Marked by Melusine

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Chapter One

When Snape tells Draco what he wants him to do, Draco nearly falls off his stool.

"What? You must be joking. I won't. I won't do it and you can't make me. I thought you were supposed to protect me. My mother said--"

"Quiet, Draco. I am protecting you, if you'd only do as I tell you. I cannot keep you with me, it's far too

obvious. Or would you rather the Dark Lord kill us both?"

Draco considers this for a moment. Presumably, the question was meant to be rhetorical. But Draco thinks he really might rather die. "And my parents?" he asks. "What's to become of them?"

Snape folds his hands on the sticky counter in front of him. Draco can tell from the look on his face that he has been waiting for Draco to ask this question, that this is his trump card. "Well, I suppose that's up to you, and whether or not you are able to secure them Potter's protection."

Draco huffs and crosses his arms. "You're mad," he says. "It's impossible."

"I have had the displeasure of sifting through Potter's brain on more than one occasion," says Snape. "Trust me, it's not impossible."

Draco blanches, then recovers with a sneer. "Pervert."

They sit in silence for a minute, Draco sulking and avoiding the former Potions master's eye as he banishes a cherry from his sundae with a flick of his spoon. The offending fruit rolls across the counter, leaving a trail of hot fudge. A waitress glares at him.

Finally, Snape says, "This is your choice, Draco. You know that your survival is my own, therefore you cannot doubt my intentions."

"Yeah, I can," hisses Draco. "You filthy traitor. If your loyalties weren't so fucked up, you'd tell me to go and kill Potter and get myself back in with the Dark Lord. I might kill you, too, while I'm at it. I would if I had any proof."

"Do you really think it's that simple to kill Harry Potter? And even if it is, do you imagine that the Dark Lord will appreciate that fact being shown to the world? The boy he could never defeat, killed by a lowly minion? No, Draco, I do not think that would be wise. Especially as it seems the Dark Lord will not win

this war."

Draco nearly falls off his chair again. "How can you say that?" he sputters. "Dumbledore's dead!"

"Unfortunate, but inevitable," says Snape softly.

"Yeah, inevitable because you made an Unbreakable Vow without even knowing what you were swearing to," Draco mutters, not caring whether or not Snape hears him.

"The point, Draco," Snape sneers, "is that you can either go to Potter or be the destruction of your entire bloodline."

Draco scowls. He knows that even his Giant Banana-Split Chocolate Supreme Sundae cannot cheer him up. Still, it can do no harm.

* * *

He nevertheless finds himself outside Potter's door in the sickeningly middle-class-Muggle town of Little Whinging. He knocks, wondering if the wards on the property will even let him in with the Dark Mark still burning on his arm. Part of him hopes they won't.

A rather unattractively skinny woman answers the door. "Erm," says Draco. He's not really sure how to talk to Muggles. "Hello."

"Dudley isn't home," says the woman.

"Okay," says Draco, wondering why he is supposed to care about Dudley, whatever that is. He waits for her to invite him in and show him to the parlor to wait while she fetches Potter. She merely looks at him,

her eyes narrowing by the second.

"Can I help you with something?" she asks.

Draco decides the woman must be very dim. "My name…" he says slowly, pointing to himself, "is Draco Malfoy. I'm… looking…"

"Malfoy?"

Draco whips around to see Potter coming round the side of the house, his hands and the knees of his jeans covered in dirt, a small gardening tool in his hand. His other hand is in his pocket, and Draco doesn't doubt that it's gripping his wand.

The woman in the doorway hisses and says, "He's one of yours? Get him out of here! What is wrong with you?"

Draco is about to argue that he is nothing of Potter's, but remembers that he is trying to get on the Gryffindor's good side, so he just sneers instead.

The three of them stand there for a moment, Potter staring at Draco with gritted teeth and Draco staring back wondering how the hell he is going to pull this off. The woman eventually seems to give up and shuts the door, muttering about being done with all this in a few days.

"Your servant was very rude to me," Draco says, by way of conversation.

"What? You mean her? She's not my servant, she's my aunt."

"Your aunt answers the door? Potter, I thought you were meant to be rich."

"I am," says Potter irritably. "I mean-- oh, never mind. What are you doing here?"

"Are you doing your own gardening?" Draco asks with fascination. If he'd known this sort of thing back at school… How much better his life would have been, had he been able to taunt Potter with this.

"Malfoy, if you don't tell me why you're here I'm going to curse you into a million pieces, never mind that we're surrounded by Muggles."

"Relax, Potter, I'm unarmed." Draco holds up his hands to show. "You can pat me down if you like."

Potter scowls. "Answer the question."

"Can we go inside or something?"

"What, so you can hex me with fewer witnesses to Obliviate? I don't think so."

"What are you afraid of? I thought you were safe here until next week." Draco decides he has to take the situation into his own hands, as Potter doesn't seem to be doing much to move things forward, aside from standing there all filthy with the expression of someone with severe intestinal troubles. Draco walks up to the door and turns the handle. The door clicks and swings open. He turns back to Potter, who at this point could have steam coming out of his ears. "Shall we talk in here, then?" he says.

Potter works his jaw for a moment, then strides forward, pushing Draco into the cool dark hallway and bringing the door to close behind them. The moment they are inside, Potter's wand is out and trained on Draco's heart. Draco is hardly surprised, but he still finds it somewhat uncomfortable.

The woman from earlier, Potter's aunt, spots them from the kitchen and gasps, dropping the pot she was holding. In another second, she is out of sight.

"I'm going to ask you one more time," says Potter gratingly, ignoring his aunt. "What are you doing here?"

"I need your help, alright? I want-- I want to switch sides. Dumbledore was right. I can't-- I can't do the things they want me to do." As Draco says this, he realizes it's true, and the thought makes him sick to his stomach.

"You want to switch sides," Harry repeats.

"That's what I said, Potter."

"You think it's that easy?"

"No, but I don't know what else to do."

"So what do you want from me?"

"How about not killing me, for starters?"

Potter doesn't lower his wand. Shit, thinks Draco. He really hates me. He feels vaguely pleased with himself, to be able to stir up so much emotion in Harry Potter. Evidently, the last six years have been well spent.

"How do I know you're not lying?" says Potter.

"Well, I wouldn't have been able to get through the door if I wasn't on your side," says Draco. This is what Snape has told him to say. He has no idea if it's actually true, though he has a feeling it isn't

because he is still not exactly ready to give up his life to Potter's cause.

Potter seems to buy it, however. His mouth twists in thought, and his wand goes back to his side.

"Look," says Draco, encouraged by this small progress, "I just want what everyone else wants." He suddenly feels very tired. "I just want to be safe, and know that my family is safe."

"That's not what everyone wants," says Potter.

"Sorry, I should have said 'what every sane person wants.' Can I stay with you?"

Potter's jaw works some more as he stares at Draco, who shivers in the draft from a strange humming box fixed into the window beside him. Draco shuffles away from the cold, and sees Potter's eyes follow him. He remembers what Snape has said to him, closes his eyes for a deep, bracing breath, and then sinks to his knees before Potter.

"Please," says Draco, staring at the tasteless floor in front of him. "Please let me join you. I'll do whatever you want. I'll-- I'll cut off my left arm if the Mark bothers you. Just don't leave me to die."

"Jesus Christ," says Potter. "Fine, get up. If you want to stay here that badly, then fine. Just please stop groveling."

Draco looks up to see Potter's face twisted in something close to panic. Before he can enjoy his victory, however, a voice hisses from a doorway behind them, "What did you just say? I will absolutely not allow it. Never! One of you in the house is bad enough. I will not--"

"Aunt Petunia, he's of age already. That means he could curse you into a thousand pieces without so much as a slap on the wrist."

Draco can hear Potter's aunt's sharp footsteps receding quite quickly down the hall. Potter smirks and says, "Well, at least you're good for something, Malfoy."

"She's pretty stupid, isn't she?" Draco says, hoping to join in on abusing Potter's aunt.

But Potter turns back to Draco and scowls. "She's better than the family you've got, Malfoy. At least she's never killed anyone."

It takes a good deal of effort for Draco not to retort. He bows his head in pain as he bites his tongue, his eyes watering.

Perhaps Potter thinks he is crying, for he clears his throat a little uncomfortably, a little guiltily. "Well," he says gruffly, "You'll have to sleep in my old room, under the stairs."

Draco's head snaps up in indignation. "You mean the famous cupboard? Are you mad? You expect me to sleep there?"

Potter scowls. "You'll sleep wherever I tell you to sleep, Malfoy, and you'll like it. Beggars can't be choosers, you know."

"Right, Potter, justify your sadism with a stupid cliché."

"If you don't like it, you can leave." Potter crosses his arms over his chest.

"You might as well kill me now," says Draco mournfully. "I have very delicate lungs. A windowless cupboard would…"

"Shut up!"

Draco shuts up, knowing he has already won.

Potter sighs and says, "As much as I would like to make you sleep in the cupboard, I've just realized that it would be better to keep you in sight anyways. You'll have to sleep in my room."

Draco feels some of the blood leave his face. He hides it with a sneer. "What fun that will be."

"Believe me, I don't want to sleep with you, either," says Potter. He doesn't seem to realize what he's just said, but Draco can't keep his mouth shut.

"That's not what Snape says," he mutters under his breath.

"What?" says Potter distractedly.

"Nothing," says Draco quickly. He really doesn't want to put ideas in Potter's head.

"All right," says Potter with a small sigh, "I'm going to go take a shower, so you can sit quietly in my room until I get out and then we're going to have a conversation about exactly how you ended up here." He leads the way across the previously spotless parquet floor and up the stairs, Draco following, wrinkling his nose and trying not to step in any of the filth Potter leaves behind.

Potter's room is disgusting. Draco really never thought that the Chosen One lived like this. There are dirty clothes everywhere, school books strewn about (some of them in positions that definitely cannot be good for the binding), and the owl cage reeks. He looks around, and finds there is no vaguely sanitary place to sit. This is worse than Snape's place, for heaven's sake. At least Snape had a servant.

Draco feels that Potter is being rather selfish by taking so long in the shower, especially when a guest of very noble blood is waiting with no place to sit in this crap-hole of a room. He wonders if maybe the

cupboard under the stairs is any cleaner. Perhaps he should request a room change.

And really, what could Potter be doing in the shower that takes this long? Oh, not that. Please, God, don't let it be that. Draco finds he would rather concentrate on his surroundings than ponder Potter's shower habits. He dearly wishes his wand was in his hand, and not lying broken in a drawer in Spinner's End, just so he could cast a bubble head charm and avoid dying a very undignified Death by Stench.

Potter opens the door, towel around his waist and muddy clothes dragging from his hand. Draco turns to him and declares "Potter, this place is a pigsty. It's an insult!"

"Your existence is an insult," says Potter wearily. He drops the dirt-encrusted clothes to the floor as he walks over to his trunk and fishes out some suspicious-looking jeans and a wrinkled t-shirt.

"You're still living out of your trunk?" Draco scoffs. "You do realize we're not going back?"

