Learning Curve

"Harry! Wait!  You can't just—"

Harry burst through the heavy double doors; the resulting bang effectively drowned out the remainder of Hermione's words.  With a determined set to his jaw, Harry strode onwards, with

scant regard for his friends trailing in his wake.

"Mate, slow down." Ron's loping stride had him at Harry's shoulder in moments. "Where's the fire?"

Without much thought, Harry shrugged off the hand on his shoulder. "I have to see Kingsley." He tried his hardest to keep the anger, the frustration he felt, out of his tone, but judging from the look on Ron's face at that moment, he failed.

"Harry!" There was something in Hermione's voice that stopped him this time. Harry's steps slowed down until he came to a halt. He didn't turn, though. He stood, body tense, staring out into the sea of faces filling the foyer beyond.

Hermione had a surprising strength about her considering her slight frame, and Harry found himself forcibly turned by deceptively small hands.

"You can't go to Kingsley about this." She had a determined glint in her eye, but if there was one thing that Harry knew he could beat his friend at, it was stubbornness.

"Hermione, I appreciate your concern, but this is wrong, and I can't just stand—"

"You don't have a choice." Hermione's grip tightened on his arms. "I know how you feel. Malfoy's... well, whatever he is, he doesn't deserve what happened in there." She nodded in the direction of the rapidly emptying courtroom behind. "But you can't ask Kingsley to get involved in this. Support for the Ministry is already at an all time low – he can't afford to overrule the Wizengamot."

"Overrule?" Ron repeated, a perplexed frown creasing his brow. "Why would you want him to do that? Malfoy's had that coming for years. Got off lightly, if you ask me. Although," he paused here, a grin curving his lips, "there's a sweet irony about his punishment."

"It's wrong." Hermione turned her attention towards Ron, and Harry was suddenly grateful he wasn't the one on the receiving end of her fierce stare. "And banishing someone to the Muggle world like it's the seventh level of hell or something? How is that attitude any less bigoted than the crap Voldemort used to spout?"

Harry stifled a grin, because as amusing as the shocked expression on Ron's face was,

Hermione's choice of language left him in no doubt of her temper, and he really didn't want to face that just now.

"Malfoy won't survive," Harry said, and suddenly it wasn't so hard to keep the smile from his face. "He's such a complete pure-blood – he doesn't have the first clue about surviving in the Muggle world."

Ron let out a laugh that sounded less than pleasant, and Harry was forced to remind himself that his friend was still grieving. "It's what he deserves, if you ask me. Why should he be the only one not to suffer?"

"Even if he starves to death because he doesn't know how to buy food?" Harry sympathised with everything Ron was going through – losing Fred had been incredibly hard for all the Weasleys – but he wasn't about to let this pass unchallenged. "Or freezes because he has nowhere to live? Or what if he gets run over because he doesn't know the first thing about cars and crossing the road? Would that be suffering enough for you?"

Ron's gaze dropped to the ground and he shuffled awkwardly. "He wouldn't... I mean, they wouldn't just let him starve." He doesn't sound anywhere as near as certain as his words, then looks up, one hand rubbing absently at his neck. "Would they?"

Harry shrugged, because if he was being honest, he really didn't know for sure, but he had enough experience with the Ministry over the years that he wasn't prepared to offer the benefit of the doubt.

"It would be kinder to send him to Azkaban," Hermione added softly, her irritation apparently faded now.

"Which is why I need to speak to Kingsley." Harry looked at his friend determinedly, and hoped his expression managed to convey just how much he would not be talked out of this. He watched apprehensively as Hermione took a deep breath, clearly gearing herself up for a lecture of epic proportions, and then... nothing.

It took Harry a moment to realise that both Ron's and Hermione's gazes were fixed on something over his right shoulder. And that while Ron's expression was one of apprehension, Hermione's was something altogether different, almost as if she were gearing up to do battle. There were few things or people that evoked that kind of reaction in his friends, and Harry found himself turning slowly, reluctantly.

Whatever it was he expected to see, a determined Pansy Parkinson striding towards him with

tear tracks on her flushed face was definitely not it.

"What the hell happened in there, Potter?"  Pansy was still several feet away from him as she spoke, but even at that distance Harry could see the tears brimming in her eyes.  "You were supposed to help him.  You said everything would be okay."  She paused here and turned to glare angrily at her companion who was frantically shushing her.  "Back off, Blaise," she snapped.

Until that moment Harry hadn't noticed Zabini hovering uncertainly at Pansy's side – he'd been too focussed on the angry girl herself, whose bitter words only served to enhance the guilt Harry was already feeling.

"He trusted you."  Most of the anger had faded from Pansy's expression at this point, and she just looked overwhelmingly sad.

Harry took a moment to glance at his friends.  Ron was determinedly looking everywhere but at the crying girl in front of them, and Hermione, well she had never been exactly fond of Pansy Parkinson, and Harry could see her hackles rising.  He reached out and placed a stilling hand on Hermione's arm.  He got an incredulous look in return, but she relaxed nonetheless.

Despite their history, both recent and old, Harry had come to something of a truce with Pansy over the last month or so. There had been that incredibly uncomfortable moment when she'd apologised for her actions during the final battle, before they'd settled into an awkward kind of co-existence. If nothing else, they had been united in their determination to help Malfoy.

Something, Harry remembered now, he had failed spectacularly to do. He reached out uncertainly, but as a stifled sob escaped Pansy's mouth, Harry let his hand fall back to his side. "I'll do everything I can," he promised, ignoring Hermione's whispered protests. "I'll make it right, I swear." And Harry realised in that moment that he was making that promise as much to himself as he was to Pansy.

"That's what you said last time."

Harry realised in that moment that he had never liked Blaise Zabini, that he was sly and devious, even by Slytherin standards, so he ignored him. "I promise," he said firmly, eyes fixed intently on a sniffling Pansy.

She nodded and seemed slightly mollified by his words, and Harry was rewarded by the sight of her elbow jabbing Zabini sharply in the ribs before she dragged him away without further words.

As the click of Pansy's heels across the marble floor began to fade, Hermione swung to face Harry.  "I told you, Kingsley can't do anything about this.  And you!" She turned to glare at Ron.  "Some help you were."

Harry looked at his friend in sympathy; Ron was still a little pale.

"But she was... crying," he said, in almost awestruck tones.  "What was I supposed to do?"

Hermione began to explain in no uncertain terms exactly what she had expected Ron to do, but Harry wasn't really paying attention.  He spotted a flurry of activity out of the corner of his eye, and turned just in time to spot a determined Rita Skeeter heading his way, Quick-Quotes Quill at the ready.

Instinctively, Harry turned to leave; the last thing he needed after the turmoil of the day, was an interrogation at the hands of that vicious-tongued creature.

"Harry Potter, where do you think you're going?  We need to talk about this."  Hermione's hand shot out and gripped his arm.

"Avoiding her," he muttered, with a desperate nod in Rita's direction.

