief tug of hesitation that there had been up until now.

As before, the potion spread through him with startling efficiency and Harry no longer cared that his body showed every sign of somebody having decided he'd make a tasty midnight snack. Harry's eyes lowered lazily.

Malfoy said, "Stay awake, Potter."

"Bugger off, Malfoy." Through the haze of the potion, it was hard to say the words with any invective. They sounded almost fond, the way he would tell Ron to do such a thing, or even, if she weren't a girl, Her-- Ron.

"Right after you've had something to drink," Malfoy said in an equally agreeable tone.

There were more hands on Harry, then, and somewhere in his mind it registered that Malfoy hadn't touched him until it wouldn't hurt, had allowed Ron the responsibility of being gentle, careful. It was a hard thought to concentrate on, though, a hard thought to decide what to do with.

Instead, Harry paid attention to the water being poured slowly into his mouth, cold and clean and fresh. It was as foreign to the cell as Malfoy, with his well-tailored robes and the blemish-free nature of his skin.

Harry found himself not particularly wanting either foreign element to go. He knew the thought was wrong, somehow, or discomforting, at the very least, but nothing much was all that uncomfortable at the moment. He smiled at Malfoy.

Malfoy looked worried. "I might have given him a slightly higher dosage than necessary."

Ron didn't look terribly concerned. "Worried he'll feel all right for an hour longer than utterly necessary?"

"Worried someone will notice and my supply will be cut off, Weasel," Malfoy answered, his voice tight.

"Weasley," Harry corrected Malfoy, not sure how someone could mispronounce such an easy name.

Ron barked a laugh. Harry smiled. He couldn't remember Ron laughing, not recently.

Malfoy's smile was slower to come, but it did. "Definitely too high a dosage."

"Let him sleep. He'll come out of it soon enough."

Harry noticed that the laughter was already gone from Ron's tone.

Malfoy's nod was unsure. Still, he said, "Sleep, Potter."

The idea struck Harry as a good one, one that wouldn't take too much effort to accomplish on his part. He said, "yeah," and let go his efforts to stay awake.

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Harry was vaguely awake when Malfoy returned. Awake enough to realize two things immediately: one, he brought company, and two, the look on his face was different, the pace of his movements less hesitant. Normally, Harry would have kept quiet, but the potion was still washing through him, making him think just a bit more slowly than he otherwise would have. "Malfoy?"

"Harry," Ron said, warningly.

Malfoy the elder laughed. "I do believe he was beginning to trust you, Draco."

"As I said, father."

Harry blinked forcefully a couple of times and thought, think. Then, of course, of course he wasn't--

Harry wasn't sure when he had started believing Malfoy, just a little bit, but evidently he had. He decided he could get mad at himself later. There didn't seem to be time just now.

Ron was between him and Malfoy, who had now stepped into the cell, his father still watching from the outside. Ron was shaking, underfed, the burn on his back red and angry and leaking. Harry said, "Ron."

Ron said, "Shut it, Harry."

Harry said, "Ron, I'll be--"

Ron's body jerked out from in front of him, and like a bizarre reversal of the events days before--had it been days? Harry thought so--froze, immobilized by Malfoy. Harry felt a shock of cold at his wrists and ankles just before his body snapped back, his arms and legs straining toward the opposing cell walls where they were now chained. The floor of the cell was frigid under his back, but it was better than being hung from the ceiling, better that having ropes tied over the unhealed injuries left by Grayback.

No, Harry thought, not better. He hated himself, for a brief moment, for believing, even if only secretly, in Malfoy's detached sympathy, his nerves, his, "I've thought better of all this."

Then he let go, and allowed himself to hate Malfoy, who was looming over him, his hand on Harry's stomach, gentle, very gentle. Harry fought not to vomit. He would only choke on it.

At the first finger entering him, the first, "Tell me, Potter," Harry thought, no, you can't have this and heard, in a voice that was not his own, not his own at all, and yet in his mind, relax, Potter.

Already occluding, Harry doubled his efforts, pushing out, even though it wasn't a physical thing, not at all. He almost smiled when he saw Malfoy blink, except that Malfoy was up to three fingers now, and strung into the position that he was, there was no way to move with it, to lessen the burn.

At four fingers Harry tried to stop thinking altogether. He tried closing his eyes, shutting out the blank gray gaze that had held possibility, held something that might have been friendship less than two days ago. Harry didn't hear the spell, but he heard Malfoy's father laugh and knew why when his eyes stayed

riveted, focused on his tormenter.

Harry didn't sneer, didn't react, just shut down his mind more.

Direct eye contact wouldn't be anything but useless to them, as would this betrayal.

It can't be a betrayal if the person isn't your friend in the first place.

The voice didn't sound like his own, but Harry knew nothing could get near his mind, he knew.

Malfoy's thumb caused him to try and arch away, failing in the lack of support, the lack of any way to hold himself separate. The physical pain was nowhere near as agonizing as the violation, although formidable in its own right. Malfoy pushed, pushed himself into Harry, and Harry thought, out, out, out but there was so much pain, that the lines of what he was keeping out blurred and then there was Malfoy's voice.

Sorry, just, keep breathing, sorry.

And it was one thing to betray, but wholly another to betray with words of mollification, of apology, when Malfoy was breaking into him, tearing him apart from the inside out, and Harry screamed, "Get out."

He'd meant the scream to be mental, but it tore from him, from his mind and his mouth and the magic lying latent in him, waiting for his wand to set it free again, curled into his anger, used his words to enact itself.

Harry didn't know what happened, didn't feel anything beyond the shockwave of his own fear of breaking, of spilling out, of betraying Hermione and Ron and all the people counting on him. In the next moment, though, his words rebounded on him, not in his own voice, his own words and others that

weren't his, were Malfoy's, mostly please, please, I didn't, I thought I could do this, but I--

Harry could feel Malfoy's struggles to regain control, a sensation not unlike the scrabble of fingers trying to hold to a mountain face amidst a rockslide.

Malfoy's eyes were no longer blank but were rather confused, with an underwash of horror.

Experimentally, Harry shifted aside some of the sorrysorry and went looking for something Malfoy wouldn't want him to see, wouldn't want him to know.

When he found more of himself, when he found the ideal and the form of Harry Potter twirled up in desire and terror and utter, swirling uncertainty, he knew what had happened. He spoke to Malfoy's mind, "Have you broken my barriers as well?"

A shuddering, "No," came into his head. Malfoy's hand had gone still, heavy and agonizing beneath Harry's stomach--at least so it felt.

"Can your father hear you?"

Experimentally, Malfoy allowed the thought, "I love mudbloods," to scroll in the outer regions of his mind.

Nothing happened.

Malfoy loosened his fist in pure shock. Harry stopped breathing. When his mind was something more than black, something less than white, he asked, "Why?"

He was fairly certain it was a question as to why Malfoy cared, not why he was doing this. That was

obvious enough.

Carefully now, Malfoy drew his fingers back together, and Harry felt a slight tug as he began to withdraw.

It was excruciating, every last millimeter.

When he was free, his arm nothing but the red of Harry's blood on milk-white skin he kept Harry's gaze and thought, "Because you are Harry Potter and I was Draco Malfoy."

Harry passed out with his eyes still open.

*

Harry woke up to hands on him and said, "No, no, nonono."

He was still saying it when the silencing spell stopped him from making any noise. Snape waited until Harry had managed to make himself actually quiet. It helped that Snape had taken his hands away.

Harry looked around for Ron and panicked all over again when he found him missing. "Where?" he mouthed, putting as much rage and threat into his eyes as he could. He didn't imagine it was much. Despite the cold of the cell, Harry could feel sweat sliding in the hollow between his shoulderblades. Even with the aid of the cleansing potions Malfoy had repeatedly brought, there was no question that some of the bite wounds, the places where the ropes had rubbed straight through the skin, the knife cuts, perhaps even the tears left from Malfoy's bit of fun had to have become infected. Harry made himself loosen his muscles so as to lessen any shivering, but he doubted the whole picture was one to make this man in front of him run.

Instead of answering the question, Snape said softly, "You must have figured out that Nagini isn't a

horcrux by now."

Harry mouthed, "Where?" again.

"He is safe, Potter." Snape's tone was dismissive, as was his, "Finite incantatum."

"I have no reason to believe you."

"How do I know about the horcruxes?"

"Voldemort told you. You found out on your own. I can think of several explanations that don't involve you helping me. Where is Ron?"

And then Snape said something that made Harry actually listen. "Forty-two and a Quarter Sayton Way."

Harry just looked at Snape, occluding, his magic pulsing in time with the pain in his head. It didn't matter how unlikely it was that Snape would know one of the houses the Order had established post-Dumbledore, Harry had held on this long and he wasn't giving anything away now.

"Draco said you broke his barriers. Despite the fact that there was no evidence of the breach extending beyond you, it seemed provident to remove him from the situation. He insisted, so far as Mr. Weasley was concerned." The last was spoken with a sneer.

"And they haven't figured he's gone yet?" Harry asked, making his doubt fully clear.

"It has been less than an hour since they left, and I took precautions."

Harry worked something out then, "If it were Voldemort who told you about the horcruxes, they would already know what we were trying to do."

"They think you were trying to target Nagini as a weapon. They want to know what spell you were going to use. They think it's a Parseltongue's gift. The Dark Lord wants the knowledge."

Which explained why they had spent so much more time concentrating on Harry than Ron.

"You figured it out for yourself, then."

Snape focused a look of pure disdain. "The headmaster told me. Before he went to destroy Slytherin's ring. So that I could prepare potions to help, should the worst occur."

"Your potions weren't much good," Harry said, making it as clear as he could that he suspected this to be more out of intent than ability.

"No," Snape said quietly. And, "The last horcrux lies on the Dark Lord's wrist. Only someone close to him, someone ultimately trusted, someone who would kill the greatest of his enemies, could so much as lay a hand on it. Do you understand?"

"His wrist?"

"Your mother used to wear a charm bracelet. One of the charms is a wand."

"Figures parts of his soul would fit into something the size of a pin." Harry didn't allow himself to think about something of his mother's lying against Voldemort's skin.

Snape was still for a moment before a grim smile touched his lips.

"Even if you're telling the truth. Even if you were to-- I'm-- I don't even have my wand," Harry finished lamely.

"If you had your wand, could you do it?"