He'd meant merely to mock Potter and his uncouth lifestyle, but realized a second too late just what he was saying. Stupid, he berates himself, as Potter's face darkens. He hadn't wanted to go anywhere near the subject of Hogwarts and Dumbledore if he could help it.

Potter straightens up and says, "You might want to leave. I have to change."

Draco doesn't leave, but merely turns around instead, closing his eyes and folding his arms across his chest. Potter apparently accepts this because he doesn't say anything until he's dressed.

"Okay," Potter says, "You can turn around now. And you can tell me what you know about Snape."

Draco turns to face him apprehensively. "What do you mean?"

"You know bloody well what I mean. Where is he?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Why? Because he killed Dumbledore, that's why!" Potter shouts. He has suddenly gone very red in the face.

"No he didn't!" Draco lies quickly.

"YES he bloody well DID and you know it! I was there, Malfoy. I saw the whole thing!"

"You…. what?"

"Yes," says Potter, with evident satisfaction at how this bit of information has disturbed Draco. "I was there. I was under my cloak, but I saw how you couldn't kill Dumbledore, and Snape had to do it for you. I heard how you confessed to everything that I knew you were up to all year, and how Dumbledore took pity on you and offered you shelter and that's the only bloody reason I--" Potter is almost hysterical now, breathing very quickly, his eyes flashing.

"You were there? " Draco interrupts. "And you didn't do anything? You just let it happen? You watched him die?"

It was apparently the wrong thing to say, because Potter slaps him hard across the face. Head reeling from the blow, Draco says under his breath, "In some countries, that's a proposal for marriage, you know."

Potter doesn't hear him. "I was Petrified, you little fuck. Dumbledore used his last chance of defending himself to protect me. But I'm sure that's something someone like you could never understand."

Draco can't hold himself back. He feels the heat rising in his cheeks, quite apart from the stinging of where Potter has slapped him. "I wouldn't understand? You're the one who doesn't understand. You do all these recklessly heroic things and everyone around you ends up paying for it. I tried to protect my family. I sold my soul to a eugenics-obsessed megalomaniac for them--"

"So you sacrificed your morals? How touching."

Draco doesn't say anything. He stands before Potter, still smarting from the blow, and evenly meets his gaze. Potter's mouth twists in a frown.

"You're not as bad as him," says Potter finally. "That's why I'm letting you stay here. You're not…"

"If you say I'm not a killer, I just might have to prove you wrong, and you won't be around to eat your words."

Potter, incredibly, smiles a little at this. "That's not what I was going to say. I was going to say that you're not like Snape. You're not… evil."

"But Snape--"

"Unless you're giving me information on how to find him and kill him, I don't want to hear it," says Potter, suddenly stone-faced. "You I might be able to forgive, but he's the reason my parents are dead, and now Dumbledore. The next time I see him, I'm going to kill him or die trying. There isn't any other way."

In the short silence that follows this speech, Draco reflects that it would be pointless to argue at the moment, and really there doesn't seem to be any reason, as Potter has just more or less stated that he's "forgiven" Draco, and as Draco is himself rather of the opinion that Snape is an evil pervert.

"Do you want some cake?" says Potter, jerking Draco from his thoughts.

Draco blinks at the non sequitur. "What?"

"There isn't anything else to eat," Potter shrugs.

Draco stares at him in horror, completely distracted from the previous conversation. "Do you mean to tell me that the bloody Boy Who Lived eats cake for dinner?"

"It isn't bad cake," says Potter defensively. "It's just a bit odd because there's no sugar. Hermione sent it me early for my birthday."

"Muggle cake? With no sugar? Potter, this is a cruel joke."

"Fine," snaps Potter. "You can go steal something from the kitchen. Good luck finding real food. And try not to scare my relatives too much, as I rather need them to be alive for the next few days."

* * *

So Draco wanders down to the shiny room that he presumes to be the kitchen. There is already someone there, however. "Who are you?" he asks the rather stocky and stupid-looking boy.

"D-Dudley," says the boy, looking petrified. For some reason he drops the sandwich he is holding and clamps both hands on his arse.

Surely I haven't got that much of a reputation, Draco thinks. He surveys the boy and decides it's safe to say, "Dudley, get me a sandwich."

Dudley squeaks and says, "All we have is Marmite and lettuce."

Draco wrinkles his nose. "All right, it's better than sugarless bloody cake. What are you waiting for? No, not the one off the floor, you slimy git, do you know who I am? I'm a Malfoy and you'd best remember it."

In this way, Draco spends a rather enjoyable evening bossing around the Muggle boy and eating everything to be found from his comfortable spot at the very pleasantly clean table before an amusing flickering box on which a bunch of grown men run daftly after a little black-and-white, earthbound Quaffle.

When he has had his fill and dismissed Dudley, Draco supposes he ought to go back upstairs. He finds Potter asleep over a Hogwarts library book, fully clothed and stretched out on his stomach across the bed. Draco snorts and closes the bedroom door once more, heading downstairs again. The drawing room is spotless, and blessedly so compared to Potter's hovel. Draco curls up on the fresh-scented white couch and sighs contentedly at the feel of a truly clean cushion to his cheek, something he hasn't had since leaving Hogwarts.

* * *

Draco wakes the next morning to the sound of his name, and it takes him a moment to realize that the voices are talking about him, not to him, and another moment to ascertain that the voices belong to Potter, Granger, and the Weasel. He doesn't stir for a few moments.

"I still think you're mad," Weasey is saying. "Considering that you know he's a Death Eater."

"Which is why I want to keep my eye on him," says Potter tiredly.

"And a fine job you've done so far!" says Granger. "I can't believe you fell asleep with him down here."

"He hasn't got a wand." Draco can hear Potter's childish scowl.

"Hmph," Granger sniffs. "Accio Malfoy's wand!"

There is a surprisingly short pause (Draco begrudgingly acknowledges that Granger has superior Summoning skills) and then the Weasel says, "Blimey. I wonder who did that?"

Draco winces, knowing the Mudblood has her hands on the broken pieces of his beloved wand.

"He might have snapped it himself," says Granger slowly. "After all, if he really doesn't want to be found, it would be unwise to use it."

The memory is still painful for Draco. He had to watch as Snape snapped the last piece of his pride in two, "for his own good." Draco sneers into his pillow. Bastard.

"Of course," says Potter, "Now anyone could see bits of wand flying from wherever Malfoy was straight to this house."

"Harry, why do you think I said the 'Accio' part out loud?" Granger sounds as if she's giving a lesson. "It was because I wanted to make it strong enough with all the other nonverbal spells for cloaking and speed and ward-disabling."

"Now you're just making things up," says Weasley.

"I am not! Just because you never paid attention in class--"

"You've been in each other's presence about fifteen minutes, and you're already bickering," says Potter,

sounding amused. "I think it's a new record."

"Ron's just in a foul mood because I had to take him by Side-Along," says Granger.

"So what did your parents say when you told them you were leaving?" Potter asks quietly.

There is a pause before Granger's response, as if she were thinking carefully. "Well, I didn't really tell them everything. But they know it's important, and they understood."

"And your mum, Ron? What did she say?" Potter sounds as if he's speaking with great difficulty.

"She wasn't surprised. I mean, she's not happy about it, but she thinks of you as her son anyway, so she knows why I have to go with you."

There is another pause. Unwilling anger rises up in Draco at Weasley for abandoning his mother for Potter and his stupid doomed quest. Why do Gryffindors have no sense of priority?

"… And Ginny?" Potter says it so quietly that Draco almost doesn't hear.

"Well," says Weasley awkwardly. "I mean, you'll get to see her when we go over for dinner, but she... She's a little upset. She didn't know you were letting us go along. She thinks if we get to go, she ought to as well. I told her she was too young, and she hexed me."

"She hexed you?" says Granger.

"Well," Weasley says, "There's no more school to be expelled from, is there? Thanks to someone."

Draco sits up. "It would have closed down anyways," he says indignantly. "Dumbledore was dying."

The other three jump to see that he is awake. Potter is sitting in a chair across from the couch, looking pale and tired. Weasley is sitting on an ottoman beside him, and Granger is standing, still holding the remains of Draco's wand.

"And how do you figure that?" asks the Weasel, once he has recovered from his shock.

"Didn't you see his hand?" says Draco. "Snape told me--"

"And we all know how trustworthy he is," growls Potter.

"It makes sense, though," says Granger. "From what I've read about Horcruxes, they're really difficult to destroy, and--"

"Horcruxes?" Draco interrupts. He's never heard the word spoken aloud before, and didn't expect to hear it from Granger, of all people. "Who's got a Horcrux?" He glances at Potter. Surely not.

The trio is silent. They look at one another, holding a wordless conversation.

Eventually, Weasley raises his eyebrows at Granger, who shrugs, and then Potter says to Draco, "Voldemort has. He's got quite a few, actually."

Draco sits, stunned, for a moment. "… More than one? How many, exactly?"

"He started out with six. Now he's got four."

"Six? Isn't that a bit… excessive?"

"I'd say so," says Potter with a wry smile. "But it is Voldemort."

"He's mad," says Draco.

Weasley rolls his eyes. "Thanks for pointing that out for us, Malfoy."

"So what's your daft Gryffindor plan, then? I suppose you're trying to hunt down all the Horcruxes?"

"Do you have a better suggestion?"

"Give up?" Draco offers.

"I'm not really in a hurry to die," says Potter.

"Then why are you still in the country, you twit?"

"Harry, you really don't have to justify your actions to Malfoy, you know," says Granger, crossing her arms across her chest. "He's not going to understand any time soon."

"Yeah, 'cause I'm not a raving loony," Draco mutters.

Granger suddenly smiles in a way that Draco definitely doesn't like. "You know, Malfoy, now that you're here, you might as well help us."

He narrows his eyes. "Help you with what, exactly?"

"Well," she continues brightly, "I've heard the most amazing things about the library at Malfoy Manor. It's quite famous for its collection of old and rare Dark Arts texts, isn't it?"

Potter looks interested now. "Is it?"

"So what do you expect me to do?" says Draco. "Have the whole library owled here?"

"Of course not," Granger scoffs. "We just need you to tell us how to get into the library and find the books we want."

"There's no way," says Draco at once. "There are old enchantments on the house. There's no way a Mudblood like you could get anywhere near it."

Granger silences Weasel's violent reaction with a wave of her hand, and says to Draco, "You and I both know there is no such thing as a spell that can detect what sort of blood you've got."

Draco, in fact, knows no such thing. "Yes, there is," he says stubbornly.

"So Voldemort's never been to your house?"

Draco laughs. "What are trying to say, that the Dark Lord is a Mudblood?"

Potter looks at him and smirks. "His father was a Muggle. He's a half-blood."

"Yeah, right, Potter, and my mother was a teacup."

"Fine, don't believe me. But if you don't help us out, then we can't help you."

So Draco unwillingly writes a note to his mother, who is still at home, explaining the situation and stressing that if she isn't fully cooperative with Potter's friends, then he, Draco, will probably be killed within the week. He seals the letter with his signet ring and sends it off with Granger and Weasley, along with directions to show it at the gates.