Harry could tell the moment Hermione spotted their rapidly approaching company, because her expression hardened.  "You go, Harry," she said firmly, her gaze still fixed on Rita.  "Ron and I will handle this."

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In the end Harry didn't speak to Kingsley.

He'd meant to, had gone straight from Ron and Hermione in the direction of the Minister's office, but making his way across the busy Atrium, Harry had heard the murmurs of

discontent, and worse still, mentions of Fudge as a possible successor to Kingsley's interim tenure, and suddenly Hermione's warning rang loud in his ears.

So he had reluctantly made his way home, back to Grimmauld Place, where he found an agitated Kreacher, a haughty-looking eagle owl, and an ominous missive gilded with the Malfoy crest.

All of which went a long way towards explaining his current predicament.  Standing nervously in the imposing marble hallway of Malfoy manor, waiting to be ushered into the presence of the lady of the house.

"It was good of you to come so promptly, Mr Potter."

Harry blinked against the bright sunlight streaming through the French windows, and resisted the temptation to reply that her curt message had left him very little option. Instead, he simply nodded.  "No problem."  He paused, and then after a beat added, "Mrs Malfoy."

"Narcissa, please."  She took a few steps closer and Harry was finally able to make out her expression.  "I think after everything you have done for my family recently, you have earnt

that right at least."

Harry flushed slightly and unconsciously raised one hand to rub at his forehead. "It was the least I could do," he mumbled, and then firmly closed his lips. That was as close as they had ever come to a discussion of what had happened that night in the Forbidden Forest. The few times they had met previously whilst preparing for Malfoy's trial, Harry had tried several times to express his thanks, only to be politely brushed off each and every time.

There was a moment's silence then as Narcissa gazed at him intently. Harry tried his hardest to read meaning into the expression, but as Hermione was so fond of telling him, he really wasn't very good at reading people. Fortunately a loud crack heralded the arrival of a house-elf, and any further awkwardness was avoided – for now, at least.

As the tea was poured, Harry found himself ushered into a chair – an intricately-embroidered wingback, with only a small side table separating it from his host's seat.

After a few moments' further silence, Narcissa gently cleared her throat. "I apologise for my lack of conversation," she said, in a voice far more soft that the one Harry had heard in the past. "I find that being confined to this house, however lovely it may be, has left me with little to talk about."

Harry looked up sharply at this, searching both her words and face for signs of a rebuke. Finding none, he felt a further drain of tension. "I'm sorry," he said, because he had to say something, and honestly, it was the truth. This woman had saved his life, whatever her motives, and when the time had come to repay the debt, he had failed. Just like he'd failed her son.

Narcissa gave a dismissive wave of her hand. "There is nothing to apologise for." She paused and took a delicate sip of her tea. Placing the cup gently back on the saucer, she turned her attention to Harry once more. "I believe that I escaped lightly, compared to the rest of my family."

Harry almost sighed with relief that they had finally reached the topic that he knew must be the reason for his summons. And as much as he dreaded the recriminations he was certain would follow, there was a small part of him that felt like he deserved it. That it was the least he could endure in view of his failures.

"I want you to find Draco."

Harry gaped slightly; this was definitely not the direction he had expected the conversation to

take.  "But I... I mean, don't you want..."

Narcissa silenced him with a look.  "I don't believe it would be in Draco's best interests for his sentence to be challenged," she said firmly.  "I'm not so removed from the wizarding world that I don't understand the current thirst for revenge out there.  It's not safe, especially not for anyone named Malfoy."

Harry nodded reluctantly, because he knew only too well that she spoke the truth.  He'd naively hoped that with the end of the war there would be peace, but it seemed that all those who had stood idly by during Voldemort's reign were now busily trying to assuage their guilt with vigilante justice.  "So what do you—"

"Help him," Narcissa replied, as if it were the simplest thing on earth.  Which, Harry supposed, compared to overturning a Wizengamot verdict in the current climate, it probably was.

"I have money," he began, uncertainly.  "Muggle money," he clarified.

Narcissa shook her head.  "That won't be necessary."  She reached for a slim folder that lay on

the table between them and rested it lightly on her lap.  "My husband was many things," she gave a slight smile at these words, "but he was also a realist.  He could see which way the war was going long before its end."

Harry just nodded.  Mainly because he had no idea what else to say. Fortunately it was unnecessary, as Narcissa continued.

"He set certain... contingency plans in place, should it become expedient for us to disappear." She gave a light, almost bitter-sounding laugh.  "Obviously they will be of no use to either him or me now.  But for Draco..."  Her words tailed off as she held the folder out for Harry to take.

He reached for it with only a slight shake to his hand and a burning curiosity.  "How?"

"Lucius felt that the most effective way to hide from both the Ministry and," she paused here for a moment, obviously searching for the right words, "other interested parties, would be to transfer a number of our assets to the Muggle world."

Understanding began to dawn on Harry and his fingers curled eagerly around the smooth

surface of the folder. "You mean you have bank accounts?" At Narcissa's slightly blank expression, he clarified further. "Like Gringotts, only Muggle?"

Narcissa nodded, a slight smile curving the edges of her lips. "Indeed," she agreed. "There is property as well, I believe. Lucius took care of the financial side of our affairs so I cannot pretend to understand fully what was involved, but you will find everything you need to know in there. And with your knowledge of the Muggle world, it should be a relatively simple matter for you to utilise it."

Harry doubted that very much, but he figured that if all else failed he could always fall on Hermione for assistance. Then his thoughts came to an abrupt halt, because Narcissa leant even closer, and suddenly her hand rested gently on top of his.

"Find my son," she said determinedly. "Get this information to him, and help him to survive."

"You want me to teach him to be a Muggle?" Harry asked doubtfully; he could already imagine how kindly Malfoy would take to that situation.

Narcissa paused for a moment then shook her head. "Be his friend," she said finally, with an

almost imperceptible squeeze of Harry's hand.  "Whatever my son may say to the contrary, I believe he is sorely in need of one right now."

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Despite the worries he'd harboured about Malfoy's ability to survive in the Muggle world, Harry had never quite expected to find him in a place like this.  The dingy backstreet B&B, only a short distance from King's Cross, made even the skin on his neck prickle, so Merlin only knew how a refined pure-blood like Malfoy was responding to such a dwelling.  But then, Harry reminded himself, it could have been much worse.  Without any knowledge of the world he'd found himself in, Malfoy could have very easily have already met with a sticky end.

Harry raised his hand and tapped lightly on the door, and tried to ignore the peeling paint and the rather obvious way it rattled in its frame, despite the lack of force.

There was no immediate reply from within, so Harry knocked again.  There was the very definite sound of movement from within, but still the door remained closed, and it occurred to Harry that Malfoy would be less than eager to open up to whatever unknown quantity awaited him.  "Malfoy," he said finally, "It's me, Harry.  Open the door."