The horcruxes hadn't been the only thing Hermione had spent countless hours forgoing sleep to research for Harry. There had also been the plethora of ancient, obscure spells. Harry wasn't sure any of them would work. He wasn't entirely sure he could actually enact any of them. Hermione had been sure. She had said, "Headmaster Dumbledore didn't pound the concept of love into your head for nothing, Harry. It's your strength, and I realize that having this said to you by Barty Crouch, Jr. the first time probably didn't cement the advice as particularly brilliant, but playing to your strengths really is the smartest way to go about any task."

"Yes," Harry said, knowing that believing something could be done was a good half of accomplishing it.

Snape pulled a bottle from his robes. "Drink."

Harry, not seeing he had a lot of options, drank. His temperature leveled off almost immediately. Snape said, "It will last for at least twenty-four hours. That should be enough time. Stay alert."

The potion thrummed through him, artificial energy inserting itself wherever Harry needed, which was everywhere. Harry nodded. "Go."

Snape went.

*

"The thing about love," Hermione had said, "is that sooner or later, it's a bit likely to hurt, isn't it?"

Harry had watched Ron bite his lips at the proclamation, watched him watch Hermione, who hadn't so much as lifted her head from her book.

"Sure," Harry had said, having no evidence to the contrary.

"Of course, the reason why it can hurt quite to the extent it's able is that it provides an opportunity for a rather unfathomable amount of happiness as well."

"Hermione, what--"

She had cut Ron off. "Extremes. Love is about extremes. And all of the spells that use it as an. . .ingredient, I suppose, are meant to effect one type of extreme or another."

"Death is pretty extreme," Harry had said.

"Yes," Hermione had agreed, "which is why the Headmaster was always so insistent that your ability to love past and beyond pain was significant. These spells, not a one of them can be enacted by someone who is less than willing to give himself over wholly to the emotion, the experience of love."

"And if I don't know what that experience is?" Harry had asked.

"I'm not sure anyone does until the moment he's in the spell," Hermione had answered, not without a tinge of concern.

"That's just bloody brilliant," Harry had said.

Ron had shrugged. "Dumbledore was right about one thing. If anyone's gonna do it, you're our best shot."

Ron's gaze had strayed back to Hermione then, and Harry thought, as votes of confidence go, that one verges on the significant.

Now, though, with Ron safe but far away and Hermione well beyond the reach of safety, the words were mere syllables in Harry's head, despite his best attempts to make them something else, something more. Turning away from imminent failure, he instead concentrated on the actual spell. It wasn't precisely complicated. The beauty of it was its simplicity. Like Avada Kedavra, it wasn't the casting that was the hard part, it was the emotion necessary to carry it off.

The way Hermione had explained it, the spell operated on the principle of matter and anti-matter. It was a spell that was literally constructed of love and that, upon contact with something that contained an utter absence of love, would obliterate such an object/being.

All Harry had to hope was that Dumbledore, Hermione and Ron had been right in assuming his capacity for love was as unlimited as they imagined. And that he could tap into such an emotion at the moment, aching inside and out as he did. Oh, and that Voldemort was as devoid as need be.

So, really, not much left up to chance. Harry would have laughed, but movement hurt.

Try as he did to stay awake, stay ready, he drifted off at some point, waking intermittently, his breath catching in his throat. He would then struggle to stay clear-headed, to build his strength, only to fall back into sleep.

There were nightmares in sleep, nightmares of Hermione's screams, only this time she was beside him, watching as Malfoy raped Ron, watching as Malfoy took things further than he had outside of Harry's dreams, watching as Ron screamed for Harry. He sounded like Hermione, like Harry's mum.

Harry woke up and thought, safe, Ron is safe and the emotion that followed in the wake of the unspoken words was pristine and whole in a way he'd never quite felt it be. For the first time since her death, Harry heard Hermione's voice in his head and it wasn't a scream.

It was an, "All right then, Harry?"

Things weren't, not by the strictest definition of all right, but Harry was pretty sure he might be able to do this.

"Enough to be going on with," he answered her.

*

There was a yank on Harry's mind and he was awake, awake and saying, "Stay the bloody fuck out," to Snape.

Snape, predictably, smirked. He held out a bottle. "Drink."

Harry did. And then had to remember to breathe through the pure, undiluted energy that spread through him. Snape said, "Three floors up, the door to the left. I have taken care of the obstacles, and will continue to keep the two of you unaccompanied. You won't have long, if I am to succeed."

"Wand," Harry said, and Snape handed it over. The touch of it in his palm was nearly as healing as any of the potions he had been fed over the course of his imprisonment. He stood, ignoring the way his body felt at odds with his mind, how there was still pain and weakness, but none of that seemed to matter through the pure rush of adrenaline.

Then he ran for the stairs.

He couldn't actually feel his feet hitting each step, but he could feel himself going up and that was useful because not concentrating on his body allowed him to build the things that were important inside of him. By the time he reached the top of the third stair-level, Harry had to remind himself why he had to kill Voldemort.

Hermione had warned him that the spell was hardest to enact because once one was in a mind frame of allowing so much love to take over one's thoughts, it was hard to pour forth magic that you knew would have lethal consequences. It took someone with purity of focus, she had called it.

Harry worked to find that. He found it in the picture of Malfoy's crest being burnt into Ron's spine.

Voldemort was alone. As Snape had promised. Harry hadn't expected him to be, not really, not until that moment. He had suspected this was all for naught, another ruse, another trick of a man who was never quite what he seemed. Only here he was, face to face with Voldemort, nothing in between them.

Voldemort looked surprised.

Harry didn't blame him. He also didn't waste time.

The words of the spell, when he had learned them, had been in Latin. He was entirely sure it was not Latin that he intoned upon opening his mouth. That wasn't to say he knew what it was. Some combination of things, he thought, maybe. Parseltongue, English, Latin, maybe two and not one.

He couldn't tell. It caused a moment's panic, a moment where the purity of intention, of emotion, was thrown. But he was keeping Ron and Hermione and the others with him and Hermione reminded him, "Language is merely a conduit, less stable in cases where emotion is significant. It's why spells can be done without speaking."

"And this one?"

She had shaken her head. "Too much power. It has to have something to rein it in, focus it."

Even with the words, Harry felt like the magic would burn him out, would explode inside him and shatter and carry him away in pieces. Which was close to what happened to Voldemort. It wasn't quite so dramatic, but inside Harry he could feel the pull of Voldemort's lack, the hole where everything Harry was should have been, where his heart should have been, just wasn't. The pull was impossible, terrifying, and Harry worked to focus, to hold onto the anchoring emotion, he thought, family.

Voldemort's demise was a breath, a puff of air, after the cyclone of magic it was nothing.

Harry found himself on the floor.

Harry made himself inhale and then exhale. Snape knocked at his mind. Done yet?

OUT, Harry responded.

Snape ignored him, We have to go.

"Really?" Harry asked of nobody in particular, and pushed himself to his feet.

*

Snape handed him another vial when they met up and Harry downed it, gasping as his heart constricted in response to whatever it was he'd drunk. Snape said, "Keep breathing, it passes."

It was hard to breathe and run and think at the same time, but Harry managed by cutting down a little on the last. When the immediate effects of the potion did pass, a high so incredible hit Harry that he was tempted to ask if the potion was going to kill him shortly thereafter. He decided staying quiet would at least guarantee he might live to see if it did or not, as opposed to being killed here and now.

The first two Death Eaters they came across were unfamiliar to Harry. Snape dispatched them without much trouble. Without words, even.

Malfoy, the third, was more of a serious obstacle until Snape asked, "Where's your son, Lucius?"

The distraction, the sudden knowledge in Malfoy's eyes and the second it took to process the realization, allowed Snape all the time he needed for a quick, neat Killing Curse. He said those words. He said them with a certain amount of relish that Harry didn't understand coming from Snape. It didn't matter; Harry agreed completely.

The series of incantations necessary to lift the wards holding them in whatever structure they were occupying was lengthy. Harry tried following but he lost track of the words in the rush of energy that was his mind, his entire nervous system.

Finally Snape pulled the door they had been standing in front of for minutes on end open and pushed Harry through. Harry stumbled but then gained his feet and kept running. "How far do the Apparition wards extend?"

"Too far, I'm going to have to bring them down." The words were taut, worried.

"Can you do that?"

"Shut it, Potter, I need to concentrate."

"Snape--"

"I said shut it!"

So Harry did, but not before letting go his Occlumency for the first time since he had actually managed the feat at all. It wasn't so much his thoughts that he wanted to allow Snape access to--no, not at all, really--as his power. Harry worked to shift things in his mind, to open the flow of magic that he could feel hidden under the false energy. When he found its center he gave it a shove--as much as he could.

Snape's gaze snapped to him even as they ran.

Harry said, "That should help."

Snape said, "That shouldn't be possible."

Harry thought this wasn't really the time to be complaining, but he didn't say anything.

There were Death Eaters after them now, and Harry turned, paused to lay down some defensive magic as cover. "C'mon, Snape!"

Something hit Harry's knee and he crumpled but kept his wand up, kept the Death Eaters at a distance even as more hexes managed to penetrate his shield. The curses still couldn't get through, but the hexes were weakening him, probably weakening Snape, who didn't have time to throw any defensive spells, had to rely wholly on the strength of Harry's shield.

Most of Harry's strength--what was left after the necessary amount for killing Voldemort--was going into Snape. Then again, Harry mused, that might be helping deflect some of the hexes.

Another hex hit Harry's shoulder and he screamed despite himself.

He felt a hand press itself to his head. The compressed feeling of Apparition came over him and his scream was sucked into the vortex.

He was somewhat amazed to be whole when they rematerialized. He knew where he was at this point, was familiar with Sayton Way. He tried to rise, but his left knee was having none of that.

He felt himself being thrown over Snape's shoulder and thought, "Oh, yes, feeling the hero now."

Snape ran toward the space between the houses marked forty-two and forty-four. He was already saying the words to let them in as he approached, Harry could feel the vibrations of Snape's chest against his legs.

No sooner had the door latched behind them did Harry notice the fact that the potion had worn off and everything hurt. He tried to answer the calls of, "Harry, Harry," he thought it was Ron and he wanted to say, "I'm fine," but his eyes dropped shut and the rest of his body followed the suggestion that sleep would be very much appreciated at this time.

*

Harry woke up to pain, intense, throbbing, pain that spiked with every breath. There were hands and he could hear, "Just drink," but there didn't seem to be any noise.