What seems like hours later, but is probably more like twenty minutes, Draco and Potter are still sitting across from each other in the living room. Potter was asking him questions, but seems to have lost his train of thought, and is now staring out the window, his hand twitching nervously, tapping his wand against his thigh. His brain is apparently on holiday in the Land of Mad Gryffindorish Thoughts.

Draco is impatient. He wonders if his mother understands the situation. He wonders if the Dark Lord is at his house right now. He wonders if his parents are still alive. He wonders if Potter is going to kill him, and if so, when. Maybe his friends have told him to kill Draco, and he is supposed to do it while they are gone. Maybe that's why Potter looks so nervous.

Potter's wand taps against his thigh maddeningly. His knee has started jiggling as well, now.

Draco twitches in irritation. The clock on the wall ticks loudly. This is intolerable.

"Look," Draco bursts out, "If you're going to kill me, just get it over with. I hate long waits."

Potter starts, and looks at him with surprise. "I'm not going to kill you," he says. "At least, I don't think I am. Not if you, you know, don't betray us all and send England to its doom."

Draco twitches again, this time in a fit of uncertainty. He can't quite trust Potter, despite that he's been safe here for the past twenty-four hours. In fact, as time passes he is becoming more anxious. Potter has yet to show even the slightest interest in violating him the way Snape implied that he would. In fact, he doesn't seem to care all that much about Draco at all. Which is very disconcerting, as it means that Draco

is, in Potter's eyes, extremely Expendable. Draco wants to be Indispensable. Which he cannot achieve tastefully.

Potter sighs. He has gone back to staring out the window. "I don't even know why I bothered to take you in, though. You're pretty insufferable."

"You don't?" says Draco. He decides to take action. Something must be done. So he stands up. "I do."

"You do what?" Potter gazes up at him in mild confusion.

"I know why you're keeping me here with you."

“Oh, really?” Potter looks incredulous as Draco steps towards him.

Draco doesn’t have time to elaborate, however, as just at that moment there is a loud pop and a small, red-haired witch appears several feet to his left.

“Ginny!” says Potter. “What are you doing here?”

“Mum sent me to my room for hexing Ron, but she doesn’t know I can Apparate,” says the youngest Weasley, smoothing out her robes.

“I didn’t mean ‘how did you get here.’” Potter looks angry. “I meant ‘why are you here?’”

“I need to talk to you.” The Weaslette's face is set under the disarray of her bright hair.

“I told you I couldn’t see you anymore.”

“I didn’t think you meant it literally. Look, I’m not asking you to- to take me back or anything. Just… take me with you.”

“Malfoy,” says Potter tersely. “Fuck off.”

Draco, who until now has been watching motionless, understands that this is no time to argue, and quickly flees the scene. He does not see the harm, however, in waiting outside the door to the kitchen and listening. Ginny Weasley hardly spares him a glance as he goes.

“You said you understood,” Potter says to her.

“I thought I did,” she says. “But I don’t. Harry, I don’t understand at all. I don’t see why they’re allowed to come but not me. I thought you didn’t want me there because you cared about me too much or something- but you care about them. I don’t understand.”

“It’s different, Ginny. They’re… I can’t tell them not to come. They’ve always been with me.”

“So basically you’re saying I’m still not in the club.”

“No, I’m saying I can’t do it without them.”

“But you’re fine without me.”

“No, I’m not fine. Listen, Ginny, if you got hurt I wouldn’t be able to live with myself.”

“And what if you got hurt and I wasn’t there to help you? Or I got hurt because you left me behind? I mean, this is a war, there are risks no matter what you do.” She pauses for breath, and it’s clear she’s

been rehearsing this little speech in her mind. “But even though you might be the one he’s looking for, you’re also the only one who can stand up to him. So wouldn’t I be safer with you?”

Potter goes slightly pale at these last words. After a little while he says, “Ginny, I just can’t. I can’t handle it. Try to understand, it’s not that I’m not willing to take the responsibility to protect you-” (although it is quite clear that this is exactly what he is not willing to do) –“I just... It’s so important that I focus on what I have to do. Can you understand that?”

There is yet another pause, in which Weasley folds her arms and doesn’t look at Potter. Eventually she says, “So if I’m not with you, you won’t worry? ‘Out of sight, out of mind?’”

“Ginny,” Potter groans, putting his face in his hands. “You’re making this so hard...”

The girl observes him pitilessly. “Well, I’m not staying at home,” she says. “If you won’t take me with you, then I’ll go fight somewhere else. I’m not just going to wait around for you to come back.”

“I never asked you to wait,” he says.

“Right, then,” she says coldly, and with a wave of her wand and another pop she is gone.

* * *

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Chapter 2: Marked

Chapter Two

Narcissa looks away from Severus.

“My suggestion,” he is saying, “is that you leave the country as soon as possible. Go to your aunt in America.”

“I can’t,” she says thickly. “Draco-”

“Will only be in more danger if you remain,” he interrupts, abrupt as always.

She is about to argue further when her house-elf comes in, bowing profusely. “Excuse me, Milady, there are two visitors at the gate. They are having this, Milady.” She scurries over to Narcissa’s seat on the settee and hands her a letter with Draco’s seal.

“Oh,” says Narcissa softly, and tears open the scroll. Her eyes scan the familiar writing and she gasps again. “It’s Potter’s friends,” she says to Severus. “They’re here. What do they want with our books? A Mudblood and a Weasley, Severus—the nerve!”

“Are you going to show them in or not?”

Narcissa looks sharply at Severus. He must have known something like this would happen when he sent Draco to Potter. His harsh profile betrays no emotion other than his usual surliness. “Very well, then,” she says irritably and turns to the house-elf. “Send them in.”

“I feel, however,” says Severus, rising, “that this is my cue to take my leave. Potter has undoubtedly told them of...” He stops suddenly, but Narcissa is unable to make out any change in his expression as he continues. “And I fear they would not react well to my presence. Goodbye, Narcissa. I will come by tomorrow to help you leave.”

Narcissa stands as he Disapparates and smooths the front of her silk robes, passing a hand over her face briefly to wipe away any remnants of tears. She turns deliberately towards the window just as she hears the Mudblood and the blood traitor being lead in. She keeps them waiting for a few moments as she surveys her estate: the gardens fully blooming with late summer blossoms, the fountains tinkling cleanly and glinting in the sun, and the peacocks strutting about in the hedges. One of the magnificent birds cries out as she finally says, without turning to face the intruders, “What do you want?”

“Just to use the library,” comes the impudent voice of the girl. “You have books we want.”

Narcissa takes a moment to control her hot anger, forcing it into ice in her tone. “And what would someone like you want with our books?” She gains some satisfaction in the knowledge that she has managed to make “someone like you” sound more insulting than “filthy Mudblood.”

“You don’t need to know that,” says the girl.

Narcissa is irritated at her inability to rile her, but more concerned with the issue at hand. “You won’t hurt Draco,” she says. There is no question in her voice.

“We might,” says the boy, the Weasley. In contrast to his companion, he sounds angry.

The girl cuts in. “We wouldn’t have to,” she says coolly. “All we have to do is turn him out. Voldemort will take care of the rest.”

How dare she speak his name! Narcissa turns around and it is all she can do to keep from slapping the girl. How does she, this skinny Mudblood girl, think she can speak so casually about the force that destroyed half of Britain? The boy, at least, has the decency to blanch at the name and give a little gasp of horror.

Narcissa stares hard at the Mudblood. The girl stares back, all uncontrolled hair and puffy eyes and cracked lips. “Tinsy,” says Narcissa suddenly to her house-elf, not taking her eyes off of this girl, “take

them to the library and see that they find all they are looking for."

She turns back to the window as Tinsy scuttles about and leads the children out of the room. She can hear one of them pause at the doorway. It is the girl, because the boy calls to her and she hurries after him down the corridor. Narcissa leans her head against the windowpane and sighs.

She looks up when, several minutes later, an owl comes into view. She pulls the window open to let the bird in, along with a puff of warm air. The letter wrapped around the owl's leg contains only one line:

Wait for me tonight.

-L

* * *

Potter has been brooding for the past hour, lying on his bed and staring up at the ceiling in an intolerably self-pitying manner. It is very boring. Draco keeps himself occupied by taking stock of the house and examining all the mad Muggle artifacts.

"Where are your relatives?" he asks Potter at one point.

Potter starts and looks at him. "What?"

"Your relatives, Potter. The people who live here."

"Oh. They decided to take a conveniently timed vacation. By the time they come back, I'll be gone." Potter turns his full attention back to sulking.

Rolling his eyes, Draco leaves the Gryffindor alone to his Gryffindorish Wallowing. Probably lamenting the fact that he's a gigantic poofter, Draco thinks, and is able to snicker to himself at Potter's suffering before he remembers what that means for him. Shuddering a little, he heads back downstairs to further investigate the pure madness that Muggles call everyday life.

He is fiddling with the knobs on the front of the little box in the kitchen, across whose surface scantily clad women are now frolicking, and watching their exposed skin turn green, cackling to himself with delight, when Granger and the Weasel boy Apparate into the living room behind him.

"Really, Ron, I didn't expect anything better. In fact, she was almost decent for her."

"But it's—You shouldn't have to take that, Hermione."

"Of course I shouldn't, but what can we do?" Granger strides into the kitchen and unloads a pile of books onto the table. "Well, hello, Malfoy. Having fun?"

Draco has a sneaking suspicion that she is making fun of him, and so he makes no reply. Instead he says, "Weasley, if you say one more word about my mother I swear I will kill you when this bloody war is over. If you're not already dead, that is."

"Where's Harry?" Granger says quickly.

"Potter is being his horrible self upstairs," Draco informs her.

"I hope that isn't some sort of euphemism for something distasteful." She furrows her brow as she begins to sort the tomes into piles.

"Me, too," says Draco, suddenly worried. "Weasel, you go get him. If he is wanking, you can help."

Weasley's blow catches Draco hard near his right ear. Utterly unprepared, he topples gracelessly to the floor. Granger gasps and says, "Ron!"

Draco looks up at his aggressor. "I can't fight back," he says coldly. "You want to hit me when I can't fight back?" Gryffindors always go for that sort of thing.

Weasley is flushed already, but now the color spreads all the way to his ears. "Fuck you, Malfoy." But he doesn't hit Draco again.

"Really, Ron," says Granger. "You can't let him wind you up. He's just bitter because his side lost and now he has to stay here, at Harry's mercy. Which," she glares at Draco. "I happen to think is probably very good for him."

Draco rolls his eyes as he gets back to his feet.

"I'm going up to get Harry," says Weasley, still fuming, and he turns smartly on his heel and walks out of the kitchen.

Draco is about to wander off to portions of the house less populated with Gryffindors, but Granger says, "Where do you think you're going?"

He turns to her. "Well, I was going to go and find some small children to throw rocks at, because that is, after all, what people like me do best, isn't it?"

She scowls at him and holds out the biggest book of lot. "If you're going to stay here and be a prat, you're at least going to do something useful. You can start by searching this index volume for anything related to Horcruxes. I've compiled a short list of related words that we should look out for..." She unfurls a roll of parchment to reveal a list which is at least two feet long, all written in her tiny, neat script. Draco stares at her in horror.