A further flurry of movement within the room followed and finally the door eased open slowly, creaking loudly on its feeble hinges.

Malfoy looked like shit. There really was no other word for it. He was wearing the same clothes that Harry had seen him wearing the last day of his trial, his hair hung lank and greasy around his face and, surprisingly, to Harry at least, there were several days' worth of stubble visible on his usually smooth face. But more than his outward appearance, it was the hollow, empty look in Malfoy's eyes that really hit home.

"How did you find me?" His voice was hoarse and barely more than a whisper, and his eyes darted wildly around the corridor as if he expected to see a hoard of Aurors, or worse, waiting behind Harry.

Harry resisted the urge to comment on his appearance and simply shrugged instead. "I asked around," he replied vaguely.

Something resembling the sneer of old appeared on Malfoy's face. "I see the usual rules still don't apply to our beloved Saviour."

Harry flushed uncomfortably, the way he did every time someone used that epithet, and bit back the retort on the tip of his tongue.  "I'm here to help."

Malfoy laughed bitterly, and Harry noticed how his knuckles whitened in their grip on the door.  "That's what you said last time, Potter, and look what happened there."

Harry sucked in a deep breath in an effort to swallow both his rising irritation and the niggling guilt he still felt despite the rational part of his brain's constant reminder that it was not his fault.  "I'm serious," he said determinedly, the memory of Narcissa's face spurring him on.  "Let me help.  You don't want to stay here, surely?"

Malfoy let the door open wider, revealing the cramped, ratty quarters within.  He gestured with a sweep of his hand.  "What do you think?" he asked, disdainfully.

Harry smiled faintly.  "Then how much worse can it be to let me help?"

"Fine."  Malfoy sighed, and Harry would have been grateful for his acquiescence, were it not

for the air of resignation about him.

"Okay, that's good." Harry tried his best to sound brighter than he felt. "Grab your stuff and we'll get going."

Another bitter laugh escaped Malfoy's mouth at this, but he didn't expand.

Harry just stared at him expectantly. "Your stuff?" he prodded.

In response, Malfoy turned back into the room and crossed to the battered table at the bedside. He picked up a small object, which on first glance Harry took to be a matchbox. But when it was pressed firmly into his hand, he saw it for what it really was – a tiny shrunken case.

A frown wrinkling his brow, Harry looked from the object in his palm to Malfoy's face. "What's this?" he asked, even though on some level it was perfectly clear exactly what it was.

"My stuff," Malfoy responded sharply.  "The Aurors who 'dropped me off' were highly amused by their little joke."  He reached out and snatched the case back from Harry's hand and shoved it in his pocket.  "There's a reason why I'm still wearing these clothes, you know."

Harry struggled hard not to show either the anger or the pity that was now coursing through his body.  The anger wouldn't change anything – he knew enough people, friends of his even, who would enjoy the Aurors' joke immensely – and he realised that the last thing Malfoy needed from him right now was pity, however well-meant it was.

"It's fine," he said firmly.  "I have some spare clothes back at my hotel – you can borrow those."

Malfoy huffed.  "Is there a reason you can't just resize it?"

"No wand," Harry explained ruefully.  "Hermione wasn't sure whether my doing magic around you would register with the Ministry.  Plus, she thought it might be a little insensitive given... you know, current circumstances."

"Right," Malfoy said briskly.  "So not content with seeing me in this state," he indicated his body with a flourish of his hand, "you now want to heap further indignity on me by forcing me to wear your sartorial nightmares?  Why don't you just invite the Weasel round to mock me and have done with it?"

Harry tried his hardest not to smile, he really did, but not even the use of Ron's much-hated nickname managed to quell his relief at this flash of the Malfoy he had come to know.  Not the old one, whose eyes sparkled malice with every word, but the one he'd had glimpse of during the intense weeks preparing for his trial.  The Malfoy that Harry realised very few people were allowed to see.

"D'you want my help or not?" he asked, and the expression on his face more than softened the words.  Or at least he thought they did, but Malfoy had gone quiet, his expression closed off, and Harry was forcibly reminded of the pale, hunched figure he'd seen so many times inside that courtroom.

"Why would you even want to help me?" Malfoy asked, and for all his outward bravado, he didn't quite manage to hide the waver in his voice.

"Because this isn't right," Harry replied quickly, repeating a phrase he'd used numerous times

over the last few days.  Then he grimaced slightly.  "Besides, I'm fairly sure that Parkinson plans to castrate me if I don't."

Malfoy's face cracked into a grin, and Harry couldn't help the small burst of triumph he felt at breaking the facade.

"We can't have that, can we?"  Malfoy said casually.  "How will you contribute to the ever growing population of Weasleys without the proper equipment?  The Weaselette will –"

"Malfoy."  Harry's tone was firm and the warning clear.

"Sorry," Malfoy replied, not looking in the least bit so.  "I can't help it."

Harry shook his head slowly.  "Well, try," he said, and then headed towards the door.

Malfoy followed without hesitation or a glance behind him.  "Did Pansy really threaten to cut your balls off?"

Harry didn't even attempt to hold in the laugh this time.  "Come on," he said, the slam of the door echoing in the empty corridor behind them.

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"And did you see the state of the towels in the bathroom?"

It was all Harry could do not to laugh out loud at the horrified indignation on Malfoy's face, but as he'd learned over the last few hours, Malfoy wasn't so far removed from his Hogwarts ways that he was able to laugh at himself just yet.  Instead, he raised one eyebrow – a newly learnt trick he was really rather proud of.

"Really?" he asked.  "You're actually going to complain about that after the last place you were

in?"

Malfoy opened his mouth, presumably to protest another failing with Harry's choice of hotel.

"And I don't care about the thread count of the bloody sheets, either," Harry said in exasperation before Malfoy had time to speak. He was really starting to curse what Hermione called his 'saving people thing'. He slid a plate across the table and said firmly, "Eat something. You look like you haven't in days."

A telltale flush on Malfoy's face confirmed Harry's concerns. "What is it?" he asked, poking the food warily.

"A muffin."

"I'm not stupid, Potter. I know what a muffin looks like, and this," he poked the offending item again, "is not it."

Harry frowned for a moment.  "Oh! No," he said at last, finally understanding.  "Not an English muffin.  It's an American thing, I think."

Malfoy still eyed the plate sceptically.

"It's like cake," Harry added, reaching for his own and taking a bite.  "'S'nice."

Finally convinced, or hunger won out, Malfoy broke off a small piece and popped it into his mouth.  Seconds later he was eating greedily.  Harry felt yet another pang of guilt as he watched this – he knew enough about the Malfoy of old to know he was a fastidious eater, so the chocolate smudge on his cheek, and the crumbs littering his jumper were just another reminder of how on track Harry had been with his fears of starvation.

"Malfoy," he asked carefully.  "When was the last time you ate?"