He drank, and fell back asleep.

This must have happened three or four times. Harry lost track, wasn't even really paying attention, was in too much pain to care about anything but the potions that were allowing him to escape the hurt. Had

he been coherent he might have thought less of himself for it. Luckily, he wasn't.

When he finally woke up to a bearable amount of pain, to a moment when light didn't seem scary and overwhelming, he turned over and pried one eye open. Ron was at his bedside, a mug of tea steaming in his hands, his attention on the liquid, as though it was telling him something.

Harry said, "Good morning?" It was scratchy and broken, but recognizable.

"Close enough," Ron said, scooting toward the edge of the seat. "I'll give you the good, definitely."

"How long. . .?"

"Six days. I think even Snape was starting to worry. Malfoy's bloody frantic, it's driving me to contemplate murder."

Harry frowned. "Contemplate but not commit?"

Ron sighed. "I. . . If you asked, mate, I wouldn't hesitate, but it seemed like bad form, killing someone I might have a Life Debt to."

"Snape arranged--"

"I know, but I'm not sure I would have made it on my own. Maybe I would have made it to the edge of the wards, although I sort of doubt it. I would have splinched beyond repair making the jump, though."

Harry closed his eyes again, just for a moment. In the silence broken only by the dual catch of their breathing, he could hear something else, a jumble of words, of images that weren't exactly sound, but weren't exactly not. The sound was familiar, and it took him a second to place it but then his eyes flew

open. "Malfoy's been feeding me the potions?"

Ron flushed. "Don't go completely barmy, all right, but you wouldn't take them from anyone else. We tried. We think its because, well, you know, you ah, broke his Occlumency."

"I didn't break his Occlumency. He can occlude against others, can't he?"

"Sure, but-- Just because something partially works doesn't mean it's not broken."

Harry ran a hand over his face. He looked up at the ceiling and asked, "How are you?"

And Ron, like the friend Ron was, let the other conversation go. "They had me patched up in a day. They say there's a possibility that the, ah, burn scar can be removed."

Brand. Mark. Harry heard Ron screaming. He took a breath and said, "Not what I meant."

"You okay?" Ron asked pointedly.

I'm sorry I couldn't rip his arms out of their sockets, tear his dick from his body and feed it to Grayback. "She wasn't my--"

"Please don't say anything I'll have to hex you for. Snape'll be right narked."

"Why would he care?"

"Who do you think has been brewing?"

Made sense in the twisted, nonsensical way everything seemed to make sense of late. "I miss her." He made the words as flat as he could.

"Yeah," Ron said. "Yes. But--and I'm only going to say this once--you're alive and I'm alive and the Great Right Bastard Tom is dead. She'd be pretty pleased with us."

Harry said, "I know I just woke up, but--"

"Sleep," Ron said.

Harry's eyes fell closed and immediately, without the interference of anything else, there was a wash of worry and soft noise and random, unrelated thoughts that weren't his own. They had been there before, just not as noticeable.

They were sort of lulling, and he allowed them to pull him into sleep.

*

Dra-- Malfoy was in the room when Harry awoke again.

It was hard to think of him as Malfoy when Draco thought of himself as Draco in the jumble of mind waves that Harry heard if he so much as stopped not listening. Harry supposed that made a fair amount of sense. It was hardly as if he thought of himself as "Potter."

Draco--Harry gave in to instinct, it was such a small thing, a name--asked, "Do you need anything? I could get you water, or food. Or a potion."

Harry felt guilt nearly overwhelm him--a harsh, fatal-feeling burn that was sickeningly familiar, but not, Harry was sure, his own. Harry considered trying to relieve Draco of the emotion, half as much for his own comfort as Draco's, but if Harry just concentrated a bit he could push the intensity of it to the side, and he wasn't quite ready to forgive yet. "I'm fine."

Draco nodded. "Still, Severus said you should drink. I'll just go--" and then he went.

Harry used the opportunity to get himself to the loo. His legs were wobbly and his steps uncertain, but he managed the distance, and that was all he needed.

Draco was in the room when he returned. Harry could feel the level of restraint he was practicing to keep from helping Harry back to the bed. Caught between appreciation for the obvious respect afforded him and annoyance that Draco was seeing him this way, Harry snarled in Draco's direction.

Draco said, "I brought water."

It was purely natural for Harry to say, "Thanks," even if it ran fairly contrary to what he was thinking.

"Weasley's at the Ministry," Draco said.

That caught Harry's attention. "What for?"

"Giving testimony in closed circuit to the Wizengamot."

The faces of several Death Eaters cycled through Draco's mind. Harry assumed they were the ones captured. Harry didn't see Grayback among them, but then, he wasn't entirely certain Snape hadn't killed him in order to get Harry to Voldemort. It seemed likely.

Harry took the glass from Draco's hand, their fingers brushing as he did. The resultant thoughts that tumbled through his mind should have been easy to separate, differentiate, the, "don't," that had to be his, just had to be, and the memories of the way he felt that had to be Draco, things about himself that he didn't want to feel, to know. It should have been easy to label "Harry" at the slight, uneasy familiarity of the touch, and "Draco" at the, "sorry, didn't want, you don't understand, father, sorry," slide of words.

It wasn't. Harry held the glass close to his chest, as far from Draco's fingers as he could manage and worked to rid his mind of everything, even his own thoughts. When he reached the level of occlusion he was attempting, all the images and words were muted to a point where he didn't have to worry about whose they were. Harry took a sip and concentrated on the cold that filled him, clean and appreciated.

He said, "Your father's dead."

"I know."

Harry had known he'd known, he'd felt it somewhere in the jumble of expectations failed and idolizations broken. He didn't know why he'd said it, except to hear himself say it, to see Draco's face at the news.

Draco could have said, "Granger is dead." He could have, Harry knew. He didn't.

Harry said, "You didn't have to do what you did."

"Raping you, or saving Weasley?" Draco asked, each word carefully enunciated. His tone was not sarcastic.

Harry laughed, but not in amusement. "It would have been easier if you could have chosen one or the other."

Draco nodded, clearly in agreement with the sentiment.

*

Harry fell down the stairs the first time he tried getting out of his room, walking around himself. Snape found him there, rolled his eyes and said, "Graceful, Potter."

Harry would have said something witty, but he was far too busy being worn out and in pain. Snape put his hands under Harry's elbows and brought him to his feet. Harry said, "Don't touch me," in breathless, automatic panic, but he didn't lash out.

Snape kept his hands on Harry even once he was balanced.

Harry said, "There are spells--"

"I'm not hurting you, Potter."

Harry tried making himself breathe. "I know."

Snape held on.

Harry said, "Please, please--"

Snape said, "They're not here, and I'm not hurting you. Potter, concentrate."

Harry focused on one of the chairs in the room. It was loosely stuffed, warm and inviting looking. It was like nothing in his cell had been. He thought of how it would feel to sink down into it, how it would feel safe, maybe, or something like safe, something close enough that Harry could pretend it was safety. He let the hands on his elbows become part of that safety. It was a slow process, and it didn't work, not wholly, but he was able to start breathing regularly again.

When he had done so for nearly a minute, Snape released him gently.

Harry said, "All right."

Snape said, "Touch is ever-present, Potter."

"That's crap. There are spells--"

"But we are human, and humans will choose touch over magic in almost all things. Even purebloods. Why do you think so much of the torture was touch-based, rather than spell-driven?"

"Because your friends were bloody psychopaths?" Harry nearly cringed then, waiting for the--all right, probably well-deserved--screaming fit.

Snape just looked at him.

Harry buckled. "That was-- Sorry."

Snape raised an eyebrow.

"I know they weren't your friends." Harry almost said, "you killed them," before realizing that statement

didn't actually preclude him having been involved in a friendship with someone.

"Indeed," was all Snape said.

"And I get that you are actually, in your own, twisted way, trying to help here."

"Your talent for showing appreciation leaves a virtually immeasurable something to be desired."

"No, I still just don't like you very much."

"The feeling is entirely mutual, I assure you."

Harry nodded. "I-- That is, thanks for saving my life."

"My debt is settled."

"It was settled before now."

"Do you still understand so little about the way your chosen world works as to imagine that a Life Debt settles at the first instance of protection? The debt settles when it chooses to."

"Oh," Harry said. "I still appreciate it. Your honor in carrying it through, I guess."

Snape frowned at that.

"You're not really all that gracious at accepting appreciation yourself."

"I haven't had the opportunity to acquire all that much practice."

"Voldemort not that good at saying thanks?" Harry asked, doing his best to sound ironically sympathetic.

Snape smirked. "Almost as bad as you."

*

Once Harry was fully recovered--or at least, recovered enough that eating and walking weren't any great challenge--he found sleep elusive at best, downright impossible at worst. He spent a lot of time lying in bed, pretending he could fall into rest. When he actually did manage such a feat, ropes stripped his flesh straight to the bones, knives carved out the contents of his chest, fingers gripped at his insides and would not let go.

On the truly horrifying nights, Ron's back burst into flames, swallowing him whole in conflagration before Harry's eyes. If Hermione was there--and she often was--she was not quiet about the fact that this was all Harry's fault.

Harry often found Ron after those dreams. Most of the time he was asleep and Harry would sit by his bed, guarding against trouble that was unlikely to find them at this point. Sometimes he was awake and would say, "All right, mate?"

Harry would say, "Fancy a game of chess?" or, "Hungry?" or, "I was just, you know. . ."

Ron would say, "Yeah. 'Course."

If he was awake at the time, he would stay up with Harry until Harry feigned sleep again.

Then there were the times when the dreams weren't his. They looked a bit like his, even felt a bit like his--they involved hands and betrayal and pain and guilt, but the perspective was all wrong. Sometimes Harry could strengthen his mental shielding enough to push the externally-generated images from his mind. Most of the time it was easiest simply to walk down to Draco's room and say, "Wake up."

There were times when Draco awoke with a cry of, "Harry!"

Harry ignored these times, just as he ignored Draco's cries of, "No!" and, "I won't!" and, "Please!"

He would say, "You awake?" even though he could feel lucidity slide into place in Draco's mind.

Draco would rub a hand over his face or look away or just say, "Sorry."

Harry generally left it at that until the night he found himself saying, "I'm alive." He wouldn't say, "It's not your fault," or "I'm all right," but he found himself capable of giving Draco that much.

"Yeah," Draco said softly, "so am I."