“Are you serious?” he says.

“Do you want Voldemort to win? He will kill you, you know.”

“Fine,” Draco snaps. “Since it gives you so much pleasure to treat me like a servant and demean me in every way possible, and since I have no choice but to obey, I suppose I will help you in your doomed plot.” He sits down heavily at the table, and opens the ancient volume.

“How kind of you,” says Granger.

* * *

They spend the rest of the day looking through the books and sneezing. For dinner they eat the meal that Weasley’s mother has packed. It isn’t as bad as the stuff Potter’s relatives keep in the house. In fact, Draco would never admit it, but the food is quite good. Probably, he reasons, it tastes better because it’s been so long since he had a proper meal. For all his enthusiasm for potions-making, Snape does not exactly cook.

They eat mostly in silence, Granger still reading over her food, but occasionally the Gryffindors chat about boring things and people Draco doesn’t know or care about.

He is interested, however, when the conversation turns to the youngest Weasley.

“So, Ginny came by today, while you two were gone,” Potter says abruptly, after one of the long silences.

Granger is immediately distracted from her book. “What?”

“She Apparated?” says Weasley, eyes wide.

“Yeah,” says Potter. “She came to ask me take her along.”

“But you said no, right?” Weasley asks anxiously.

“Yeah, of course I did. I mean, she... She can’t come along. I can’t...” He swallows, and doesn’t finish the sentence.

“And how did she react?” Granger asks.

“Well, she yelled at me a lot,” Potter says morosely. “I’m pretty sure she hates me and may never speak to me again.”

“Ouch,” says Weasley.

“I’m sure she’ll get over it,” Granger says soothingly. “You two will work it out sometime. But you do see where she’s coming from?”

“Of course I do,” says Potter. “I would do the same thing in her situation. But I can’t take her along. I can’t.”

“Of course you can’t,” Weasley agrees.

Granger, however, looks thoughtful. “Still,” she says. “She is rather talented. I mean, she’s never even had Apparition lessons, and she showed up here, a place she’s never been. It’s quite remarkable, really. And there must have been a reason Slughorn chose her for his club.”

“So?” says Weasley.

“So, she might actually be able to help.”

“No,” says Potter at once. “She can help from home, but she isn’t coming with us! Look, I’m tired of this conversation. There’s no way she’s coming. So can we just drop it, please?”

“Well,” says Granger, “If you feel that strongly about it...”

“I do,” says Potter.

They finish the meal in silence.

* * *

Narcissa is indeed waiting, sitting before the fire in the study, when she hears her husband Apparate behind her. She turns at once and rises to embrace him.

“I didn’t think I would see you again,” she says into his robes.

Lucius makes no response. “Where is Draco?” he asks.

“Severus has sent him to the Potter boy. They haven’t hurt him yet, because they think he will be useful.” She is not foolish enough to tell Lucius that she granted Potter’s friends full access to their library over something as trivial as Draco’s life.

“Will they still find him useful after the thirty-first?” Lucius asks.

Narcissa frowns, looking up at him. “I don’t know. I expect so; it’s only two days. Why?”

“After Potter’s seventeenth birthday, Draco will be able to kill him easily. If we can hold off the Dark Lord’s anger until then, we will be restored in his good graces.”

Narcissa thinks this over, then says, “Severus said that the Dark Lord wouldn’t want someone just killing Potter for him like that—”

“I expect he told you there was no choice but to flee.”

Narcissa nods.

“Cissa, my dear, Severus Snape wants me dead. He is trying to lure you away. He plans to take you for himself and keep me from gaining favor with the Dark Lord. He is also worried about Draco gaining prominence. Are you really going to take his word on what the Dark Lord wants?”

Narcissa has gone very white. “Severus would never do anything to harm Draco—”

Lucius slaps her with such force that she staggers backwards, stabling herself on the back of the armchair.

“Is that because Snape thinks of Draco as his own son? What have you been telling him? Why do you sneak off in the night to visit him? Why do you defend him? Have you given him cause to think that he will have you after my death? Or are you already his?”

Narcissa hisses lowly. “What do you take me for, Lucius? A common harlot? I can make Severus do what I want, it’s true, and sometimes I have to encourage certain.... ideas that he might have. But I assure you,

the power is all mine, and I would never betray you. You know I wouldn't." This is indeed true, and she waits a moment for Lucius to remember that he is the one with the money and connections that attracted her in the first place. To drive this point home, she adds, "Severus has nothing to offer me."

In a few moments, Lucius has collected himself, slightly red-faced after his outburst. "Right," he says. "You know I cannot stay. See that Draco knows what he must do. Our lives depend on it."

Narcissa nods, still nursing her cheek where he has hit her, and he is gone.

* * *

That night, there is an unnecessarily large fuss over who will sleep where. Potter offers the guest room to Weasley and Granger, but they refuse, saying that they wouldn't feel comfortable sleeping in his relatives' bed without their permission, even if it is a guest room. However, Draco knows that really they just don't want to leave him alone with Potter. Part of him is grateful for this, and part of him is frustrated, because he knows that he has to do what he has to do, and has to do it soon.

Then there is an argument over who will sleep in Potter's bed. He offers it to both of his friends, but they decline, after fighting between themselves over who should get it. Draco selflessly offers to take the bed and remove the terrible cause of the disagreement, but his olive branch is unanimously shot down.

"Harry," says Granger finally, "It's your bed. Just take it! We'll be fine. You know, after a few cleaning spells on this floor."

"Er, yeah," says Potter. "Sorry about that."

"I just feel sorry for you," says Draco. "You have to live here. It is truly abominable."

"Shut up, Malfoy," says Weasley.

And so, in the end, Draco is forced to sleep on Potter's floor with Granger and Weasley, which is really too disgusting for words.

Draco cannot sleep. He is worried. Well, fine, he's scared shitless. Not that he hasn't been scared shitless for about a year now, but tonight he is scared shitless on a hard floor next to a snoring redhead. He hates that his mind can wander now, but at the same time is grateful for the opportunity to think over his strategy for survival.

He still can't figure out Potter. It may be that Snape is insane or lying. But then, why does Potter put up with Draco here? And even if Potter has no interest currently, Draco should probably create some. Because if he doesn't, if he can't make Potter care about him at all, then he will never be safe.

Draco is following this train of thought when Potter, in the middle of the night, gets out of bed and silently crosses the room, stepping over Granger and shutting the door behind him. He doesn't return for a long time.

After twenty minutes, in which Draco sweats on the floor, steeling himself for the task ahead, Potter still has not come back and Draco decides it is time for action. He rises and goes after Potter.

Draco finds him in the kitchen, poring over the books from the Malfoy library.

"Still hard at work, Potter?"

Potter jumps. For someone whose life is almost constantly in danger, Potter could stand to be a lot more alert.

"I couldn't sleep," says Potter. "What are you doing here?"

“I couldn’t sleep either,” says Draco truthfully. “I guess we have the same problem.”

“Er,” says Potter. “I guess.”

Draco sighs. “We could just solve the problem.”

“What?” Potter looks very confused.

Suddenly, Draco turns Potter’s chair around so that he is facing him, and leans in with his hands resting on the table on either side of the other boy.

“What are you--”

“Why can’t you just admit it?” says Draco. “We both know it. The reason you’re keeping me here—It’s the same reason I came.” Draco kneels and moves his hands to Potter’s knees. “Don’t pretend like this isn’t what you want. Me, here, submissive, bound to do your bidding...” He can’t help some of his real feelings adding an unintentional bite to his voice.

Potter’s face is ashen. He shakes his head dumbly, slowly and then more forcefully. “No, he says finally. “No, you’re wrong.”

Draco is momentarily confused. He knows he is attractive by any standards. Dead sexy, actually. Then Potter covers his face with his hands, still shaking his head, and Draco thinks he knows what to do.

Acting purely on instinct, he stands and kicks the chair out from under Potter. Potter gives a little yell of surprise, and topples to the floor. He tries to get up, but Draco pushes him back down.

“Is this what you want, then?” says Draco. “Is this how you want it?”

Potter struggles for a moment more, but when he looks Draco in the eye something in him seems to break, and he relaxes, slumping back against the floor.

“Please,” he says to Draco. “Please, let me go. I don’t want... I don’t want any of this. I’m so tired...”

“Do you think I’m going to hurt you?”

“Come on, Malfoy, just let me go.” Potter’s voice still sounds dead.

Draco relents. Potter stands and walks quickly out of the room without looking at him.

* * *

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Chapter 3: Marked

Chapter Three

The next day, Potter doesn’t mention the events of the night before, and so Draco doesn’t bring it up, though he imagines Potter is avoiding his eye even more than usual.

It is the day before Potter’s seventeenth birthday, and therefore the last day of his family’s protection. Much to Draco’s amusement, it only takes Potter fifteen minutes to pack all his belongings in his trunk.

“Aren’t your family coming home to say goodbye?” Granger asks him.

“No,” says Potter.

“So you’re just going to leave it at that? You’re just... going?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh,” she says. “Okay.”

At five-thirty, they leave for the Weasley house, where they are apparently supposed to be having dinner. Draco tries to suggest that really it might just be better and far less awkward on both sides if he abstains, but the others won’t hear of it. They are obviously bent on torturing him to the fullest extent of their powers.

* * *

Ginny keeps her head down when Harry, Ron, Hermione and Malfoy come in. She sets the table silently, which is alright because her mother is talking and fussing enough for the both of them.

Then Fleur comes in. Ginny feels sick. The blond brushes past her on her way to greet the guests. One long, shining hair sticks to Ginny’s shoulder. Ginny brushes it off with disgust.

“And who is this handsome young man?” Ginny’s mother is saying of Malfoy. Ginny looks up to hear the explanation for his presence.

“Mrs. Weasley, this is Draco Malfoy,” says Hermione. “He’s staying with us for a while. He’s actually been

very helpful."

Malfoy scowls at the floor, but shakes Molly's hand and mutters a "pleased to meet you."

Ginny sets a glass down with unnecessary force, and for a moment everyone stares at her. She feels her face grow hot. But really, why should Malfoy get to go, when she's expected to stay here in this horrible house, alone with her terrified mother and unbearable Fleur. Unbearable.

Harry avoids Ginny's eyes as they all sit down to dinner. So does Ron, actually. Hermione gives her an encouraging sort of smile, and Malfoy watches her curiously.

Fleur seats herself on Ginny's right, next to Bill. Whenever Fleur turns to her fiancé, her hair brushes against Ginny's cheek. When Fleur reaches across the table, her hand and then her elbow come in contact with Ginny's bare forearms. Fleur is laughing and smiling charmingly at Harry, Ron is wearing that stupid grin, and Fleur turns to Ginny, flashing her perfect teeth.

Ginny stands up abruptly. "Excuse me," she says. "Loo, you know. Sorry," she adds when she realizes she has given too much information. She almost runs out of the room.

In the hallway, clear on the other side of the house from the kitchen, she stops and leans her back against the wall. She closes her eyes and tries to seize control of her body, to stop the involuntary shudders shaking through her.