Malfoy swallowed hard and wiped self-consciously at his face with a serviette.  "It's been a while," he admitted softly.  Which Harry was fairly sure meant not since his trial three days ago.

Rather than say anything in response, because really, what could he say anyway, Harry slid over the takeaway bag containing the giant cookie he'd bought for later.

Malfoy looked at it and Harry suspiciously, but hunger quickly won out.  He nibbled cautiously at the edges, his eyes flickering up occasionally to meet Harry's.

Harry leant back in his seat, coffee in hand, and just watched unashamedly.  There was something so refreshingly real about Malfoy's actions, his behaviour, and even though they were motivated by less than pleasant circumstances, Harry couldn't help the feeling of warmth that the whole experience created in him.

"So what did she say?"

"Huh?"  Harry dragged his gaze away from the sugar crystals Malfoy was licking from his fingers

and met questioning eyes.

"My mother," Malfoy continued. "You said you'd seen her. What did she way?"

"Oh, right, yeah." Harry rubbed awkwardly at the back of his neck, like he hadn't been so busy watching Malfoy eat that he'd forgotten the entire purpose of his mission. "She wanted me to find you."

"And?" Malfoy looked at him expectantly. "Did she have any suggestions as to what you do with me once you found me?"

For the briefest of moments, as Malfoy gazed steadily at him, grey eyes glinting up at him through dark lashes, Harry had the distinct impression he was being flirted with. Which was ridiculous, he told himself instantly. Malfoy had a girlfriend, and Harry had, well, he didn't exactly have Ginny anymore, but he liked girls. So he gave himself a slight shake in an attempt to clear his mind of such crazy thoughts, and when he looked up again it was to find Malfoy outright grinning at him.

"All right there, Potter?"

"Fine," Harry muttered, and promptly tried to hide behind his coffee cup. When he finally placed it back down, somewhat reluctantly, Malfoy was still watching him. "What?"

"My mother," Malfoy prompted, with an all too familiar eye roll.

Harry flushed and let out an awkward laugh. "Oh, yeah. Well, she said that your dad," he noticed Malfoy wince at this particular epithet, "had made all these plans in case you ever needed to hide from Voldemort." The wince was even more pronounced this time but despite his sympathy for Malfoy's situation, Harry wasn't about to stop saying the name now. Especially when there was definitely nothing left to fear.

He cleared his throat quietly. "Anyway, he apparently hid a big chunk of his assets in the Muggle world, and your mum gave me all this information on how to access them so that I could pass it on to you, so you could... you know, eat and stuff."

"So I have money?" Malfoy asked slowly, a faint glimmer of hope visible in his eyes. "Actual

Muggle money?"

Harry slid the folder across the table. "See for yourself."

Malfoy's fingers clutched eagerly at the rough card and flipped it open. He scrutinised the enclosed papers intensely, the slight furrow between his brows a clear indication of his concentration. His hair, now washed and restored to its former glory, fell constantly into his eyes and was repeatedly flicked back in irritation. Harry watched this routine with silent amusement, and his fingers itched to reach over and tuck the wayward strands behind Malfoy's ears.

The thought had barely occurred to him before Harry stared at his hands as if they had been responsible for it, had betrayed him somehow.

Then he shook his head and firmly buried that thought in the deep dark pit where he buried all the other things he'd vowed never to think of again. Like that time he'd caught Ron having a wank, or even worse, the time he'd walked in on Hermione doing it for him.

Harry licked his dry lips and shifted in his seat. The silence was suddenly oppressive. "You

need a haircut," he said finally, in what he hoped passed as a teasing manner.

Malfoy raised his head slightly and peered at Harry through the blond strands. He said nothing, merely cocked one brow and gazed at Harry's own hair meaningfully until Harry flushed.

"Fine," Harry muttered, cursing the heat in his face. "We both need a haircut. Satisfied?"

Malfoy looked up fully now. "At hearing my hair put on a level with yours? Hardly." He snorted softly, then lowered his gaze and resumed his former occupation. Harry did the same.

After a few more moments of silence, punctuated only by the occasional shuffle of papers, Malfoy let out a sigh. "I give up," he said. "This makes no sense, and it's making my head hurt." He pushed the folder across the table top. "Explain it to me?"

Harry made no move to take it; instead he gazed at Malfoy expectantly.

A few moments later, Malfoy huffed noisily.  "Please?"

Harry grinned and then wondered exactly when he'd begun channelling Hermione.  "Honestly," he said, idly flipping through the various documents.  "I really can't.  It probably only makes slightly more sense to me than it does you.  But Hermione assures me it means you're very wealthy."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed slightly and his mouth opened instantly.  Harry held his breath and waited expectantly for some rant about meddling, know-it-all Muggleborns, and how they should learn their place.

Only, Malfoy's mouth snapped shut bare seconds after it opened, and in the end all he said was, "That's hardly news."

The relief Harry felt was a little overwhelming.  "It is in the Muggle world," he pointed out.

Malfoy lowered his head, but not before Harry glimpsed the faintest flush on his cheeks.  "I own a house?" he asked suddenly, long fingers tugging one sheet in particular from the bunch.

Harry nodded.  "Several.  And a flat here in London."

"I want to see it."  Malfoy's eyes were wide with what was unmistakeably excitement, and before Harry could respond further, he added a hurried, "Please."

Harry was becoming increasingly familiar with the smile that crept its way over his face again – it was something he hadn't done much in the last year.  He dug into his pocket, past the crumpled notes and empty sweet wrappers, before finally producing a silver key with a triumphant noise.

He held it out towards Malfoy and grinned.  "Somehow, I thought you'd say that."

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"This was a terrible idea."  Malfoy's scowl was visible even in the dim candlelight.

"This was your idea," Harry reminded him, not even attempting to rein in the smugness.

"No one's forcing you to be here, Potter."  Then Malfoy sniggered and added, "Oh yeah, I forgot about Pansy," before making a snipping motion with his fingers.

Harry extended one leg and kicked Malfoy's foot.  "Ha ha.  Very funny."

"Thanks.  I thought so, too."  Malfoy fell silent then and the only noise in the dark flat was the rustle of paper as he delved for another chip. "You know, these aren't bad," he said finally, and Harry couldn't help but wonder what Narcissa would say if she could see her son eating chips from their wrapper and sucking the grease off his long, slender fingers.

"Told you," he replied, smugly.  "It's much better like this than off plates, too."

Malfoy hummed softly and Harry could tell he wasn't convinced.  "I don't see why we couldn't have bought some cutlery at least."

Malfoy sucked another finger into his mouth.  The smacking noise that accompanied the visual struck Harry momentarily dumb.  "It's Sunday," he managed to say eventually, and hoped that the slight crack in his voice wasn't noticeable.

"And?"  Malfoy balled the empty wrapper up and set it down on the small table between them.

Harry heaved a sigh of relief that he was done.  The last thing he needed right now, on top of training Malfoy to be a good little Muggle, was having to figure out why the sight of Malfoy with his fingers in his mouth was so damn distracting.  "Shops aren't open on Sundays.  Not this late, anyway."