Harry had to tighten his hold on the doorframe at the wave of revulsion that came with the words. He couldn't make sense of it, couldn't tease out the strands of what combined to create it. "You did what you thought you had--"

"--to do," Draco finished for him. "But don't you wonder, had it been you, had it been Weasley, had it been some other boy wonder and not me, don't you wonder if you wouldn't have found another way?"

Harry killed Voldemort, so he had no delusions that he would not find himself able to resort to violence when absolutely necessary. "Maybe. Maybe not."

"I--"

"Did you enjoy it?"

Draco looked as though he might actually be sick for a moment. "You know I didn't. You can-- You know I didn't."

"Then I probably had a reason for asking a ridiculously rhetorical question, yeah?"

Draco just looked at him.

"The others liked it," Harry said, unsure of what made him shy away from saying, "your father, Grayback. It was right there in their eyes. I didn't even need. . .what I have with you. They loved it."

Draco did sick up then. He hit the floor at a dead run and Harry could hear the sounds of choked, pained retching emanating from the washroom. His head swirled with misery and fear and loss and Harry didn't even try to understand all the connections. The water ran for a moment and Draco reappeared, shaken and pale.

Harry asked, "Why did you save Ron's life?"

"Self-preservation," Draco said.

Harry found it vaguely interesting, the way Draco's mind swirled and kicked and generally caused all sorts of mayhem when he simplified things that defied simplification. Harry waited.

Draco said, "Because I couldn't undo what had been done."

"That was your way of saying sorry?"

"Malfoys are known for grand gestures. You just didn't know that, not having grown up in the wizarding world."

The humor fell flat, but Harry smiled all the same. Draco risked a half-smile in return. Harry shook his head. "Go back to sleep."

"I'd, ah, rather not."

"Tea?"

Draco nodded. "Tea."

*

The fourth time they had tea together Draco just followed Harry down to the kitchen when he woke, neither of them saying a word. When the tea had been brewed and they were sitting, they talked of inconsequential things.

Draco asked, "Who buys this tripe?"

"The tea?" Harry asked.

"No, the non-existent scones."

Harry ignored this minor fit of pique. "Do house elves go to market?"

"If their owner asks it of them, but they have better taste than this."

"It doesn't seem all that horrid to me."

Draco blinked. "It's from a bag, Harry."

Harry nearly smiled at the overlay of mild horror and delicate distaste radiating from Draco. He prodded. He couldn't help himself. "What else is it supposed to be from?"

There was a moment when Draco's varying reactions to that battered against Harry's mind, almost violent, except too inward, too befuddled to be so entirely. Then they stilled. Draco said, "You're fucking with me."

Harry grinned. A second later he saw--felt? He wasn't sure; it happened too quickly--Draco move to slap at his arm. It would have been a playful slap had it ever landed, but Harry was across the room before it could.

Draco said, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean--"

Harry held up a hand and closed his eyes, trying to get rid of the part of his brain that was going, no, I didn't, that wasn't, sorry, Harry, I didn't. Occluding wasn't as easy as he remembered it being, not with Draco, not now. He said--loudly, in order to hear himself over the babbling--"Stop. Stop."

And that just made it worse, because then there was confusion and panic at not knowing what he was doing and Harry pressed his palms into his temples so hard he thought he would flatten his head entirely.

"Oh," Draco said. There was a slow swirling sensation and Harry's head quieted. There was still a low hum of sorrysorry, but Harry could handle that.

Harry said, more softly this time, "I know you didn't mean me harm."

"You're standing in the corner."

"Instinct," Harry said, and felt Draco's struggles for quiet inside his own mind.

"You instinctively flew into a corner at my touch."

"You--" Raped me. Broke inside me. Harry couldn't finish the thought, not aloud. He thought about letting go the shields on his mind, but he couldn't manage that either.

Draco nodded. "I didn't think."

That made two of them. And Harry had already known that. "I'm, er, going to sit back down now."

Draco tapped Harry's tea cup with his wand. "This stuff is bad enough warm."

"You could tell the house elves what you wanted."

"No, they've been instructed to only listen to Order members."

"Really?" Harry asked.

"So Severus says. I thought it would be somewhat embarrassing to tell a house elf to do something and have it refuse. As such, I haven't tried."

Harry rolled his eyes, and wished, not for the first time, that Hermione was there. Even if it were just to rant. Particularly, then. He missed her intensity, her well-intentioned energy. Pushing the ache deeper, where he could think past it, he asked, "What kind of tea would make you happy?"

"Loose leaf, with bergamot."

Harry took a sip of his. It tasted fine to him. "Maybe some will show up."

*

Ron looked at Harry oddly when he asked the house elves for the tea. Harry said, "Don't ask."

For awhile, Ron didn't. It was a relief, but it also made Harry feel like a bad friend. Not that Harry was Ron's only friend, but they'd both lost Hermione, so sometimes it felt like it, just a bit. Seeing as how he couldn't even find the words to talk to himself about the problem, he had no idea how to communicate about it with Ron.

Ron made it easier by telling Harry, "That's really good tea, mate," which allowed Harry to say, "Draco asked for it."

Ron's smile was restrained, as if he didn't want Harry to know he was amused. "I know."

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. "They only answer to Order members, the elves."

"Yeah." Then, "Snape's had me ask for things."

Harry raised his eyebrows. He knew that Ron and Snape had laid off full-fledged yelling at each other, but neither man was exactly what one could call friendly with the other.

Ron scrunched up his face. "Seemed he went to a lot of trouble just to poison us with the healing potions. And then he was brewing the stuff for us and so if he wanted a little something on the side. . . Refusing made me feel petty."

"Sure."

"I think--" Ron tugged at his earlobe. "I think it might be all right for us not to hate them."

"I hate his father," Harry said, even knowing he sounded ridiculous, as thought he were reaching. "Even when I don't have the energy to, I hate him."

"Healthy," Ron said without a trace of irony.

"It gets me through the day."

Ron laughed at that, a shocked laugh. Harry managed a smile. He even maintained it while asking, "Do you think what I did was as bad as what he did?"

Ron didn't look as though he relished saying, "You're going to have to be more specific."

"The way I opened Draco's mind for myself. Do you think it was as bad as. . .as what he did?"

"Did you mean to do it?"

"My intentions were about as noble as his. And I can go in, repeat my crimes, anytime I want. In some ways, I have no choice."

"Choice is something we're all a bit short on these days," Ron said.

"So you do think it was. As bad."

"No, but I think you think that."

"It makes it hard to have him play the villain," Harry said softly. Pain pulsed slightly behind his eyes and he shut them for a moment, until the sibilant whisper of Draco's mind became too clear, and he would take even pain as a means of distracting himself.

"There's got to be something in between. The villain and the hero." Ron paused. "There's me, isn't there?"

Harry wasn't wholly sure Ron was as in between as he believed himself, but the point was a valid one. He was a hero for doing the worst deed he'd ever done in his life, so black and white had to be next to nonexistent. Still, Draco was Draco, and he'd had his hand--

Harry took a breath.

"Harry," Ron said softly, worry coloring the word.

"I think I always figured Hermione would be around to tell me what to do once I got to this point, you know? The after part." Harry was proud at having barely stumbled over Hermione's name. His smile was tremulous, and not altogether mocking. He was certain that by now she would have annoyed him into doing something, moving in some direction, any direction.

"I know," Ron said. "I know."

"Yeah," Harry said, because Ron was the one person in the world who did.

"But I think she'd tell you to not worry about what was supposed to be and what wasn't."

"She didn't really believe in that sort of tripe, did she?"

"No, she really didn't." Ron shook his head. "Also, I think she would have cursed him for you, then fixed him up and sent him on his way and figured all was even."

"Maybe so." Hermione had been hard to predict and although it sounded like her, she had also been a girl and had a heightened sensitivity for things that posed a threat to her sexual choices. He didn't know that she could have forgiven this, not even though it had been imposed upon Harry.

"This part?" Ron said, "This part is your choice."

"I know," Harry said. "You would think that would help, wouldn't you?"

*

Draco said, "Yes," after his first sip of tea, and then, "Thanks."

Harry didn't really mind the twirls of pleasure and confusion and uneasy acceptance that skimmed over his own thoughts. He shrugged. "You asked."

"Didn't mean you were going to do it. I'm sure you've asked for plenty of things you didn't get."

"You have no idea," Harry muttered without wholly realizing he was speaking aloud. Draco's emotions, thoughts, mind-patterns were very distracting.

Draco said slowly, "Some idea."

There was a sharp spike of fear and something that tasted coppery even though it never reached his tongue before Harry realized that Draco was talking about his own transgressions against him. He said, "Oh. Uh. That wasn't what I was referring to."

Draco blinked. After a long moment he said, "I think I'm getting used to you knowing me like this."

"Glad one of us is."

"You weren't talking about that?"

"I didn't really ask for anything," Harry pointed out.

"It was implicit. We were--"

"Don't." Harry had already heard the words in Draco's head. He didn't want to hear them aloud. He felt Draco's resistance to the command, but he gave in the end. Harry lifted his tea cup. "See, you do things when I ask for them sometimes."

"There is such a thing as relativity, Harry."

Harry wasn't always sure there was, or at least, he wasn't sure he could always judge the importance of things, trust his subjectivity, let alone his objectivity.

"What were you talking about?"

Harry considered ignoring the question, except that Draco was tamping down on his curiosity so hard he was nearly shaking from the effort. The attempt was oddly inviting of confidences. Harry said, "My aunt and uncle. They weren't big on requests."

Draco tumbled the answer over and over and over until Harry felt nearly dizzy with it. He felt the pockets that the tumbling created, questions that weren't fully formed, questions that Draco wouldn't allow to come into actual words. Finally Draco said, "You were really the first to ever refuse me anything. Anything that mattered. And there hadn't been much refusal of the things that didn't, either."

"I'm not surprised to hear that," Harry said dryly.

Draco smiled, but the expression was bitter and lost. "When father told me to join--I thought it was a request. I thought I owed him the same willingness to please he had generally shown me."

Harry understood that to a certain point. He'd done stupid things for Ron and Hermione all the time due simply to their, well, permissiveness, yes--their willingness to give him what he needed when he needed it. When he asked. And sometimes when he hadn't.

"When did you realize--" Harry cut off at the barrage of images that filled his head. They had no coherence, no linear sense to them, just Dumbledore and Harry himself and Voldemort and the disturbing part was that despite the lack of sense, Harry comprehended what Draco was struggling to force into words.