She doesn't know how long she half-stands there, slumped against the wall, her knees barely supporting her, before she feels a hand on her shoulder. She jerks violently and her eyes snap open. Hermione is standing much too close, a look of concern on her face.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asks.

Ginny flinches. "I'm fine," she tries to say, but what comes out of her mouth is not words at all. It is a sort

of strangled, voiceless sob. Feeling the full weight of her vulnerability, Hermione here watching her fall apart, Ginny nearly throws up. She slides to the floor in defeat.

“Ginny!” Hermione is truly alarmed now. She bends down and gathers Ginny into a hug.

“I can’t,” Ginny says, the words tumbling out of her now, along with the tears. “I can’t fight him anymore. I’m so tired. Hermione, I’m tired. I don’t want to do this anymore.”

“You don’t have to keep fighting with him,” says Hermione. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. Why don’t you just explain to him—”

“Who are you talking about?”

“Who are you talking about?”

“You’re talking about Harry. I’m not talking about Harry.”

“Then what is it? Ginny, I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what the problem is.”

“You can’t help me!” Ginny half-shrieks. “No one can help me!”

“Ssshhh. Look, will you please tell me what’s wrong? For the sake of friendship? You know you can trust me.”

“You’ll tell my brother.”

“I won’t. Not if you don’t want me to.”

Ginny takes a deep breath, then shakes her head. “No, I can’t... please don’t make me say it.”

“Nothing’s so bad that sharing it will make it worse,” says Hermione soothingly.

Ginny looks into Hermione’s large, dark eyes, slightly moist in sympathy. She looks away. “Tom got to me.” The words fall out of her mouth. It’s like a dream, saying these things she can’t take back. She is reckless. “He... somehow, he got to me. I didn’t realize. I didn’t notice it until...” She pauses and glances at Hermione. Her friend is listening intently, her expression impassive.

“Got to you how?” Hermione asks quietly.

Ginny squeezes her eyes shut so that she can pretend Hermione isn’t there, pretend she is saying it all to an empty room. It doesn’t help much. “He did something... I dunno what... he... perverted me. The things I think, Hermione—It’s horrible. I try to block them out, but I can’t. And sometimes I can’t resist them. Sometimes I give in to the urges and it’s so awful, it’s so awful I don’t know what to do...” She finishes in great, choking sobs that, like so much of her life, are completely out of her control. She has shrunk away from Hermione over the course of her speech, and is huddled against the wall, with her face in her hands. “I feel like I’m going mad.”

Hermione touches Ginny’s knee. Ginny flinches. “What sort of things?” Hermione asks softly.

“Horrible things,” says Ginny brokenly. “Unnatural. Perverted. Unforgivable. Awful. The sort of things they do in Slytherin.”

“Have you hurt anyone?”

Ginny shakes her head.

“Have you hurt yourself?”

“I had to,” Ginny says, lifting her face from her hands. “I had to fight him somehow. But it didn’t work. I still... he’s still inside me, somehow.”

“What would happen if you stopped fighting?” Fear draws at the corners of Hermione’s mouth.

This is too much for Ginny. She doesn’t want to fight anymore. Every cell in her body is screaming for her to just give in, and now even Hermione is telling her to. Without thinking, she leans forward and kisses Hermione on the lips.

Hermione freezes, and Ginny draws away quickly. Hot guilt washes over her. “See?” she says, though the word is mostly drowned.

After a moment, Hermione says, “That’s your big secret? That you like girls? Ginny, I don’t know how to tell you this, but I sort of knew already.”

Ginny stares at her. “You... what? But I’m a Weasley! I’m a bloody Gryffindor, Hermione!”

Hermione blinks. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Ginny doesn’t know what to say. She doesn’t know where to begin. Everyone knows that only Slytherins and people who practice Dark Magic engage in homosexuality. It is perversion of nature!

Hermione looks confused for a few minutes more, then a look of comprehension dawns on her face and she says, “Ohhhh, yes, I remember reading about this. You’re one of those families that still believes homosexuality is wrong. Of course, it makes sense, you’re an old pure-blood family, historically Gryffindors....”

“I am not an historical phenomenon!”

“Oh—right. No, of course you’re not. Sorry. But really, I thought you would have known better. It’s okay if you like girls. There’s nothing wrong with it. It has absolutely nothing to do with Voldemort or anything evil, it’s just who you are.”

“I am not BENT!” Ginny screams. Then a noise makes her look up to see her youngest brother standing just a few feet away, having obviously just come to check on them.

“What?” Ron breathes, all the color draining instantly from his face, which bears an expression suggesting he’s been hit with Petrificus Totalis.

“Oh, don’t tell me you believe all this nonsense, too?” Hermione says desperately. “Honestly! It’s ridiculous!”

“Ginny,” says Ron, “Of course you aren’t... I mean, you’re not.... Are you?”

Ginny bursts into tears afresh. “It’s Tom!” she says.

Ron’s expression changes. “You-Know-Who’s been controlling you and you want to go along with Harry? Are you mad? You could kill him! How dare you-”

“Harry makes it better!” Ginny cries. “Something about him helps me control it. I have to be around him. I have to.”

Ron shakes his head slowly. He sighs, and says, “Don’t worry, Ginny, we’ll get you help. We’ll take you to St. Mungo’s, they’ll know what to do.”

“They’ll arrest me!” Ginny protests. She doesn’t want anyone to know that doesn’t have to. She really

can’t stand it, and the more she has to talk about it the worse it gets.

“Shh.” Hermione tries to hug her again, but Ginny wriggles away. Hermione’s eyebrows knot together. “Ginny, no one’s going to arrest you. We won’t force you to do anything you don’t want to do. And we won’t take you to St. Mungo’s. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with you.”

“Nothing wrong with her? She’s sick!”

Hermione turns angrily on him. “No, she isn’t, Ron. There is nothing wrong with girls being attracted to girls, or blokes liking blokes, or anyone liking men and women. It’s just the way some people are! Why on earth would it have to do with Dark Magic?”

“Because it’s a Dark Art in itself!” Ron is rapidly turning red. “It’s inherently unnatural and... and just plain wrong! Everyone knows that.” He turns abruptly to his sister. “Ginny, I’m sorry, but I have to tell Mum. You can’t deal with this on your own.”

“NO!” Ginny screams, scrambling to her feet. “Ron, please, don’t. I don’t want everyone to know. She’ll tell them. She’ll tell Bill and he’ll tell Fleur...”

Ron’s eyes widen. “Fleur... Is that what this is about? Is it about her?” He seems to relax somewhat. “Well, she’s part Veela, I mean a certain amount of... temptation is only to be expected...”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Ron,” Hermione snaps. “I don’t find Fleur attractive at all.”

“Well different people have different tolerances for Veela, don’t they?” Ron shoots back.

Ginny looks between them. “It’s not just Fleur,” she tells them. They stop arguing to look at her. She looks away. “Back at school...” She almost doesn’t finish the sentence. She pauses for a long time, wondering if she can get out of it, but she’s already gone this far and she might as well tell them

everything. “I used to... I kissed Luna.”

“You what?” Ron sputters. “Ginny! You know it’s wrong! How could you? My little sister...”

“Oh, shut up, Ron!” Hermione looks as if she is about to hit him.

He glares back at her. “No, Hermione. You don’t understand. This is serious, I’m going to tell Mum.”

“NO! Please! RON!” Ginny tears after him as he walks to the kitchen. Halfway there, she attempts to tackle him, jumping and grabbing him around the shoulders. “Ron, you can’t DO this to me! Ron!” Pumped full of adrenaline, she holds on tight despite his efforts to shake her off.

“Mum!” he calls, trying to pry Ginny’s arms apart. Then, in a low voice to Ginny, he says, “If you don’t let go I’m going to shout it so everyone can hear.” She gasps and lets go immediately, but runs ahead of him into the kitchen.

Their mother is already standing, looking concerned. “Ginny? Ron? What’s going on?”

Ginny is vaguely aware of her brother bending to whisper in their mother’s ear, but she runs past them and tugs open a drawer in the counter. She snatches at the first knife she sees. She can’t take this anymore. She can’t deal with it, any of it. There is simply no choice.

“Ginny!” Harry is behind her, he has her by the waist, he is wrestling the knife out of her hands. “Ginny, what are you doing?”

At the same moment, Ginny’s mother pulls away from Ron in shock and says, quite loudly and plainly for all the kitchen to hear, “A homosexual? What—Ginny!”

Ginny gives a little gasp of horror and feels her knees go out beneath her in the silence that follows.

Harry lowers her gently to the ground, coming with her to kneel beside her, arms still tight around her waist.

“Is zhat what zhis is all about?” Fleur says after some minutes, looking taken aback.

“You fuckers!” Malfoy bursts out. Everyone turns to stare at him. He stands up, facing Ron. He is trembling visibly. “You absolute wanker. She is your sister! She was going to kill herself just now, you do realize that? I bet you told her she was sick! I bet you called her a monster, you deranged, foul, Gryffindor, blood-traitor BASTARD!” He spits dramatically on the ground.

“Malfoy...” Hermione is staring at him in surprise and something like admiration.

Ron, in contrast, has turned purple. His retort is cut short when he notices that his mother is about to faint. While he helps her to sit down, his brother speaks up.

“Malfoy,” says Bill, his voice betraying barely controlled rage. “If you think we are going to take moral advice from a bloody Death Eater Slytherin git like you...”

He doesn’t seem to notice his fiancée’s shocked, wide-mouthed expression, until she interrupts him. “Bill?” she says quietly. “Is zhis truly ‘ow you feel? You would reject your own sister because of ‘o she loves?”

He turns to look at her, and they stare at each other for a moment.

Hermione, who has, along with Ron, been trying to revive Mrs. Weasley from her fainting spell, says, “Well, at least some people here have some sense. I’d never thought I’d say it, but Malfoy and Fleur are right.”

“Hermione,” growls Ron, “I’m warning you...”

“Harry agrees with me. Don’t you, Harry?” She looks towards the corner where Harry hasn’t loosened his grip on Ginny. Ginny can’t see his face, but she can feel his jaw working against her head.

“I love Ginny,” he says finally, giving her an extra squeeze. “I don’t want anything to hurt her, ever.”

“We all love Ginny!” says Ron hotly. “Well, all except Malfoy and Fleur—D’you see a pattern here, Hermione?”

Hermione slaps him full across the face, and at the same time Fleur stands up.

“Zhat is a lie!” she says. Except that she doesn’t just say it, because there is something in her voice that makes it reverberate around the room. Her eyes are actually glinting and her hair is giving off pale sparks. “Ginny is my family! I love ‘er as I do my own sister! ‘Ow dare you suggest ozzerwise!”

While the rest of the room is held captive by Fleur’s beautiful and terrible anger, Ginny takes the opportunity to say quietly to Harry, “You never told me you loved me.”

“I know,” he says, his voice thick. “I meant to, only I’d never said it to anyone in my life before. And then I had to end it, and it would have been cruel. I’m sorry.” She can feel him bury his face in her hair.

“I love you, too,” she says, and means it. She reaches up and twists one hand in his hair.