"That's rather... uncivilised."  Malfoy turned his head slowly and gazed around the room.  "Did

it not occur to you to ask if this place was furnished when you collected the key?"

"There's furniture," Harry protested.

Malfoy's eyebrow rose again, and Harry was tempted to point out that he'd get wrinkles if he kept that up.

"Potter, I realise that you are used to somewhat more... cosy surroundings than the Manor, but even in your book this can hardly qualify as furnished."

Harry looked quickly around the room, the moonlight now streaming in the bare window providing him with further light. "There's chairs," he said weakly.

Malfoy snorted. "And a table, and a bed – without bedding, I might add. Oh, and let's not forget the... the..." he trailed off here, clearly searching for a word that eluded him.

"Hat stand," Harry supplied reluctantly, having already been treated to Malfoy's treatise on this particular topic earlier.

"Hat stand, yes!" Malfoy reached up and pushed his hair back from his face. "What in the name of Merlin was my father thinking?"

Wisely judging this to be rhetorical, Harry didn't comment. And anyway, Malfoy's rant suddenly suggested another problem to him – sleeping arrangements. "We could still go back to the hotel," he suggested hopefully. "It's not far on the Tube."

Malfoy's nose wrinkled in distaste at the bare suggestion. "No, thank you. One trip on that monstrosity was enough for today." He paused, then looked at Harry seriously. "You go, though, if you want. I think you've put enough hours in to maintain your saviour status for another day."

"No." Harry felt the familiar prickle of competitiveness mingle with responsibility. He wasn't about to leave Malfoy alone – not just because of the promise he'd made his mother, but because, well, if Malfoy could manage to rough it in the empty flat for one night, then so could he. He'd spent most of the last year in a tent, for Merlin's sake. "I'll stay," he said firmly.

Malfoy smirked, but not quickly enough to hide the flash of relief. "You realise this means we'll have to share a bed. Unless you fancy taking the chairs?"

"I'm sure I can handle it for one night. Just so long as you don't snore."

"I'll have you know that—"

"Yeah yeah," Harry interrupted. "Malfoys don't snore, I know." He let out a dry chuckle. "Malfoys don't do a lot of things by the sound of it."

Malfoy opened his mouth but appeared to think better of it. "Just keep your hands to yourself," he said eventually. "I'm no one's teddy bear."

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It didn't take Harry long to regret his decision.

Whilst the bare mattress itself wasn't particularly uncomfortable, the balled-up jumper under his head was barely adequate, and the mild summer night was more than warm enough to urge the shedding of clothing.  But sharing a bed with Malfoy was one thing, sharing a bed whilst practically naked was another matter.  So the jeans and the shirt remained, as did Harry's frustration.

"Will you stop fidgeting?"

"I can't get comfortable," Harry grumbled.  "And you're hogging most of the bed."

"Fine."  Malfoy let out a huff and then shuffled over.  "Merlin, we need to get some furniture."

Harry tried his hardest not to put any weight on the we part of that sentence. "We can go shopping for some tomorrow," he said, hoping to cut yet another of Malfoy's complaints short. "Hermione offered to help."

"Can you not function without her holding your hand?" Malfoy raised himself on one elbow and stared down at Harry. "I don't see why we need her help; you were raised in the Muggle world, too, weren't you?"

Harry laughed bitterly, memories of Privet Drive rushed through his brain. "More like in a cupboard," he muttered.

Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "What?"

Harry shook his head, and promptly dislodged his makeshift pillow. "Never mind," he said, struggling to work it back into position.

Malfoy watched him carefully for what seemed like a long time to Harry, though in reality he knew it was bare seconds.

"Whatever," Malfoy said eventually.  "If she has to come, I hope she at least has the sense to bring your wand with her."  Then he flopped back on the mattress, causing it to shake momentarily.

"Now who's fidgeting?"  Harry couldn't resist.

"I can't hear you, Potter," Malfoy replied loftily.  "I'm asleep."

Harry rolled his eyes before letting his lids drift close.  It wasn't particularly late, but it had been a long day, a long few days in fact, and he had the sneaking suspicion that he would need all the energy he could muster if he was shopping the next day.  Shopping with Malfoy was an alarming enough prospect.  Shopping with Malfoy and Hermione was the stuff of nightmares.

The Malfoy he had spent the last few days with was a different boy than the one he'd been at school with.  Not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, and they still had so many issues to work through before Harry could consider calling what they had friendship.  But he'd reacted to Harry's presence far better than Harry could have ever imagined, and buried

underneath the slightly histrionic rants and relentless complaining, Harry fancied he could see something like gratitude in Malfoy's eyes.

"You know," Harry said suddenly, and turned his head to the side. "I think if we're going to share the same bed, we ought to at least be on first name terms." He smiled slightly before adding, "I'm Harry, by the way."

Malfoy remained silent and for a moment Harry could taste that never-far-away sting of rejection. He reached over, tentatively placed a hand on Malfoy's shoulder and shook very slightly. "Are you asleep?" he asked, already anticipating the acerbic response to that question. But none came, except for a murmured protest as Malfoy snuffled deeper into the crook of his arm.

Harry gave a slight shake of his head. Typical, he thought. The one time he actually made an effort with Malfoy, tried to build one of the many necessary bridges between them, and the git was asleep.

For a want of anything better to do, Harry lay back down and shifted around until he found a barely comfortable position on his side, one arm tucked under his head doing the job of an absent pillow. Just as tiredness overcame him, and his eyelids began to droop, Harry felt the mattress shift. Then there was the unmistakeable press of another body along his side, and even more startlingly, the weight of a hand resting gently on his hip.

It was a situation he was hardly prepared for, and his mind reeled at the prospect of how to handle it.  He was far enough over to the side of the bed that shuffling forward was not an option, unless he wanted a night on the floor, and the idea of waking Malfoy was equally unpleasant, not least because of the embarrassment it was likely to cause both of them.  And if Harry was being completely honest, it wasn't entirely terrible.  If he overlooked the fact of just who it was behind him, there was something rather comforting about it – even if it did feel rather like Malfoy's touch was burning through his clothes, searing the skin of his hip.

So in the end, he did nothing.  Even as Malfoy's arm slithered further round his waist, holding Harry in a way he'd never experienced before, he just closed his eyes again and willed himself to sleep.

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"That was delicious."  Malfoy settled his knife and fork together on the plate and sat back in his chair, an air of satisfaction around him.

"I should hope so."  Hermione's knife scraped across her plate.  "Considering how many places

you made us walk past until you deemed one up to your standards."

Malfoy just smiled – he looked almost like a lazy cat, Harry decided. "It was worth it, wasn't it?"

Harry smiled at Hermione's irritated huff, but didn't speak – there was no way he was voluntarily putting himself in the crossfire.