Draco settled on, "It wasn't just my father."

Harry didn't quite follow that, even with the help he was getting from Draco's unspoken sentiments.

"I don't like refusing people. Bad trait in a Death Eater."

Harry would imagine. He tried gently pushing at the maelstrom of anxiety that wasn't his own and--to his surprise--it quieted a bit. He asked, "More tea?"

Draco said, "Yes. Please," and for a moment, there was full, heady, silence.

*

Snape handed potion after potion to Harry, and Harry drank them down without question or hesitation, but nothing cut the constant, easy, loud flow of Draco's thoughts through Harry's head. Snape just kept trying, even as Harry got used to the nightmares that weren't his, the odd pleasure at manipulating runes--Harry hadn't even taken runes--the mixed feelings about Ron. It was less confusing than it had been, despite the fact that the words, pictures, sentiments of Draco's mind had become far more overlapped, intertwined with his own.

Sometimes he could feel Draco trying to tamp down on his own thoughts, humiliation and fear at the knowledge that he would, would be caught.

Finally, because Harry knew how it was to be afraid even of the things he couldn't help thinking, he said, "I won't hold those things against you."

Draco didn't ask what things. He said, "I still don't want you knowing them."

Harry really couldn't blame him. He suspected that in the end, the only thing for it was to share reciprocally a bit. It wasn't the same, of course. Harry had control over what he gave and he wielded it. He thought about the things he liked feeling from Draco--the sense-driven pleasure of tasting a favorite food, the electric brilliance of performing magic--and mixed in the things he thought Draco probably needed--the nightmares, the grief over Hermione, the constant, unshakeable sense of violation. Harry dropped these in little, un-forewarned doses. Draco's shock was always crisp, cold. Harry liked the smack of it.

Draco said, "I'm not sure you should--"

"We're well past 'should'," Harry said.

All the arguments in Draco's head crumbled and blew away at that. He said, "I'm sorry about Granger."

Harry thought it was funny, how for Draco, that was the element for which apology was possible.

Draco said, "Maybe if I were further away from you."

Harry asked, "Where would you go?"

Draco shrugged. "My father had hidden properties. Johannesburg, maybe."

"By yourself?" Harry asked, regretting it as fear that wasn't his own turned his blood warm and stagnant.

"Perhaps not," Draco admitted with a rueful twist of his lips.

"Snape'll figure something out," Harry said, not allowing Draco access to the growing store of doubt in his mind.

"Mm," Draco said. He had enough doubt for both of them.

*

There was a funeral for Hermione. Two, actually. A state one and a private affair. Her body had never been recovered, so time hadn't been an issue. At least, not in the sense of urgency. It had been more of a problem as far as getting Harry to attend was concerned. The Ministry wanted him there. Harry was unconvinced that was a reason to go. However, he said, "It's the Ministry," and Ron said, "It's Hermione," and that was that.

The reality of leaving the house, unfortunately, was something else altogether. Harry hadn't known it was going to be until he found himself at the threshold and the thought of standing in a crowd, people's shoulders brushing into his, their knees accidentally knocking up against his own, paralyzed him. Ron said, "Harry?"

Harry said, "Give me a moment."

A moment passed, then two, and Harry became aware that telling himself lies about things being fine, about this being no big deal wasn't working. So he said, "Okay, another moment," and walked back into the house. He found Draco easily, following the strain of vague, unconnected thoughts to the kitchen.

Draco said, "Thought you were leaving."

"I thought so too," Harry said. "I am. I just need a favor."

Draco blinked. Harry read the layered response of, "I owe you," resonating inside Draco. Draco didn't say anything.

"Not like this, you don't," Harry told him.

"What do you need?"

"Usually I try not to hear. You. I try not to hear you. It doesn't really work, but I at least try."

"I know."

Harry took a deep breath. "You never say, you never even think, but I'm pretty sure what I did was as bad as what you did, even if I didn't mean it. So what I'm about to ask--"

"You want to stop trying for the afternoon. To borrow my thoughts."

Harry nodded. "It's not a fair favor to ask."

"Give me a bit to decide whether I find the fact that you still think anything between us could be fair is amusing or simply pathetic."

"I can, then?"

"Why are you even asking? I can feel the crack in my defenses, the place where you rest but I wouldn't know if you were actively looking or not."

Harry didn't have to think to know the answer. "Because it was your right to say no."

"Yes, fine, you're Harry Potter, Golden Standard Bearer of All which is Right and Pure."

"Or just trying not to fuck up as much as humanly possible."

"Seems like you get it right an awful lot," Draco said. The words were bitter, but the emotion under them was a pure strain of sadness to which Harry had trouble not reacting.

"Your score's improving," Harry told him instead. "Thanks."

"For loaning you my mind?" Draco asked, somewhat dryly.

Harry smiled. "Pretty generous of you."

"Don't let word get out."

*

Between the almost constant presence of Ron at his side, in front of him, anywhere Harry needed him to be, and the loud, displaced ramble of Draco's thoughts, Harry managed to handle the press of people, their expressions of false sympathy, the occasional murmurs of true grief. Draco could easily focus on the

inconsequential, trapped in the house as he was day after day, which made it less taxing for Harry to pay attention to Ron.

He was clearly using the need to keep Harry out of the worst of it as a way of avoiding what was actually happening, of never once looking at the casket that didn't hold her, of not really listening to the words that were being said, that he was saying about the woman he had loved.

When it was all over, when it was just family and actual friends, Ron said, "I was thinking about going home for a bit." There was guilt in the statement. "You could come too."

But Harry knew hesitation from Ron when he heard it, knew Ron needed to be away from his memories for a little while--at least as much as he could be.

He said, "Have your mum send cookies."

Ron said, "Oatmeal with peanut butter and chocolate chips. I have not forgotten what a complete freak of nature you are."

"See that you don't."

"Tell Ginny hi for me?"

"Just this once, mate. Then you have to tell her whatever it is you need to tell her."

Harry wasn't quite sure what that was yet, other than that there was maybe a reason why he had left her behind and there was no going back. He needed to find a better way to say it. "Once is all I ask."

Ron hugged him, then. That had been Hermione's job, her arms always insistent, and stronger than Harry would have expected. But she had left them to themselves, and Harry supposed it wasn't so bad, having

Ron's arms around him instead. Not so very bad at all, if he couldn't have the original.

Harry wondered if perhaps he was getting used to moving on. The thought was worrisome and reassuring all at once, and Harry laid it aside in favor of Draco's musings over what to ask the elves to make for dinner. He said, "Go," because he could do this, he could let Ron have his space for a while, but not if Ron stood there for much longer.

Ron went. Maybe it was the same for him. Harry was pretty sure he'd never ask.

Harry went back to Forty-two and a Quarter Sayton Way. Draco said, "Where's--" but cut himself off. Harry, not having yet worked to quiet Draco's mental processes, felt the moment of realization. Draco shuffled his feet a bit. "Sorry."

Harry felt the surprising twist of actual sympathy in Draco. Harry shrugged, not casually, but with a sort of emphasis. "He'll come back."

"That must be nice to know," Draco said softly.

The words allowed Harry to let go slightly of his hold on Draco's mind, let things quiet to their normal quiet susurration. "What'd you decide on for dinner?"

"What, you don't know?"

"I was distracted."

"Venison steak and chips."

Harry smiled. "That's my favorite."

It hit him a second before Draco said, "I know," that Draco already knew.

*

Harry went out alone four days later, mostly just to prove to himself that he could.

He came back with a kneazle. Draco said, “You could have just found a floo and asked me to come get you,” but didn’t protest as the traitorous creature pawed its way into his arms.

Harry frowned. He’d never had a way with cats. He’d considered the possibility that his animagic form was a Doberman, or something equally anathematic to their species. “Hermione had a kneazle.”

“That thing was not a kneazle. What happened to it, anyway?”

Harry shrugged. “Half. Ginny took it.”

Harry felt Draco’s laugh before he heard it. All Draco said was, “Appropriate.” There wasn’t any bite to the comment, not even in Draco’s head.

“Harry,” Draco said.

“I know, it was a stupid idea. She doesn’t even like me.”

“She?”

“Winter. The kneazle.”

“Winter?” The kneazle was white with large black splotches and didn't look much like the descriptor at all.

“Winter’s Tale, Shakespeare? I did have some education before arriving at Hogwarts, you realize.”

“I don’t know the reference. I…well, my pre-Hogwarts education was probably somewhat varied from yours.”

Harry felt sparks of magic, nothing else. “Huh. You don’t know Shakespeare.”

“Muggle thing?”

“Author. Hermione was one of the characters in the play. I don’t know if that’s why her parents named her that, I’ve never even actually read the thing. But I liked it. It was a good kneazle name.”

Winter looked at him doubtfully. There was possibly reproach in the stare, but Harry chose to believe she was simply getting used to him. She curled her tail, caressing the end of it along Draco's cheek. Harry sighed.

Draco wrapped his hand lightly around the tail. "I think she's just confused by you."

Harry cocked his head. "I'm not that complicated."

"You have remnants of other people populating your mind."

"Person, and not remnants, that makes it sound like you're dead."

"I was referring to myself and the Dark Lord. And He is dead."

Harry tensed. "Yeah, you'd think that would mean you could call him Voldemort."

Harry was punished for his instinctive anger quickly enough, Draco's brief but crushing wave of fear threatening to flatten both of them. Harry said, "Right."

Draco made himself unclench his fingers from Winter's fur, where they had buried in his moment of terror. She had never moved. She still didn't once set free. Draco picked her up gently and set her in Harry's lap. He soothed a hand over her back. "It's all right. The parts that matter are his. I promise.

Winter put her front paws on Harry's chest so that she could sniff at his face. He held still as she sniffed at his scars, at the scar. Finally, she settled in, curling herself up on his midsection and closing her eyes.

Draco smiled slightly.

Harry said, "Sorry 'bout--"

"Shouldn't have just said that He was in you."

"I knew you didn't mean it as an insult." Harry had, of course. But he had issues. He thought he had a right to them.

"Still." Draco paused. "She's a pretty kneazle."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

*

At times, when they were both petting Winter, Harry and Draco's fingers would brush. The first couple of times this happened, Draco snatched his fingers back and thought, didn't mean, didn't mean--, but when Harry hadn't thrown him or yelled at him or even stalked off to find some privacy by the fourth time, he stopped flinching.