He shakes his head, but says nothing.

This is what Ginny didn’t want. This was what she was trying to avoid. This is horrible. She looks up to see Malfoy watching them. He looks away as soon as their eyes meet.

Ginny's mother is starting to wake up.

"Mrs. Weasley," Hermione is saying. "Please, try to keep an open mind. There's really nothing wrong with Ginny liking girls--"

"Nothing wrong?" Molly repeats faintly. "It's Dark Arts, dear! My poor baby! We simply must Floo St. Mungo's..."

"They'll arrest her," says Hermione quietly.

"Don't be silly, Hermione, dear, she hasn't done anything wrong."

"Mum," says Ron, "she has. She's acted on it."

Ginny buries her face in her hands. She feels Harry stiffen slightly.

"Oh, dear," she hears her mother say. "Oh, my. Ron, you'd better Floo your father. Tell him everyone's safe, but it's an emergency."

The electricity created by Fleur's outrage is still palpable. However, the woman apparently has had enough. "Excuse me," she says, "I cannot watch you do zhis." Ginny hears her leave the room, and Bill's sigh as he follows her. A few minutes later, their raised voices can be heard distantly from the other side of the house.

Ginny raises her head to survey the room. Ron is gone, presumably to Floo their father. Mrs. Weasley is gazing sadly back at Ginny, who shrinks into Harry's arms and avoids her eyes. Hermione is leaning against the counter, a furious expression on her face, evidently lost in thought. Malfoy is sitting once again, staring down at his abandoned plate, muttering to himself. Abruptly, he looks up and announces, "Potter, I've changed my mind. I don't want to be on your side any more. You're all a bunch of nutters. If you lot have your way after this war, I'll never be allowed to have sex again. What kind of life is that, I ask

you? No, you'd better just kill me now if you're going to keep up with all this nonsense."

"Malfoy, that isn't funny," Hermione snaps. "And I swear that when I'm Minister of Magic, it'll be perfectly legal to be gay."

Malfoy stares at her. "You, Minister of Magic? That'll be the day, Granger. A Mu-"

"I'd advise you not to finish that sentence, Malfoy," comes Harry's threatening voice from behind Ginny.

Malfoy scowls back but says nothing.

"Er," says Ginny uncertainly, from the floor. "Can I leave? I think I'd like to go... lie down or something."

Molly hesitates.

"I'll keep an eye on her, Mrs. Weasley," Harry says, correctly, it seems, interpreting the pause.

Mrs. Weasley nods, and Harry releases Ginny. Ginny stands unsteadily, still feeling weak from crying and emotional exhaustion. She feels an immeasurable tiredness through to her core. Harry supports her from behind. Together they trudge up to Ginny's room.

It is a sign of Mrs. Weasley's state of mind that she would allow Ginny's boyfriend, even Harry, up to her room while she "lies down." Perhaps, Ginny thinks, she hopes that Ginny and Harry will get up to something, and that then they will be able to forget all of this.

Ginny sits on her bed, and Harry kneels beside her, elbows resting on the floral bedspread.

“You aren’t going to try that again, are you?” he says. For the first time today, Ginny looks at his face. He is not looking his best.

“Try what?”

He almost looks close to tears. “Killing yourself.”

She shakes her head. “No. I’m sorry about that. I... I won’t be trying it again. I probably wouldn't have even been able to go through with it.” She gives him a weak smile and changes the subject. “You look like you haven’t slept in weeks.”

“So do you,” he says. His eyes are large and green and so pretty, even when accompanied by purple rings under them.

“Harry,” she says, “let’s never be apart again.”

He shakes his head again. After a moment, he asks, “Are you really a lesbian?”

“I don’t know,” she says truthfully, painfully. Another wave of weariness hits her, and she falls back against the pillows, lying down properly on the bed.

She reaches out a hand and rests it on his arm. He doesn’t pull away, but he does turn his head away from her.

Ginny’s stomach clenches. She wants their old intimacy back. She wants him to climb into bed with her and just hold her until she falls asleep, not that they really had the chance to do much of that or anything during the short time they were together. It simply isn’t fair. She wants to scream at him, “Come back! Come back to me!” But she just swallows instead.

After a short silence, Harry says, “How did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“When you– When we—You faked it. You faked it so well.”

“Oh, Harry.”

“Were you thinking of someone else?”

“Harry, don’t. Please.” She buries her face in her pillow. She feels Harry’s hand stroking her hair.

“I’m sorry,” he says. Then, “What is your dad going to do?”

She doesn’t take her face out of the pillow. “I don’t know. I hope he doesn’t turn me in.”

Harry inhales sharply. “He wouldn’t do that, would he?”

“I don’t know.”

After a few moments more, Harry says, “You know, this is all pretty weird. I had no idea something like this could be such a big deal. I mean, in the Muggle world there are people who don’t approve, but even so I don’t think they would react quite this strongly. I mean, there certainly isn’t any sort of law against it. And, you know, a lot of people sort of accept it.”

“Well, that’s Muggles, isn’t it?” Ginny snaps. “Who knows why they do anything.” She turns her head to look at him, and is surprised to find him looking frightened.

“Is it really true, then?” he asks her. “Is it just because of that diary and everything?”

“It has to be.”

It is his turn to bury his face in his arms. She feels suddenly cold without his hand on her hair.

* * *

Draco has decided to leave the kitchen, and no one moves to stop him. He is fuming, and all the more so because he doesn’t know quite why he is so angry. Gryffindors are mad, they’re mad. He knows this, has been told this all his life, but somehow never grasped the full depths of their absurdity. On the one hand, they preach tolerance and acceptance of Mudbloods and Muggles and all manner of half-breeds, and yet they turn on their own for something as insignificant as sexual preference. Draco was always taught that it didn’t matter whom he chose to bed, as long as he chose someone with appropriate wealth and/or connections. Of course, it is preferred that as the sole male heir he procreate and carry on the family name, but there are ways and ways of doing that. The idea that it could matter so much who one slept with-- not even married, just slept with!-- is completely foreign to him. He had had some prior warnings, people telling him how they did things in Gryffindor, rumors of Hogwarts students removed from school by their parents and sent to reform schools in Northern Ireland. He had even studied the laws against “unnatural and Dark acts, including acts of perverse or homo- sexuality” while in primary school. He knows, too, that the eradication of such laws was all part of the plan for Voldemort’s new Britain. Some Death Eaters had joined him merely because of it.

And yet, coming face to face with it is still shocking. Potter’s friends, with all their self-righteous bullshit, cannot even put family before politics. It’s fucking horrible. Intolerable. Loathsome.

And then, when Draco has mastered his rage enough to be able to think straight, he wonders what this means for his plans with Potter. If Potter buys into even half of this shit, he will resist Draco with everything he’s got. .....Well, Draco will simply have to try harder, then. Failure is no longer an option. He is going to seduce the hell out of Potter, whether Potter’s friends like it or not.

* * *

Over an hour later, after Ginny and Harry have both fallen asleep, Hermione comes up and shakes them gently awake.

Harry wakes with a start, a word on his lips that dies before anyone can know what it was. Ginny sits up.

“Is my dad here?” she asks desperately. “What did he say?”

Hermione looks on the verge of tears. “Calm down, Ginny, it’s alright.” She places a hand on Ginny’s shoulder. “They just need some time. They.... They don’t want you in the house right now.”

Ginny swallows, and nods slowly.

Harry gapes at her. “What? Are you serious? How can they do that?”

Hermione shakes her head. “They’re very set in their ideas, Harry. I tried to talk them out of it, but they just won’t accept something like this in their family.”

“Even Ron?” Harry asks.

“Well, him I might be able to bring round. He still doesn’t approve, but he wants what’s best for Ginny.”

“Plus he wants to get in your pants,” says Ginny, a little more harshly than she means to.

Hermione flushes, but ignores the comment. “I think you should come with us, Ginny.”

Both girls turn to Harry. He closes his eyes, nods.

“Thank God,” says Ginny, before she can stop herself. “Harry, I can’t function without you.”

His eyes snap open. “You say that, but how can it be true? You can’t possibly love me the way you say you do. You can’t love me the way I love you. You can’t.”

She gasps. “How can you say that? I love you, Harry! You know I do. Just because I’m having some problems right now doesn’t mean my feelings have changed.”

“No,” says Harry coldly, “they haven’t. That’s just it. You never wanted me and you never will. You lied to me, pretended to be something you weren’t, made me believe that for once something was going right in my life...” Throughout his speech, his voice has grown louder and angrier, and by the end he is on his feet, glaring down at her and breathing quickly.

“Harry,” Hermione says, a little surprised, and more than a little disapproving.

“This isn’t what I wanted to happen at all,” Ginny cries. “I wasn’t trying to trick you, Harry, I swear! And I’ll get better! Once I get over this thing, then I’ll love you even more than I already do—which is a lot! I never meant to hurt you, I would never want to hurt you...” But Harry has already left, slamming the door behind him. Ginny cries into Hermione’s shoulder. It feels as if she’s been crying forever, and she doesn’t think she’ll ever be able to stop.

* * *

Draco is pacing the Weasleys' crowded, tacky living room when he hears an insistent, owl-like, tapping. He turns and sees a handsome raven at the window, waiting to be let in. He rushes to lift the sash, throwing the window open and letting the bird flap awkwardly onto the inside of the sill. Sure enough, the raven’s left leg is encircled with a tiny, almost undetectable, band bearing the Malfoy crest. The bird spreads its wings and beats them, and from in between the glossy black feathers a small piece of

parchment falls to the floor. Draco picks it up, unfolds it, and reads it quickly. It is from his mother:

Draco-

You will need to carry out the second mission that was discussed a year ago. Your father feels it is the only way. I'm sorry. He will know, when you have done it, and will ensure your safety thereafter.

Remember, we love you.

-Mother

Draco swallows hard and tears up the letter. He crosses the room and tosses the scraps into the fire as the raven beats its wings once more and retreats into the evening through the still-open window.

* * *

When he leaves the house with Potter, Granger, and the two Weasleys, Draco still hasn't decided.

If he stays with Potter, and Potter wins the war, Draco will be safe. His mother will be safe. If he's lucky, he will be able to save his father from Azkaban. Unless, of course, the Dark Lord catches wind of the fact that Draco is still alive and has not yet done away with Potter.

On the other hand, if he kills Potter, it is somewhat uncertain what will happen. The Dark Lord, though obviously wanting Potter dead, has never to Draco's knowledge actually directed anyone to kill Potter. Mostly he gives orders for Potter to be captured, or his friends to be killed or captured. Draco is unsure whether the Dark Lord wants only to kill Potter himself, as Snape said, or if doing it for him would bring Draco untold Death Eater glory.

Certainly killing Potter is less of an insult to Draco's dignity, though his pride is already shattered into

pieces. But Draco, though he can hardly admit it to himself, hates the idea of killing anybody. He is weak for a Slytherin and a Malfoy; when he was younger he fainted at the sight of blood, vomited after seeing his father perform the Cruciatus Curse on a lesser Death Eater...

Either way, Draco is going to have to do something incredibly distasteful.