"It's nearly one already, and we've bought nothing." Hermione levelled a glare on Malfoy, who remained impervious. "You've complained and turned your nose up at every single shop we've been in."

Malfoy reached out and took a slow sip of his drink. "These things take time," he said, and Harry knew he was just doing this to provoke Hermione now, so he stretched out under the table and gave Malfoy's foot a warning tap.

Malfoy raised one brow in question at him for a moment, and Harry matched the look in return. "There was really nothing in any of those shops you liked?"

"No."  He placed his glass firmly back on the table.  "Look, just because I'm not living in the Manor anymore, doesn't mean I don't want to live in style."

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but Harry gave her a silencing look and she snapped it shut again, her brow creased almost in confusion.

Malfoy noticed, and grinned a little smugly at her, before turning his attention back to Harry. "This is London," he continued.  "There must be somewhere we can buy furniture with a little more... class."  He paused for a moment before adding, "And clothes, too.  I definitely need new clothes."

"I can just resize your trunk now that I've got my wand back," Harry pointed out.

"No good."  Malfoy shook his head emphatically.  "Judging from what most Muggles wear, I have maybe one outfit that would be suitable.  I'll need some clothes like these," he gestured around at the restaurant's other patrons with a negligent wave of his hand, "only more stylish."

"Maybe you'd like Harrods then," Hermione snapped, irritation clearly building in her tone. "After all, it's good enough for the Royal Family, so it might just be up to your standards."

Hermione's sarcasm fell short, however, because the only reaction it provoked in Malfoy was one of interest, and Harry realised with a sinking feeling exactly where he would be spending the rest of the day.

"They sell clothes in this Harrods place, do they?"  Malfoy addressed his question to Harry, clearly not willing to indulge Hermione further.

Harry nodded reluctantly.  "Amongst other things."

"Other things including furniture?"

"It's the second largest department store in the country."  Clearly her irritation was not enough to make Hermione miss a chance to display knowledge.

Malfoy frowned slightly.  "And the largest would be?"

Harry silently prayed she didn't know.  But this was Hermione, so of course she did.

"Selfridges."

Malfoy leant forward in his seat a little; Hermione had his full attention now.  "And is that in London as well?"

"Of course."

As much as he loved Hermione, there were times when Harry would have willingly gagged her. This one being no exception.  It was all very well showing off her knowledge, but she'd inadvertently condemned them to even more hours spent trailing round in Malfoy's wake.

"And you didn't think to mention any of this before because..?"  Malfoy pushed his chair back from the table, and before either of them could reply, he was on his feet and speaking again. "Never mind, we don't have time to waste on that.  Come on, let's go."  He made a shooing motion with his hands, and Harry found himself bolting the last of his meal down.

"Everything's really expensive," he warned.

"Ostentatious is what it is," Hermione muttered.

Malfoy levelled her with a glare.  "You don't have to come.  I'm sure we'll manage just fine without you.  Don't you have a ginger boyfriend you could be off annoying?"

Harry shot him a warning glare.  Malfoy scowled in return just as Hermione replied.

"Actually, no I don't.  Ron and I are no longer together."

"What?"  Harry demanded in shock.  "What happened?"

"I don't really want to talk about it."  Hermione frowned in Malfoy's direction, her meaning clear.

Honestly, Harry was quite relieved to hear that.  One of his biggest fears when Ron and Hermione had started going out was that they would split up and he would be put in the middle of his two best friends.  Still, he cared about Hermione.  "Are you okay?" he asked tentatively.

Malfoy cleared his throat nosily.  "You heard her, Harry.  She said she doesn't want to talk about it."

It took a moment for Malfoy's words to register, but when they did, Harry gaped at him in shock.  Malfoy's expression was not far behind.

"Finally.  I wondered how long you two were going to keep up that ridiculous surname thing. Maybe next you can work on saying Hermione?"

For once, Malfoy had no biting retort.  His cheeks had flushed pink, and when he finally spoke, the words were mumbled.  Not that Harry was paying attention anyway.  His head was too full with memories of the previous night, with trying to work out if Malfoy really had been asleep after all, and the memory of that hand on his hip, the touch he could feel long after it had gone.

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Harry was knackered.

As expected, Malfoy – or should that be Draco now, he mused – had dragged him around every

exclusive inch of retail space that London had to offer, and had purchased most of its contents.  Or at least, that's how it felt to Harry's aching legs and sore feet.

It only occurred to him once they got back to the flat that they had missed off the most important purchase they needed to make that day: food.  So once again it was takeaway for dinner.  Hermione suggested Chinese, and Malfoy, surprisingly pliant after a satisfying afternoon of retail therapy, had acquiesced without protest.

"What are you doing, Harry?"  Hermione demanded.

Harry looked up from the carriers full of steaming food to the concerned look on his best friend's face.  "Umm, putting it on plates?"

"Don't be obtuse," Hermione snapped.  "You know what I mean.  What are you doing here, playing house with Malfoy?  Have you forgotten who he is, what he did?"

"I haven't forgotten anything, Hermione."  Harry did his level best to keep his tone light.  He really didn't have the energy to argue right now, not about this, and certainly not while Malfoy was in the flat. "He needs help.  You've seen him; he didn't even know how to use a

light switch until I showed him."

"But why does it have to be you?"

Harry reached for the expensive bottle of wine that Malfoy had insisted he buy, and rolled his eyes at the memory. "Because I promised his mum."

Hermione didn't reply straight away, instead she just watched Harry intently. "Is there more to it than that?"

Suddenly Harry's mind was filled with the memory of how Malfoy had looked when he found him. "Maybe," he admitted slowly. "You didn't see him, Hermione. He was a mess."

Hermione didn't say anything further, she just nodded briefly and folded her lips together in a way that told Harry the conversation was definitely not over. Harry chose not to think about that, and decided to change the subject. "I'd better let him know the food's ready."

"Where is he, anyway?"  Hermione eyed the numerous shopping bags still littering the kitchen's various work surfaces.

"Shower.  Apparently Muggle cities are filthy places."

"Well, he's not wrong about that."  Hermione watched as Harry slowly dished the food equally onto the three plates.  "He's got you well trained, I see."

Harry shrugged.  "I don't mind."

"Well, you should.  You're not his house-elf, Harry.  Don't let him treat you like one."

"He doesn't."  Even Harry was surprised by the defensive tone to his voice.  He gave himself a small shake.  "I told you, I don't mind."  Then he turned towards the door.  "Draco!"

When he turned back around, Hermione was smirking at him, but all Harry could think of was how weird that name had felt on his lips, but how nice it was to finally say it out loud.

The sound of footsteps in the hall stopped any further conversation. Which was fortunate, because suddenly Harry found himself without the power of speech.

Draco stood in the doorway, a small towel wrapped low around his hips, whilst he rubbed gently at his hair with another. He'd clearly come straight from the shower as there were still droplets of water clinging to his torso. "What?"