Harry wanted to explain that something about having his hands in her fur helped him to pull it together and not see things that weren't there, not feel things that were over and done with, but there was no way to say it without Draco tensing up even more, so he just continued to pet Winter and pretended not to be bothered that Draco couldn't read his mind every once in a while. He didn't, however, drop the defenses on it.

Harry was perfectly willing to pretend that he could have his cake and eat it, too.

After a while there was the day when Harry's hip accidentally clipped Draco's as they were passing each other in the hall and Harry didn't feel the acute need to scream, "get off me, get off me, GET OFF ME!"

It was progress, and Harry found himself, if not enjoying it, then at least appreciating it.

Still, even given the relatively peaceable nature of things between them, and the fact that he could hear Draco's thoughts, he was surprised when Draco said, "You have to know my trial's coming up."

Harry nodded. Snape's was over and done with. He was on probation, working for the Ministry for a period of no less than fifteen years.

"Right. I was wondering, then, if perhaps you'd attend."

Harry blinked which was all it took for Draco to backpedal--literally, Harry felt the wheels in Draco's his head turning backward. "Nevermind, it was an unwise--"

"Why do you want me there?"

"Who else?" Draco asked, and Harry saw the vast emptiness inside his head, relieved only by Snape and himself. Evidently Snape was a foregone conclusion.

"So, not because it would look good." It was a statement, not a question. Harry already knew what he needed to know.

The moment of, "Oh, huh," passed through Draco's head. He said, "I should have thought about that, shouldn't I?"

He should have, so Harry nodded.

Draco shook his head a bit. "No, I just want someone who, if it goes for the worst, thinks that maybe I didn't deserve that. Not entirely."

Harry thought it was a little weird that he was that person. Or at least, one of those two people. But Draco was right, he was. "Yeah, all right. I'll be there."

Draco's surprise was muted, but there. "Good, that's-- Thank you."

It was Harry's turn to say, "You're welcome."

*

They sentenced Draco to two years house arrest. Draco nodded and said something suitably grateful, but Harry could barely see for the rushing of panic and claustrophobia bombarding him. It was only then that Harry noticed how often Draco had thought about the day when he could leave the house, fly, go to a shop, anything.

Draco held himself perfectly straight and still for the trip back to Forty-two and a Quarter Sayton Way and only when they were solidly encased in its walls did he break his posture, running for the toilet. Over the next few minutes, Harry became entirely sure that he would have preferred just being sick himself.

Thankfully, Snape had simply disappeared to the potions cabinet, and before long Harry felt the pull of whatever Snape had found to give to Draco calming him, lulling him into sleep. Harry was tempted to follow him straight there, but instead he went and sat in the hall outside Draco's room, where Snape had carried him to bed.

Snape, surprisingly, brought him tea at one point, a tray of it, with heavily caffeinated earl grey and a rather considerable spread of sweetbreads and biscuits.

Harry asked, "You put anything in it?"

Snape opened his mouth, narrowed his eyes. Then, halfway to saying something Harry was entirely sure would have excoriated him from the inside out, Snape simply shook his head.

There were two cups, so Harry poured for two and handed one to Snape, who was still standing. Snape summoned himself a chair and sat down across the hall from Harry.

Harry said, "He thinks he's going to go mad."

Snape took a sip. "He will calm down."

"Maybe." Harry didn't know. Snape hadn't felt the way Draco's mind had nearly ripped itself apart.

Snape smirked. "Teenagers."

Harry frowned, automatic defenses popping to his lips until he realized that to Snape, two years couldn't seem like much. And that one could be trapped in worse places, worse situations, than a house that had provided safety at the most awful of moments. He nibbled at a biscuit and asked, "What will you do?"

"Skip the country, leave him to his own defenses and make my way in a suitably tropical and foreign spot."

"Go on as you have been, then?" Harry asked.

"Unless you had a better idea," Snape's voice underlined his extreme disbelief in such a likelihood.

Most of Harry's better ideas involved wildly unlikely scenarios of escape and happily ever after, so he shook his head.

"Is he dreaming?"

Harry's gaze snapped up. "You didn't give him Dreamless?"

"I did. One can build an immunity."

"Ah. Not yet." But it told Harry just how much Draco had been using it. He had hoped his dreams were just calming, quieting to the point where Harry's own fears and memories were drowning them out. Evidently not.

Snape poured himself some more tea. "There's that then."

Harry nodded, and took another biscuit, despite the fact that he hadn't finished the one in his hand.

*

Snape decided that the thing to do was to distract Draco with tasks that needed doing, particularly schoolwork. Draco, petulant, argued that being stuck in a house for two years was not conducive to being employed, and if one had no intentions of being employed there was really no reason to finish one's education.

Snape said, "Do you plan on dying in the next two years?"

"Do you plan on the job market deciding to embrace ex-Death Eaters within those two years?" Draco asked in return.

Although Draco's emotions had almost settled into familiar, the familiarity that came with this particular blend of worry and hope and fear was different, real. Harry knew how it was to be frightened of disappointing both oneself and others. Or even worse, finding that he couldn't disappoint, because his expectations of himself were too low to begin with for such an outcome to occur.

Harry said, "It could happen."

"Fuck off, Potter," Draco said, accompanying the words with a rush of anger and jealousy that Harry was pretty sure were both accidental, at least the extent of the force with which they came at him.

Harry waited to get them under control and said, "No, don't think I will."

The evident effort on Harry's part calmed Draco a little and he was able to verbalize, "As though you have to worry."

"Probably not, but I could use the last year of information anyhow, don't you think? Hermione would have said so."

Draco clearly didn't know what to say to that. Finally he settled on, "She liked school."

Harry asked, "You didn't?"

Draco glanced over at Snape for a moment. He shrugged. "It was better than other things."

"Like being stuck in a house with nothing to do?"

Harry rode along for the memories of Draco's parents, the grief and guilt involved in having to think about them. Draco said, "Yes. Like that."

Harry nodded. He had his own nightmares to avoid in a haze of definable assignments and deadlines. "Ex-Death Eater with a Hogwarts certificate has to be better than one without one, yes?"

"I'm not entirely certain there's that much difference between the two," Draco told him, but the

petulance was gone, leaving simple resignation in its wake.

Harry wasn't sure either, but he wanted a study partner. Also, he wanted for Draco's mind not to feel so claustrophobic, heated and still and confined. "Could be in two years."

Draco said, "Relax, you've already won the argument."

It was often after victory that Harry found himself least able to just let go.

*

Draco slept too much for the first month and a half, ignoring the nightmares of the house collapsing on him, of asphyxiation, of burial. Then he gave up sleeping altogether. Harry said, "Maybe you should talk to Snape."

"He's busy," Draco said, and they both knew it was with the potion to disconnect their minds.

"Not that busy," Harry said, because he had come to accept the fact that Snape would make time for Draco's needs. Their relationship was full of odd silence and harsh words and a bond that Harry recognized vaguely from his own with Ron, but that encompassed different similarities, different histories.

"It'll pass," Draco said. "And in the meantime, McGonagall is horribly impressed by the speed at which I'm working."

Draco liked to distract himself while awake, which was pretty much twenty hours a day, so he could get himself through three or four days worth of course work in one. Harry would have struggled to keep up, but being ahead of Harry calmed Draco for some inexplicable reason, despite the fact that it would get

him out of the house no sooner. Harry liked a calm Draco, for obvious reasons, so he let him set his own pace.

When the exhaustion began wearing at him and schoolwork became complicated, if not impossible, but sleep was still elusive--a prospect both frightening and appealing--Harry said, "You wanna, I don't know, play a game?"

Draco ran a hand through his hair. His hands were less-than-steady and the skin around his eyes was thin, a bruised wine-blue from lack of sleep. "A game. Yes, a game. That's a good idea."

Harry thought it best to avoid exploding snap or really, anything that involved snapping and exploding, given Draco's current state. He was pants at chess, and didn't really like playing with anyone other than Ron in any case, so he asked, "Mind if I teach you a Muggle game?"

"You think I can actually learn something at this point?"

He had a point, so Harry said, "We're going to need a telly," and made plans for a jaunt out into Muggle London.

The day he left he opened his mind to Draco and let him come along--at least at some level--should he so choose.

Harry knew he didn't, felt him make the choice, draw away, not tempt himself. Harry brought back take-away, at which Draco poked a lot before eating and for which he didn't say thank you.

Mostly they watched comedies, shows that were so bound up in Muggle world spaces--offices, hospitals, flat complexes--that Draco found them more fascinating than funny. Harry, though, Harry could laugh at them.

They would watch through the night, or at least, Draco would, Harry falling asleep on the opposite side

of the couch from him to the sound of conversations that he was too tired to follow.

On the morning that he woke up with his head in Draco's lap he felt a spike of panic that was his, and one that wasn't, and Draco said, "I didn't want to wake you, I didn't want to-- I didn't know what to do."

Harry fought past the dual levels of panic and managed to find the thought, You were safe all night. He didn't move.

Harry said, "Right. Next time you can shove me off."

But Draco didn't, and Harry learned to wake up with his cheek pressed to Draco's pajama bottoms without wanting to hyperventilate or vomit or curse someone.

The night that Draco finally, finally fell asleep before him, slumping forward in a way that was going to cause no end to his whinging the next day, Harry took a breath and arranged him carefully, lying along the couch. He draped a blanket over him, turned off the telly, and made his way to his own room, where he could sleep safely.

He found, somewhat to his surprise, that he didn't feel anymore safe than he had three cushions away from Draco.

He closed his eyes, heard the deep, steady blackness of Draco's capitulation to unconsciousness, and fell asleep to its rhythm.

*

Once Draco started sleeping again, things became easier. The incipient madness brought on by sleep deprivation slackened and Draco acclimated himself to the house. There were still times when Harry felt

a sort of desperation, only to find Draco watching telly, London flashing before his eyes, or see him sitting near a window, trying to get his homework done.

Mostly, though, he stayed almost unsettlingly calm.

There were two sets of protections set upon the house to enforce the arrest.

(Well, three, if a person counted Harry, but Harry--as much as he never would have admitted it--was starting to think he probably would have just let Malfoy go. So he didn't count himself.)