* * *

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Chapter 4: Marked

Chapter Four

They travel to the old Black house in London. Draco has vague memories of visiting relatives in this house when he was very young. He doesn't quite follow the story of how it came to be in Potter's possession, but doesn't much care. He has other things to think about.

* * *

Ginny can't sleep, which is hardly surprising. She is worried about Harry, or more specifically, her relationship with Harry. She loves him; she knows she does. She wasn't faking.

When Ginny first suggested that they might take their relationship to the "next level," back at school, Harry resisted.

“I don’t think we should do it yet,” he said to her, up in his dormitory.

Ginny was shocked. Didn’t boys always want to have sex? Did this mean there was something wrong with her? “Why?” she asked. “If you’re worried about Ron--”

“Believe me, this has nothing to do with Ron,” said Harry firmly. “The idea of having sex with you hardly reminds me of him.”

“Well, that’s something, at least.” She sat down next to him on his bed. “So what is it, then?”

He looked very uncomfortable, determinedly not meeting her eye. “I just hate the idea of it. Not of you, I mean—you’re very... But that’s just it. I’ve heard Seamus and Dean talk about it, and I just hate the idea of doing that to you. Of hurting you, making you bleed like that...”

"Last week you bit me so hard I still have the mark."

"I know," he said, his eyes widening. "That's exactly it, don't you see? I never wanted to hurt you, Ginny."

She shrugged. "You didn't."

"You did scream a little," he said.

She flushed. "It was really more of a squeal. And anyway, I didn't mind."

Harry shook his head.

“Harry, this is all very sweet, but I want you to do it. I want to make love to you.”

He scoffed. “That’s a stupid euphemism for a horrible thing.”

“Horrible? What, did you have a bad experience or something? Because it’s supposed to be wonderful. I mean, that’s the whole point, you know.”

He didn’t answer for a long time. “I just don’t want to, okay?” he said finally.

But the next time they were alone together, it happened anyway. It is as if there are two sides to Harry: the real-life, everyday Harry who is a true Gryffindor hero; and the private, more animal Harry that used to bite her and liked it when she dug her nails into him. Ginny supposes that everyone shows a different face in the bedroom than in the rest of their lives, but in Harry the dichotomy is so pronounced as to border on neurosis.

After that first (indeed, the only) time, when they lay panting and tangled together on Harry's bed, slick with sweat and, yes, blood, Ginny said, "So is it just the talking about it that you don't like?"

Harry's face was turned away from her, as it often was after this sort of thing, as if he had had his fill of her and now wished she would just disappear. It always made her feel cold inside, but she reasoned that this was merely how he was. It never occurred to her until later that it might be his own actions he couldn't face.

He didn't answer her, then. All he said was, "I'm sorry."

"For what?" she asked. "No, please don't go." Harry had gotten up, and was starting to pull his clothes on.

"Your brother will be up here soon," said Harry. "You know, trying to keep things like this from happening."

"Look, if that's the reason why you're feeling so guilty-"

"It isn't," Harry cut her off sharply. "Now get dressed, I-"

"Harry," she said sadly, pleadingly.

The pain in her voice caught his attention, and he looked up from his shirt buttons. Their eyes met and his expression softened. "I'm sorry," he said, crossing the short distance between them to kneel before her and bury his face in her naked lap. She stroked his hair and felt the pleasant warmth of his breath between her legs. He kissed her softly. It was a kiss meant to comfort her, a kiss of tenderness, not exactly a sexual one. She thrilled at the worshipful touch.

He raised his head, his mouth now stained with her blood, and touched his lips, stared at the red that came away on his fingers. She bent down and drew him into a kiss, tasted her own blood and gripped his hair, tangled in her hands. He clung to her for a few moments, but the spell was broken by a knock on the door. Harry broke away and staggered drunkenly to his feet, wiping his mouth furiously.

"Harry, come on," came Dean's voice. "You've got to be done by now. You can't honestly expect us to believe you've that much stamina." He sniggered, and was joined in his amusement by what had to be Seamus.

Ginny recovered herself quickly and shouted back, "Really, Dean, just because you're early doesn't mean everyone else is."

Harry jumped a little and shot her a glare. "How would you know that?" he hissed. Ginny felt the heat rush to her face, even as she pulled her clothes on. She didn't answer, however, and Harry let it drop. He must know that she hadn't merely acquired all her skills through talk.

Once they were both decent, and Harry had magicked any trace of blood from the sheets with a well-practiced charm, he left, pushing past his roommates and leaving Ginny behind. When she made

her way down to the common room, he had gone.

And after that, when real life had come between them once again, Harry was more distant than ever. He hardly touched her from then until the day of Dumbledore's funeral. Ginny still doesn't understand why Harry would act that way. She feels she no longer understands anything he does. And now he doesn't want to talk to her at all. And it is all her fault, really, for being weak and not being able to cope with a few strange urges brought on by Tom Riddle and Harry's absence.

Because it really does get better when she is with Harry. She has never liked anyone the way she likes him. She wishes, often, that she were more like him. She wishes she were exactly like him. She used to steal his clothes to sleep in, or even to wear under her own.

Sometimes she looks back and wonders if all these feelings are coming from the way he rescued her from the Chamber of Secrets. He did, after all, save her from death, nearly being killed himself in the process. To her he is more than a hero; he is her personal savior. She doesn't like to dwell on such thoughts, however, because she doesn't like to think that her love is merely some sort of damsel-in-distress complex. She also doesn't like to remember how horribly weak and stupid she was. So abysmally stupid...

* * *

That night, Draco finds Potter sitting alone at the windowsill in the living room. He turns his head as Draco approaches, then goes back to staring out the window.

Draco moves in as close as he dares, and leans his shoulder casually against the wall next to Potter. "You're sitting alone in the dark, looking out a window when you can't see a bloody thing. Something bothering you, Potter?"

Potter doesn't answer, but glances at the clock across the room just in time for it to strike twelve with a sound like cathedral bells. Draco stiffens. He watches Potter sit tensely through what seems like ages of bells, before the clock finally reaches the twelfth note, and the room is filled with ringing silence.

“Well, there it is,” Potter says. “I’m seventeen. Now’s your big chance, you know.”

“Big chance for what?” Draco asks innocently, though he knows exactly what Potter is talking about. It’s a bit of an awkward situation, actually. He moves experimentally towards Potter, who flinches and whips his head around to look at him. “Are you actually scared, Potter?” Draco quickly covers up his delight, masking it in a frown. “You don’t trust me?”

Potter laughs. “Why on earth would I trust you? You’re a Death Eater, and I’m Harry Potter. The math doesn’t work out, you see.”

“Yes, I see,” says Draco darkly. It is absolutely killing him that his situation prevents him from properly mocking Potter the way he so desperately deserves to be mocked. But he has to gain Potter’s trust somehow.

The walk to the kitchen seems to take forever. Draco is tired of this game he is playing with Potter, tired of the pretending and terrified of everything he is going to do, and more terrified of what might happen if he doesn’t do it. He comforts himself with the thought that, eventually, everything will be over. He only has to charm Potter until his parents are safe, and then it doesn’t matter what happens to him. Draco takes a moment to wonder when he stopped caring about his own life, in favor of his family. He supposes it can be traced back to the very moment when he first dropped to his knees in front of Potter a few days ago, though it seems like years. In that split second before he made his decision to beg, he had decided to place his family before himself, because after that there could be no return to dignity, and therefore no meaning to his life.

Coming to the kitchen counter, Draco selects the largest of the butcher’s knives. If he’s going to do this, he’s going to do it right.

When Draco reenters the living room, he is pleased to see Potter look up at him with something like fear in his eyes.

“So you are going to do it,” Potter says. “Aren’t you ashamed that you have to resort to Muggle weaponry? A kitchen knife, no less. Don’t only your servants touch that sort of thing?” He smiles, his expression closed. There is something in his voice, however, that gives Draco pause. A sort of resigned

sadness.

“Relax, Potter,” Draco spits. The taunt about his wand has wounded him slightly. “I’m not going to kill you.”

“Oh, how polite of you,” Potter says. “What are you-”

But Draco interrupts. “I told you I’d cut off my left arm if you didn’t like the Dark Mark. Did you think I didn’t mean it?” He holds out his arm, the Mark glowing red, raw and shining from the effects of not answering the Dark Lord’s calls. He grips the knife in his right hand, slightly awkwardly as it is not his dominant side, and positions the blade just below his left elbow, in the soft pale flesh of the crook of his arm.

Potter stares. “You’re mad. You can’t do that with that knife—You’d have to saw your way through--”

Draco is furious. “Don’t doubt me, Potter,” he hisses. He raises the knife. He waits for Potter to stop him, but the other boy doesn’t move an inch. He is looking hard into Draco’s eyes.

“You’re not going to do it,” Potter says. “You’re not going to hurt yourself for me or anybody. You’re a Malfoy.”

That does it. Now Draco has no choice. He has to carry through, if only to prove Potter wrong. Before he can think better of it, he brings the knife down swiftly—

“STOP!” Potter yells. He has leapt up and has one restraining arm on each of Draco’s. But he is a split-second too late. Blood pours from Draco’s arm with every beat of his heart. The cut isn’t very deep, but it is in the right spot, it seems. Draco feels rather dizzy. “Jesus Christ,” says Potter, pressing his bare palm hard against the wound in a vain attempt the staunch the blood which leaks and slips out from under his hand, soaking both of their clothing. “Jesus fucking Christ. You’re insane.” Actually, Draco notes, Potter looks more than a little disturbed. He might even be on the verge of tears.

Draco realizes he is still holding the knife, and drops it. This allows Potter to take a hand off of Draco's wrist and pull his wand out of his pocket.

Draco feels cheated. "You had your wand the whole time?" he says, slurring slightly. "You bastard. You were just going to curse me into oblivion if I tried to kill you--"

"You think I would be down here alone and unarmed? Now shut up a moment; I need to concentrate."

"Why? What are you doing?" cries Draco in alarm, as Potter points his wand at the injury. "No, don't try to heal it yourself! No, I want Granger. Can't we get Granger? She's tops in the class, isn't she? GRANGER! Help, he's slaughtering me! Ow!"

"Stop being such a baby!" Potter shouts in frustration as he is unable to heal Draco's wound, due to his patient's desperate attempts to escape his wand.

"What on earth is going on?" Granger has appeared next to them, pulling on a dressing gown. "Oh my God, where did all this blood come from? Harry, did you use that horrible spell on him again?"

"Granger, thank God. Please, make him stop. I don't trust him. He's going to screw up my arm. You do it! Quick, I'm dying!"

"Oh for goodness sake, you're not dying!" Potter tells him. "And no, Hermione, I did not curse him; the mad bugger did this to himself."

"To himself?" says Granger.

"What did you call me, Potter?" Draco says sharply.

“Oh, hush,” says Granger. She is already working over Draco’s arm with her wand, a steady beam of faint yellow light pouring into his wound, slowly stemming the flow of scarlet.

Potter is looking considerably put-out. Draco watches him wipe his bloodied hand on his pajama bottoms, his shirt hopelessly drenched. “Malfoy,” he says, “you’ve gotten blood all over my carpet.”