Harry turned to Hermione, hoping she would help him out and answer, because he was busy trying not to choke on his own tongue. But all that came from his friend was a soft eep, before she turned away, blushing fiercely.

"Honestly," Draco said, stepping further into the room, causing the towel to slip slightly. "I didn't realise Gryffindors were such prudes. How on earth did you cope sharing a dorm for all those years?"

Harry mumbled something that might have passed for a reply had it not been for the cotton wool in his mouth.

Draco just laughed and gave a shake of his head.  "Smells good," he commented, spotting the food. "I'd better throw some clothes on before we eat, though.  Wouldn't want either of you two to spontaneously combust."  With a decided wink in Harry's direction, he turned and left the room.

"He's up to something."

Harry turned to face Hermione, a smile on his lips.  "Isn't that my line?"

"I'm serious."

"Well, whatever it is, I'm sure I can handle it.  I'm a big boy now, Hermione."

"So's Malfoy by the looks of it."

Harry was just about to remind her it was Draco now, when his friend's words registered. "Hermione!" he said in scandalised tones.

Hermione's cheeks were scarlet, but there was a defiant expression on her face.  "What?" she asked defensively.  "There's no harm in looking."

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"What's this place called again?"  Draco had his hands tucked deep in his pockets and was frowning at the large building in front.

"A supermarket," Harry replied patiently.

"And this is where you get food from?"

Harry raised one eyebrow – something he was doing entirely too often now, and blamed Draco for.  "I already said that."

"Don't look at me like that.  You wouldn't let me come last time, and they never covered this in Muggle studies."

Harry came to a sudden halt, much to the annoyance of the shoppers around them jostling to enter the store.  "You did Muggle studies?"

Draco turned to face him and grinned smugly.  "I'm a man of many hidden talents, I'll have you know."

"But why?"  The crease between Harry's brows became more pronounced.

"Have you ever heard the phrase know thy enemy?"

Harry glared.  "Not funny."

"Fine."  Draco crossed his arms and sighed.  "I was curious, okay?  It was only for one term anyway.  Then Father found out and I ended up stuck doing Arithmancy, instead.  Which I'm sure will come in really handy here."

"I just can't imagine it."

"It was interesting," Draco admitted with a shrug.  "The teacher was..."

Draco's words died off here and his face turned even more pale than usual.  It didn't take Harry many seconds to work it out; he remembered only too well hearing the details of Professor Burbage's death.  "Come on," he said, with a gentle tug on Draco's sleeve.

Draco's distraction didn't last for long.  Once they were inside the shop, his eyes widened with interest as he absorbed the vast space, numerous aisles, and packages of every shape, size and colour.  Harry clipped Hermione's helpful shopping list to the front of the trolley, and when he looked back up, Draco had wandered off.  Figuring to himself that there really was only so much trouble to be got into in a supermarket, Harry decided to set off; he'd no doubt catch up with Draco along the way.

It didn't take long, either.  Harry had barely rounded the end of the fruit and veg aisle before Draco appeared, an outraged expression on his face.  He hurried over to Harry, dodging various other shoppers on route.

"Harry, I need your wand. Hand it over. Some Muggle just rammed me with one of these," he waved a hand in the direction of Harry's trolley, "contraptions."

Harry laughed, but when he realised Draco was actually reaching for his pocket, he put out a

hand and grabbed his wrist.  "You know I can't."

"Well, you'll have to do it then."  He shook Harry's hand off and grabbed his harm in return. "Her.  Look."  And he pointed out the culprit.

"She's a sweet old lady," Harry said with a chuckle.  "How much damage can she have done?"

"Easy for you to say.  It wasn't your ankle she took a chunk out of."

Harry laughed out loud this time, earning him a few curious looks from the other shoppers. Then he stopped when he noticed Draco unloading his pockets of various sweet packets and piling them into the trolley.  After the first ten he gave up counting.  "We can get more of those next week, you know.  I don't think they'll run out."

"Run out?"  Draco repeated – he looked almost worried.  "Should I get more, d'you think?  Just in case?"

"I'm kidding," Harry said as Draco finally seemed to have finished. "That's a lot of sweets."

"I have a sweet tooth," Draco said defensively. "Not a crime, is it?"

"No," Harry agreed, steering a wide berth around the crisps, lest Draco be similarly tempted. "But don't blame me if you ruin your dinner."

"Yes, Mother." Draco paused and peered at the contents of the trolley. "What are we having, anyway?"

"I don't know. What do you fancy cooking?"

Draco blanched at the mere suggestion, and Harry gave him a friendly dig. "I'm just kidding." He scanned the trolley's contents himself. "I don't know. I'm not that good a cook myself."

"It needs to be good, whatever it is.  You haven't forgotten Pansy's coming round later have you?  She definitely won't eat chips out the bag."

"How could I forget?"  Harry stopped in front of the cereal and grabbed several of the named brand ones.  He had no idea what they were like, but he remembered dry toast, and Dudley's bulging eyes as he tucked into foods Harry was always denied. "That's at least the tenth time you've mentioned it already this morning.  Don't worry, I'm sure I can manage something that'll impress your girlfriend."

Draco laughed this time, light and carefree.  "Pansy's not my girlfriend.  She was my... well, beard, for want of a better word."

"Beard?" Harry scrunched up his nose in confusion.

"Yes, Harry, beard."  The amusement was obvious in Draco's eyes, but he at least managed not to mock outright.

Harry touched his face lightly. "You mean like...?"

Draco did laugh this time.  "No, not that kind of beard.  We're not talking Dumbledore. Although..." he smiled softly before shaking his head. "She acted like my girlfriend so that no would realise that it was actually Blaise who was kept my bed warm most nights."

"Oh."  Harry rocked back on his heels slightly, a stunned expression on his face. "You mean you're gay?" he asked eventually, resolutely not even thinking about what the Dumbledore reference might imply.

"Yes."  Draco folded his arms defensively across his body.  "Is that going to be a problem?"

"No!"  Harry shook his head quickly. "I'm just surprised, that's all. I didn't know."

"Hence the term beard."

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Harry got up from the table and gathered the empty plates.  He tried his hardest not to wince at the sound of raised voices, but too many glasses of wine had rendered him a little sensitive.  He'd known from the minute he opened the front door to find Pansy and Ron waiting on the doorstep, eyeballing each other furiously, that it was going to be a long night ahead.  And so far it hadn't disappointed.

Draco flashed him a sympathetic smile and got up to help.  Harry appreciated the gesture, though if he was honest, he would have preferred it if Draco had just told Pansy to shut the hell up.  And Ron, too, for that matter.  They were dredging up the past, raking over issues that no longer mattered and that Harry preferred to forget.  The time he and Draco had spent together over the last few weeks had allowed Harry to glimpse a different side of Draco, and he didn't want anything to jeopardise their fragile friendship.

"Remind me why we invited them round again?"  Draco followed Harry into the kitchen and dumped a stack of empty pots on the counter.