There were the wards and there were the Aurors. The wards weren't all that big a problem. Harry had found through his renewed efforts at finishing school that his intrinsic ability to unravel magic--even magic that wasn't supposed to move no matter what--had strengthened. He wasn't sure why. He didn't want to think about it too much. He told himself it was because he had tapped into his emotions deeply enough to heighten his baseline of power overall. He didn't know if that even made sense, but it made him feel better than to think he had gotten some sort of boost from having killed.

The Aurors were a bigger issue.

Harry was a nice guy, mostly, but he wasn't charming. And charming was clearly what was needed here. Snape was going to be of no help, obviously. To his surprise, however, when spring began to poke its head around the corner, Draco ended up being useful in the pursuit of bringing a few of the Aurors into a more sympathetic position.

Draco, when he tried, was evidently charming.

Or rather, when the situation absolutely called for it.

The first time this became clear was when one of the younger Aurors--the one they kept sticking with the graveyard--got sick coming off her shift. Snape wasn't around, already off at his job, so Draco made a

trip down to the potions store and brought up a few to help. Harry knew that he'd brewed at least one of them. Draco helped Snape sometimes, the familiarity of working with him taking his mind from current day-to-day reality.

Draco handed the potions over to Harry, not even bothering to say aloud that he doubted an Auror would take them straight from him.

Harry doubted it too.

But Aurors were, by definition, not all that stupid. So on the next shift that the Auror was well enough to show up to, she said, "Look, tell Malfoy thanks?"

Harry did, later. Which evidently was all the permission Draco needed to chat her up the next evening. And the evening after that.

Harry didn't think it would go anywhere, except that she talked to the other Auror who shared her shift, and he happened to be friends with one of the morning-to-early-afternoon Aurors, and after a few months, the only Aurors who weren't on vaguely friendly terms with Draco were the late afternoon and early evening ones, all of whom were veterans and held their own grudges.

So when Harry said one night, in an offhand manner, "The weather has been so nice lately," Draco did his best to bury a quick flash of hurt and Dorelei, the first Auror to come over said, "It really has."

She didn't look at Draco.

Harry let go his hold on his emotions, just slightly, just enough for Draco to be able to feel his intent to help. Draco was good, his expression didn't change, but Harry felt the slight twist that was almost a loosening of his chest, almost, but was also surprise and confusion and gratitude that had nowhere to go.

Harry said aloud, "Perfect flying weather."

Dorelei did look at Draco then. "Harry," she said.

"He wouldn't flee. Even if he could, he wouldn't."

"I already know you can destroy the wards," she said.

"But I haven't," he said. He felt Draco's curl of interest. He pushed it away. "I asked first."

Dorelei sighed. "Maybe."

At Harry's grin, she said, "Maybe."

Draco smiled then, too, small and stunted and almost unrecognizable. Harry recognized it.

*

When Draco was flying his thoughts were strong, pure; they tasted and smelled like pine and distant earth and Harry liked them almost as much as his thoughts of speed and freedom. There was laughter in his mind, which Harry rarely ever heard from him and it was surprisingly nice, made falling asleep draped over his side later easier: easy, even.

So it went like that until Draco stopped sleeping again, only this time Harry could feel the shift in reasons.

He wasn't sure what to say. He stopped falling asleep on Draco, because he couldn't stop flying with him--the Aurors wouldn't let him without Harry. He stopped eating with him because he couldn't stop studying with him--Draco helped him with too many of his assignments.

Only that made it worse, because Draco's self-censor--which always simmered just beneath his concerted self-interest--spiked at the obvious avoidance.

Harry said, "I just. I don’t want to make things worse for you."

"Why not?" Draco asked, but he sounded tired, not particularly curious or angry.

"Because I wouldn't want to have someone throw that in my face."

"That you were hopelessly in love?"

Harry blinked in surprise.

"Why not say it? Why not? It's not like you can't tell, like you couldn't quote me to myself before I ever said anything, so why not?"

"Because there's very little left to you, and I'm trying to bloody allow you that." As opposed to Draco, Harry knew he sounded angry. He was really just tired. Draco's lack of sleep was oftentimes his lack of sleep. And the awkwardness wasn't helping.

"Yeah. Saint Potter." The comment was made without inflection. Harry could feel the dark amusement, the utter hopelessness that rippled beneath it.

Neither of those things caught Harry's attention so much as the fact that Draco sort of believed the moniker. Harry pressed the palms of his hands to his eyes. He said without looking up, "If I tried to kiss

you right now, would you think I was just being nice?"

Draco didn't answer. He didn't need to.

"Fuck," Harry said. "What am I supposed to do here?"

Draco shook his head. "There's nothing--"

Harry kissed him anyway, because he wanted to, and if there were no good options, then he might as well pick the bad one he liked best. He caught the line of Draco's jaw in his hands and pressed his lips to Draco's, and it was wet and slick and new, especially with Draco thinking, "please let this be real, please let this," and Harry letting his thoughts slip, letting his, "this isn't then, this isn't," wash over Draco.

At some point Draco's hands grasped on to the back of Harry's head and despite the restraint that was new too, and Harry didn't mind, not at all, didn't mind so long as Draco stayed where he was.

It was like that until Snape found them and then they broke off, Draco looking ashamed but mostly relieved, satisfied, and Harry grinning, even though it was likely to bring about even more intensive excoriation. Snape just rolled his eyes and said, "I leave you gentleman to it."

And that was about the most approbation Harry was ever going to get out of the universe, he was quite sure.

*

Despite the evidence provided by the last six months, Harry was well aware that restraint was not one of Draco's foremost qualities. Given this, he was not surprised when what restraint he had been practicing went out the window in the wake of Harry's somewhat forceful statement of returned attraction.

Draco took the opportunity to think about Harry's cock at every turn, keeping Harry in a perpetual state of readiness. For a while, Harry ignored this as best he could, praying harder than ever before that Snape would finally, finally come up with a solution. Then, giving up on that, Harry came to the realization that the only way to rid himself of the torment was to give Draco what he was craving. It was weak, it was a moment of giving in, giving up, and Harry couldn't really bring himself to care because his own hand was nice, but it seemed imminently possible that Draco's mouth would be nicer.

As such, one day while they were both trying to do their charms theory--well, Harry was trying, Draco was just working at being distracting--Harry said, "Get under the table and suck me off."

He said it casually, as though he was asking a question about the assignment. He felt the beat in Draco's head skip.

"Now," he said, without any more urgency than he had used for the first command.

It got Draco moving, though. It was weird for Harry, almost discomforting, to have the thought, "Oh, fuck, gorgeous," float through his mind at the vision of his own cock, but he was getting used to the double vision of seeing himself outside of himself and there was something brilliant in it, too. It was reassuring and made it so much more real, so much easier to accept Draco's smooth obedience knowing that it turned him on, being under the table, nothing more than a mouth, hardly more important than Harry's charms assignment.

Except that was just the script. And they both knew it.

Draco's mouth was warm and tight against Harry's cock and if he wasn't precisely practiced, he wasn't fumbling either. "What," Harry said, even though he could see, he knew that just at this moment, he was the only person in Draco's mind, "were you all the Slytherin boys' favorite whore?"

The question, the incongruity of it originating from Harry, Harry Bloody Potter, the distinct lack of truth behind it--and now there was a flash of Nott and some Ravenclaw that Harry didn't recognize--turned Draco on even more and Harry said, "If you let your hands go anywhere near your cock I will curse them

off," returning to his nonchalant tone.

Harry was quiet after that, bending over the text so as to follow through with the illusion but closing his eyes. When he was about to come Harry let his hands drop below the table and pressed Draco's head just a bit further down and said, softly, "Swallow."

Draco tried. He didn't wholly manage and when Harry let him draw off he was sputtering a bit, come dripping from one side of his mouth. He looked up at Harry with slightly unsure eyes. Harry swiped the come from his face with one thumb and said, "Open."

Draco opened his mouth, keeping it open as Harry laid his thumb along the center of his tongue.

Harry said, "Do you really need to be told?"

Draco sucked.

When Harry withdrew his thumb, Draco squirmed and pleaded with his eyes and Harry said, "Oh, I think you'll have to do better than that."

Draco's, "Please," was breathless and a little lost and Harry could feel certain parts of him that had still existed from Before dropping away, washed away in the tide of his capitulation. He didn't seem like he would miss them.

Harry hauled him up onto his lap and shoved his hand into Draco's trousers without so much as undoing a button. He palmed his cock, pressed it tightly to Draco's pelvis, rubbed once, twice, and Draco came, panting and squirming and acting otherwise desperate. Harry held onto him so that he would not slip straight off, onto the floor.

When he was done, when his mind and body slowed back to their normal speeds and he could think,

Draco reached for his wand. Harry said, "No."

Draco said, "But--"

Harry said, "No. You'll stay like that until we've finished our lessons."

Draco settled, wet and uncomfortable, back into his chair. He glared at Harry across the table and thought, "Later, Potter," but he didn't go for his wand again.

Harry grinned. Later was what this was all about.

*

Snape still hadn't returned by dinner time, so Harry took the opportunity to say, "I don't want to hurt you," because it had become apparent to him that the statement was possibly necessary.

"Why not?" Draco asked, and images that Harry didn't like seeing in his own mind, let alone from the point of view of anyone else flashed uncontrollably in his head.

"Why would I want to--" Harry stopped. "Is that what you want?" He'd known Draco kept mulling it over. And over and over. He hadn't until now thought of the possibility that Draco might be longing for it, rather than dreading it.

"You should be allowed--"

"No, stop talking about me. I know what I want."

Draco swallowed. "I don't know. It scares me. But then I think maybe it would help. Like an anchor. A point to go to, to draw together all the other stuff, to give it an end point."

"How much Draco? How much would be enough?"

Draco shook his head. "I'd like to say it would be up to you. But you don't-- Why can't you be bloody normal and want revenge?"

Harry wanted revenge on enough people to be thoroughly convinced of his own normality. "I suppose because it would make you too happy."

Draco laughed at that. "You're funny when you're trying to be an arse."

Harry said, softly, so that Draco could ignore it if he chose, "If you needed, really, you know. Look, you were sort of. . . Hot. On your knees. Listening to me."

"Potter, I am always--"

"Hot, right--"

"Stop reading my mind."

Harry rolled his eyes, "But I'm just saying, if it was like that, it would be like that because of the sexy part, not because I was seeking, I don't know, reparation."

"Big word."

"Hermione taught me it."

Hermione was a good way to get Draco to stop harping on him in general, but in this particular instance he hadn't meant to effect the moment of utter silence in Draco's mind. "Anyway. We could do it. Like that."

"I want you to do what I did." Draco said, and it took Harry by surprise, because the statement came literally at the same second as the thought.

"No, no."

"Okay," Draco said, because evidently he'd had enough of forcing himself on Harry, but Harry knew it didn't mean he didn't want it, just that he wouldn't ask anymore.

"Not that," Harry told him. "Don't worry, I'll be creative."

Draco shivered.

"See?" Harry asked. "So much better when you don't even know what's coming."

Draco's breath hastened, fear and anticipation and trust interrupting his body's normal instincts. It was that last one that almost made Harry back out on the deal. But he had moments wherein he was actually Gryffindor, and fully worthy of the house.

Harry said, "Later, Malfoy," and walked off, leaving Draco only so alone with his thoughts.

*

Harry went to the Weasley's place, where Mrs. Weasley would feed him cake and Ron would sit with him and it would just be the two of them, no confusing, overlapping thoughts involved.

Harry could still hear Draco, but it was muted at this distance--for the most part easy to filter and process.

Ron said, "Ginny's coming home for dinner. I asked for a couple of hours, but it's her house too, mate. And she used to be your friend, before."

Harry said, "I'm not avoiding her. Not anymore than I'm avoiding anyone else."

Ron just looked at him. Harry saw how, contextually, that might be a little bit more than most people. He sighed. "I'll talk to her after dinner. My word, all right?"

Ron said, "All right," and went on as if they hadn't been talking about Harry's somewhat cad-like treatment of his youngest and only female sibling. "I've been thinking about going out to Romania. Visit Charlie, you know."

Harry nodded.

"You could come with. Bit of a holiday. I think I might stay a while, but you could be there for just a week or so."

Harry didn't say anything.

"He'd be all right, Harry."

Harry looked down at his tea cup, rubbed at the back of his neck. "There's something I maybe haven't said."

"There tend to be lots of things you don't say, mate. But I figure you didn't come over here just for a cake, or at least, I'd like to think so, what with me having some ego."

Harry smiled. "It'd be easier to say that if you'd come around every now and then, you realize?"

"I could tell you I was afraid of the Slytherin contingent."

"Yes, but then you would have used 'afraid' to describe yourself, and I would know you were lying."

Ron laughed, a little. He asked, "This about Malfoy?"

Harry said, "If you ask him, everything is."

"I asked you."

"I spend a lot of time in his head."

"Harry, just say it."

"We're, I don't know. We're not just mates. It's-- Leaving him feels like a sort of crap thing to do. I mean, a couple of hours at a time, sure. But. A week? Maybe. I'd have to talk with him."

"He would say no?"

"It's generally not about what he says."

"Another reason I think you should go."

Harry huffed a bit. "Probably. He's not--"

"I'm not saying he's all the things I thought he was for a long time, Harry. I'm saying I think you need some perspective."

"Probably. Romania, huh?"

"A week."

"Might be fun."

"Charlie's pretty much a guaranteed party."

Harry laughed shortly. "It would be nice. If you'd come around, a bit."

"You could come around more yourself."

"That wasn't completely obvious."

"I know. I was a little-- You only had to watch once."

"But I had to watch. I had to. There was nothing--"

"I know. I just-- It wasn't that you weren't welcome. It was that I was. . .what if I said you could come and you didn't?"

Harry didn't say anything. He couldn't.

"I'd already lost her. I wasn't watching and I lost her and I thought I could lose you because I was, because they made me and it didn't seem fair, but what was I going to say to you? That it didn't seem fair? Bloody hell."

Harry poked one sneaker-covered toe at Ron's calf. The sound Ron made wasn't exactly a sob, but Harry thought it was pretty close. "Well," he said, his own voice less than completely even, "you should visit. We keep the kitchen pretty stocked. They both tend to get a hair up their respective arses otherwise, so it's just easiest."

Ron attempted a smile at that. Harry knew what the expression he managed was supposed to be.

"Maybe sometime next week," Ron said.

"Yeah," Harry said, thinking that if Draco had his way--and he had a sense they had pretty much agreed he would--he would need someone to just sit with, talk Quidditch with, be silent with.

As if reading his mind--and really, having his mind read would be almost novel at this point--Ron said, "Your thing with Malfoy, it's not something you should think you have to not talk about. He's not-- Surprisingly, you could be doing worse."

Harry did laugh at that, a real laugh, even. "I actually could, couldn't I?"

Ron cut him another piece of cake, and Harry didn't bother to worry that he'd ruin his appetite.

*

Harry said, "The thing is--" the thing that you should know, he thought, but did not share the thought with Draco, "--the thing is that it isn't so much the pain, but the loss of control."

For a second, just a second, Harry pushed even further at Draco's shattered wards, like he hadn't done in months--hadn't wanted to do in months. Draco resisted and Harry said, "Let me in."

It took a second, but Draco obeyed. He said, "You could have just--"

Harry said, "Yes, I could have."

And for the first time since they had begun having these conversations, Draco caught on. Harry murmured in his ear, "See, this is what I want," and when Draco's mind became a flash of cold heat, a single exclamation mark of arousal, Harry started to believe that maybe, maybe it was.

He gathered Draco's arms behind his back and with touch and language--the surprise of non-verbal magic was all well and good, but Harry was fast learning the aphrodisiac-like qualities of voice and sound--bound them.

The pace of Draco's breathing increased and there was uncertainty now, with the arousal, but the two were harder to identify as separate than Harry would have expected.

Harry pressed a thought into Draco's mind, let him see the ropes holding him.

Draco said, "Fuck, Harry," and despite the erotic content of the words, Harry said, "Don't talk."

Harry bound him to the bedposts standing up, his legs just a bit too widespread for comfort and Harry could feel the way the pain relaxed him just enough, just enough to give in completely, regardless of how stridently Harry preyed on his thoughts, how roughly Harry pinched at the skin of his shoulder, his nipples.

Harry held Draco's nipples tight between his fingers until Draco screamed and only then did he perform the spell necessary to clamp them that way. Draco whimpered and wondered where, precisely, Harry had learned these things.

Harry allowed him to wonder.

He played with Draco's balls a bit then, squeezing them just too hard for comfort's sake, and watched as Draco grew harder, listened as Draco thought, okay, yes, okay, not exactly sure of how to process the fact that he liked this, something about this, maybe the pain itself, or maybe the giving himself up unto it, or maybe just that it was Harry effecting it, but something.

Harry kneeled up on the bed, brought Draco's head down to his cock, barely allowed Draco to get it in his mouth before pushing up, pressing Draco further onto it. Harry held on at Draco's incipient panic at his inability to breathe, held on, waiting for Draco to remember to breathe through his nose.

It took longer than it should have, black crowding the edges of Harry's consciousness and he thought he might have to allow some slack. Then there was a line of clean blue, and Draco sunk further onto his cock.

"Good boy," Harry murmured, feeding the words straight through to Draco's mind.

He pulled Draco off when he was good and ready.

He slipped around to Draco's back, grasping Draco's cock firmly. He said, out loud, "This is going to hurt," and pressed the head of his cock into Draco.

Draco stiffened, sobbed a bit.

Harry asked, silently, Draco?

Yes, yes, don't stop, Draco answered, equally silent.

Harry pressed a bit more, waiting for the sharp, hot, sudden pain to fade. Inch by inch by inch until the pain became familiar, easier, pleasurable not just for its psychological value.

Harry settled himself in Draco and despite the entirely full nature of Draco's cock, still in his hand, said, "This is the last time for this."

Draco said, "Fine, fine, please, just move. Please."

Harry was somewhat ambivalent about the fact that Draco's begging turned him on so much that he couldn't have not moved at that point. His motives were moot, however, with Draco straining against his bonds, moving himself into Harry, against Harry, from hand to cock.

Draco came first, screaming, "Harry!" and it was a different sort of sound than Harry had ever heard given to his name.

It pushed him straight over the edge.

He lost time for a minute and when it came back to him, he said, "I thought I told you not to talk."

Draco, the little shit, promised, "I'll do better next time."

*

Harry had never awoken to a blowjob, but if it felt anything like Draco's first wash of, "Yes, yes, yes," upon waking, he'd have to try it at some point.

Harry pressed down on Draco's stomach the moment he felt him rise into consciousness, silently placed the order, "Do. Not. Move," into his mind.

Draco thought back, "Not on your life," without really thinking anything at all.

With Draco still and thinking about how happy he was just then--happy being an understated term, but Harry wasn't really up to searching around for another--it was fairly easy to finish, even if he had to draw off before Draco came.

When he came down off his high, Draco eyed Harry warily and said, "Good morning."

Harry flopped onto his back next to Draco, "Pretty good, I'd say."

Draco rearranged himself so that he could suck lazily at Harry's still untended erection. Harry said, "You don't have--"

Draco lifted himself up enough to say, "I didn't have to do anything last night, either."

Which was the first time Harry validly understood that whatever else they were about, compulsion wasn't one of those things.

Draco said, "I'm going to go make tea. You want some?"

Harry rolled out of bed. "Thanks. I'll be there in a moment."

He showered and dressed and by the time he got to the kitchen his cup was already full, steaming, the tea steeped almost black, the way he liked it. Draco offered him the cream and he poured a bit in, mixing absent-mindedly.

Draco was thinking about one of his arithmancy equations and Harry said, "Hey, I know that symbol. Hermione showed me once."

Draco didn't startle or even react as though he hadn't been talking aloud. "It's an indefinite."

"But an indefinite with an emphasis on the future. I know, she was looking for answers. She always thought answers had to be available."

Draco summoned the problem set he was working on and looked it over, scribbling something. "Huh. Thanks."

"Make it up to me in Potions."

"You'd do better asking Severus."

"If he'd ever give me a straight answer, sure."

Draco smiled and reached across the table for the teapot. He poured himself more tea and motioned questioningly toward Harry's cup. Harry shook his head. "Not yet."

Winter padded in from wherever she had gone to--she liked to disappear for hours at a time--and jumped onto Harry's lap, allowing him a cursory pet before transferring herself to Draco.

Draco thought, hello there and said, "Your familiar likes me better."

Harry said, "You should shower, you smell like me."

"You smell good," Draco said, and continued to pet Winter while poring over his textbook.

Harry said, "That was almost like a compliment."

Draco said, "Almost."

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