"Technically, we didn't."  Harry still felt a surge of something indefinable at Draco's every casual us or we. "You invited Pansy, and Ron pretty much invited himself."

"Bloody Weasley," Draco muttered, glaring back in the direction of the dining room.

"Pansy's as bad," Harry chided.  "You know she's only saying half those things to provoke him."

"True."  Draco reached out and opened the dishwasher.  He still eyed it suspiciously even though Harry had taught him how to use it.  "Is it too early to tell them to leave, d'you think?"

"I'm not sure that's a good idea."  Harry chuckled wryly.  "Pansy's already got certain of my body parts on her hit list.  I'm not sure I want to risk losing anything else."

Draco smiled at him for a moment, and Harry wasn't so blind that he missed the way Draco's gaze travelled the length of his body.  "No," he said with a definite wink.  "We wouldn't want that."  Then he bent forward and began stacking the dishwasher as if nothing had happened.

Harry leant back against the cupboards, his hands gripping the counter for some kind of support.  He hadn't drunk that much, but he was still feeling decidedly shaky for some reason. And the sight of Draco bent over, his pert arse snugly encased in denim and swaying in a most distracting fashion, really wasn't doing anything for Harry's peace of mind.

Fortunately it didn't last long before Draco was back upright, wiping his hands clean on a towel.  "I'd better get back in there," he said with a nod towards the door.  "It's gone awfully quiet."

Harry nodded mutely; a little afraid of what would come out if he tried to speak.  He watched instead as Draco headed out of the kitchen, only for him to be instantly replaced by Pansy Parkinson, who hovered in the doorway, smirking madly.

"Well, I certainly didn't see that coming."

Not for the first time Harry wished there were a potion to control blushing.  "What?" he asked, and winced at how shaky his voice sounded.

"You and Draco," Pansy replied, stepping forward into the room a little.

Harry shrugged. "Yeah, I don't think anyone expected us to be friends."

"Friends?" Pansy laughed, and Harry couldn't help but think how harsh it sounded. Not at all warm, like Draco's. "Pfft! I don't give a crap about friendship. I'm talking about you blatantly eyeing up his arse, Potter. I'm not blind, you know."

Harry had thought it was impossible for his face to burn any brighter. He was wrong. "I-I wasn't," he stammered. "I'm not... I don't know what you're talking about." His hands twisted nervously at the hem of his shirt.

"Calm down," Pansy said, not unkindly. "It's not like I blame you. He really does have a fine arse." She paused here and eyed Harry thoughtfully for a moment. "You have quite a nice one yourself."

Harry sank into the nearest available chair and buried his head in his hands. "Can we not have this conversation, please? At least, not till I've had a damn sight more drink inside me."

Pansy reached out and patted his head gently. "Don't fret so much. It's no big deal."

Harry spluttered at this, and looked up, wild-eyed. "You're kidding, right?"

Pansy just shrugged. "He likes you, you like him -- or parts of him, at least. You're not at school anymore – no having to sneak into one another's dormitories. You have this whole flat to yourselves, to do whatever you want." She smirked then and leant forward, pressing on the table. "This table looks nice and sturdy," she said causally.

Harry let out another groan. "Can you stop talking, please?"

Pansy reached out to touch his hair again, and Harry couldn’t help but pull back.

"Leave him alone, Pans."  Harry had never been so relieved and terrified to see someone all at the same time.  The warning note in Draco's voice as he spoke to his best friend – that was something new, though.

Pansy obviously realised this, because she stepped away.  "I'm just teasing," she said, and turned towards the door with a smirk.  She paused in the door way and looked directly at Draco.  "I wouldn't want to tread on your toes, would I?"

Harry heaved a sigh of relief that she was gone.  He got up and poured himself another glass of wine, before taking a deep drink.  One awkward conversation down...

"Are you okay?"

Harry turned round, unable to resist the concern in Draco's voice, but he couldn't bring himself to make eye contact.  "Yeah."

"You don't look it."  Draco came a little closer and Harry could feel that intensity of his gaze, even if he couldn't quite meet it.  "What was she saying to you?"

Harry took several large gulps of his wine for courage, and then the words were out of his mouth before he was able to stop them.  "She thought I was looking at your arse."  It sounded as bad out loud as it had done in his head, but Harry was sure it would have sounded even worse coming from Pansy, which it undoubtedly would have before the night was out.

Draco took several more steps towards Harry, and his tongue flicked out to moisten his lips. "Was she right?" he asked quietly, and Harry had a moment of relief when he heard the quaver in Draco’s voice.  At least he wasn't the only one affected by whatever this was.

Harry went to step backwards, to gain a little thinking space, only to find himself backed up against the counter.  "I-I..."

"It's okay if you were, Harry.  It's not like I haven’t looked at yours."

The flames of embarrassment were back, and Harry's face felt like it was literally on fire.  He lifted his glass and drained the remainder of its contents.

Then Draco reached out and prised his fingers from the glass stem, and set the glass down on the worktop.  "So?" he asked, still so quietly.

"What?"  Harry kept his eyes glued to the floor and refused to meet Draco's gaze.

"Were you doing what Pansy said you were?" Draco asked, as his fingers gently tilted Harry's face up.

Harry stared at him for a moment, something in the depths of Draco's eyes robbing him of breath and speech.  He nodded slightly.

Draco's eyes widened at this, almost like he hadn't expected Harry to admit it.  Which wasn't surprising, Harry thought, because he hadn't expected to admit it, either, and he really had no idea what to make of it all.  "What does that mean?"  Draco asked carefully.

"Does it have to mean anything?"

"No," Draco replied, his fingers still touching the line of Harry's jaw.  "I was just curious."

"About what?"  Harry fought the temptation to lean into Draco's touch.

Draco took one last step forward.  "About what you'd do if I did this."

Before Harry had the chance to ask what this was, Draco was showing him.  The kiss was soft and tender, just the gentle press of lips, and as Draco pulled away, Harry leant forward as if chasing his mouth for more.

They stared at each other for what felt like the longest time, pupils blown, and breathing heavily.  Not even the sound of Pansy and Ron's continued argument in the other room

disturbed the moment.

Harry couldn't think straight.  He'd only ever really kissed Ginny before (Cho barely counted), and he'd liked it, really he had.  But this was Draco, and suddenly it didn't seem to matter that they had hated each other for years, that he was a boy, that Ron was in the next room and likely to have a heart attack if he walked in.  All Harry could think about was the feel of Draco's lips on his, and how, if he didn't seize the moment to find out what this meant now, he might never get the chance again.

Draco reached out with one hand and cupped it around Harry's neck, his fingers tangling in the cropped hair on his nape.  As he was pulled back in, the touch gentle but firm, Harry couldn't help the contented hum that escaped his mouth.  And when Draco's lips touched his, searching and insistent, sending thrills to the tips of his toes, Harry made a mental note to send  the Wizengamot a thank you card.

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