“You’re the one who dared me to do it,” Draco snarls at him, flinching as Hermione completes the healing spell with a jerk of her wand.

“Okay,” says Granger sternly. “Someone needs to start explaining exactly what happened here.”

“Malfoy apparently felt he had something to prove,” says Potter, looking sidelong at Draco.

Draco cradles his arm. Really, Granger has done a fantastic job patching it up. That doesn’t stop it from hurting, however. “He accused me of trying to kill him.” He tries to look hurt that Potter would even imagine such a thing.

Granger glances at the clock. “To be honest, I am a bit surprised you were down here alone with him, Harry. Considering that you’re not protected anymore.”

“Oh, he had his wand the whole time,” Draco says. “He was trying to test me.”

“Ah,” says Granger sagely. “I see. So you decided to try and prove your loyalty by cutting off your arm? Only you thought Harry would stop you, and he didn’t. So now we know that Harry can trust Malfoy, but Malfoy can’t trust Harry, is that right?” She looks between the two of them.

Potter is looking a little green. “I did stop him, I tried...” he whispers desperately. “I didn’t think he would actually...” He swallows.

Draco is fascinated by this new development. Potter is actually feeling guilty for not intervening sooner. Is this a sign that Snape may have been telling the truth? Or is it just more Gryffindorish, Boy-Who-Lived nonsense about being nice to everyone?

Potter looks away from the other two, and quietly casts a spell to clean the blood off the carpet. He looks thoroughly ashamed of himself.

“You know,” Granger says to Draco. “You ought to be more careful. You could have died.”

He gapes at her. “Since when do you care if I die?” So it is all Gryffindor nonsense.

Granger rolls her eyes. “If you’re dead, how are we supposed to use that wonderful library of yours?”

Draco smirks. Maybe not nonsense, then. “Granger, you could have been in Slytherin.”

Apparently, she knows a rare compliment when she hears one. “Thank you,” she says, with dignity.

The Weasel appears at the top of the staircase. “Hermione? Harry? Is everything okay?”

“Quite some bodyguards you’ve got here, Potter,” says Draco. “Twenty minutes after you get killed Weasley’ll be right there to save you!”

“Fuck off, Malfoy,” Potter says despondently.

“Everything’s fine, Ron,” Granger calls up to him. “I told you I’d tell you if anything was wrong.”

“But then you didn’t come back, so I wondered.”

“It’s fine, I’ll be up in a minute.” Granger watches Weasley retreat back upstairs, a small sort of smile on her face. Then she turns back to Potter and Draco, and flushes. “For goodness sakes, Harry, we were talking!”

Potter doesn’t say anything, but Draco catches a glimpse of his expression before it gets hidden away. It’s a strange mixture of hurt and affection.

“Well,” says Granger, “I don't have enough skill to heal it completely. We're going to need some bandages or something, to make sure this doesn’t open up again.”

“I think we have some in the pantry,” Potter says quickly, obviously eager to get out of the room. “I’ll go fetch them.”

As soon as he has gone, Hermione whirls on Draco and grasps him by the collar, baring her teeth in a manner that reminds him forcibly of the time she slapped him in third year. Stunned by this sudden change in demeanor, Draco can only stare back at her as she hisses at him.

“What the fuck do you think you’re playing at, Malfoy?” she whispers. “Fucking with his emotions like that.”

Draco starts to panic. How on earth does she know—he hasn’t even really started yet – Did Potter tell her about last night? “Granger, what are talking abou-”

“Trying to cut your arm off right in front of him? When only a few hours ago Ginny tried to slit her wrists? If you ever pull something like this again, Draco Malfoy... If you ever come close to hurting him again... I will personally execute you. Do you understand?”

Draco nods mutely. Granger releases him just as Potter returns.

“I couldn’t find proper bandages, so I got a bit of cheese cloth...” Potter looks up, his eyes traveling from Granger’s flushed face to Draco’s, which he quickly tries to rearrange to hide his fear. Still, he knows he must look paler than usual. “Everything alright?” Potter says suspiciously.

“Yes, fine,” Granger says, a little too quickly. She is a terrible liar, and Potter’s eyes narrow even further, but he apparently chooses to ignore the issue for the time being, and walks over to Draco.

“Hold out your arm,” he says. Draco does so obediently, not wishing at the moment to have Granger’s hands on him unnecessarily, even though he still rather feels that she is far better qualified than Potter. Even if she is a Mudblood.

Draco doesn’t flinch when Potter touches him. After all, he is going to have to get used to it. Potter wraps the cloth tenderly around Draco’s arm, carefully avoiding the Dark Mark. Granger watches for a moment, then says, “Well, I’m off to bed. Goodnight, and no more blood, okay?” She doesn’t wait for an answer before heading back upstairs.

“I can’t believe you actually did it,” says Potter quietly. “I was sure you wouldn’t...”

Draco is silent.

“Look,” says Potter. “I don’t think I ever told you, I’m sorry about last year, that time in the bathroom when I ... I didn’t mean to do it. I didn’t even know what that spell did.”

“You didn’t know what it did?” Draco asks, interested. Potter just nods guiltily.

Potter is taking an inordinate amount of time to tie up Draco’s bandages. Draco sees his opportunity and takes it.

“So do you believe all those things Weasley was saying earlier, about two girls or two blokes together?”

Potter hesitates, doesn’t look at Draco. “... No,” he says.

“You don’t sound too sure.”

Potter still doesn’t take his hands off Draco’s arm. He shrugs.

“Well,” says Draco carefully, “does it feel evil to you?”

Potter closes his eyes, and his grip tightens convulsively. “Yes,” he whispers.

Draco is surprised, but recovers quickly. “So you admit you do feel it?”

Potter flushes and his eyes snap open. “Well, you did practically attack me last night. What was I supposed to think?”

Draco grins at him. “I think that knot is tied pretty well by now, don’t you?”

Potter’s blush deepens, and he quickly releases Draco, stepping back.

And now Draco understands the game. He should have caught on much quicker, but his sheer unwillingness to do things this way had held him back. When he had first come to Potter’s house to ask for sanctuary, he had hoped that Potter would just do what he wanted with Draco, and the Slytherin would be able to just close his eyes and submit, however sick it made him. But now he understands that Potter wants to be dominated. Draco is going to have to keep pursuing Potter, keep pushing him, until he gives in. This involves a whole other level of acting, and a good deal more effort. He might even have to

pretend to be in love with Potter.

So Draco steps forward as Potter steps back, until Potter's back is against the wall. "What are you afraid of?" he says softly. But in truth, Potter doesn't look scared. His eyes are wide, but they are locked on Draco. He doesn't resist when Draco crosses the short distance between them, or when he touches his lips to Potter's. And when Potter sighs softly and Draco takes the opportunity to push his tongue into the other boy's mouth, Potter's response is eager.

Potter reaches up to grip Draco's hair and moans into his mouth. Draco pushes him more firmly against the wall, bringing his knee up between Potter's legs.

Abruptly, Potter pushes Draco away. Hard. Draco staggers backwards, and looks up to see Potter still fixing him again with that intense, wide-eyed, almost hungry look.

"You could still do it, you know," Potter says. "I won't be expecting it now. You could do it any time."

That is it. "What the fuck, Potter? Honestly, do you want me to kill you? What is wrong with you?"

"You could at least try," says Potter.

"What?"

Potter dives forward and scoops the abandoned knife from the floor, pushes it into Draco's hands. There is definitely something wrong with him.

"There is definitely something wrong with you," Draco informs him.

"Yeah, I know," says Potter. "Just do it, would you?" He grasps Draco's hands in his own, curled around the knife's handle. Potter guides the point to a spot right over his heart. "Do it," he says again. The blade

has already torn a small rent in his t-shirt. “You don’t even have to go very deep—just do it a little. Come on.”

Draco doesn’t want to. But he has no choice. Potter’s hands are still firmly gripping his, and the Gryffindor (mad, mad Gryffindor!) pushes down in one sweeping motion, creating a long, shallow cut across his chest.

Potter gasps again, touching the cut, and then seizes Draco, his hands on either side of Draco’s face, and pulls him into a deep kiss.

Draco feels blood on his cheeks, feels it warm on his shirt, adding to his own. Then Potter moves his hands and Draco knows that it is now in his hair. His hair! He would pull away and scream and run for a shower, except he remembers he has no choice. No choice but to be here, his tongue in Potter’s mouth, pretending to like it, murmuring and reaching his hands down Potter’s jeans. He fights away the image of the boy he is betraying.

Potter makes a little noise when Draco’s hand comes in contact with his hard cock, and he bites down hard on Draco’s neck. Draco is quite sure that Potter has broken the skin, but he forces himself to ignore the pain and make his hands keep doing what they are doing.

When Potter comes, he bites again, this time on Draco’s shoulder and Draco can see the blood and he feels sick and then Potter is panting and leaning against him and saying, “Malfoy, this never happened.”

Draco nods mutely.

Later, after Potter has cleaned up everything with a wave of his wand and gone off to bed, Draco locks himself in the bathroom and cries on the floor. He has never felt so disgusted with himself.

* * *

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Chapter 5: Marked

Chapter Five

The next morning, Ginny creeps in to Harry's room while he is still sleeping. She meant to just peek in and watch him sleep and think about how much she wants him and get a respite from all her other, disturbing, desires. She sits down cross-legged on the old oriental rug, just by his bed.

Most people look peaceful when they sleep, and perhaps so did Harry, once. But now the corners of his mouth turn down naturally in his dreams, and sometimes he makes little sounds of distress. This morning is no exception. As she watches, he curls up into a tight ball and begins to tremble. Carefully, she leans forward enough to pull the blankets up over his shoulders.

Feeling slightly guilty for sneaking in and, uninvited, seeing him so vulnerable like this, she stands up. As she turns to leave, however, her eye catches on one of his shirts lying on the floor. She knows it's a little strange, now that they are no longer technically together, but perhaps she could, for old times' sake...

Before she can think better of it, she tosses her own, rather girly, pajama top aside and slips the gigantic shirt over her head, reveling in the scent of him, familiar and exciting at once, and shivering pleasurably at the slide of the soft fabric against her bare skin. The garment buries her. In truth, she and Harry would be about the same size if either of them wore clothes that actually fit them, but when Harry isn't in uniform he is always in his cousin's old cast-offs, despite the sizable sums in his two Gringotts vaults, and Ginny is still wearing clothes from several years ago, before her figure completely filled out. It is a wonder, actually, that Mrs. Weasley lets Ginny out of the house at all with breasts straining against too-small shirts and skirts that she has to keep tugging on just to preserve the last remnants of her modesty. Ginny privately thinks that this is why so many boys at Hogwarts seem to like her.

Harry's clothes, on the other hand, are so comfortable that she could live in them. And they smell so

much like him that the feeling evoked is almost intoxicating. Sighing in happiness, she looks around and sees Harry's glasses on the nightstand. She has never tried them on before, but now the impulse is too much to resist. (And there is so much she has been resisting these days, so much she has wanted and couldn't take...) She pads back over to Harry's bedside and picks up his glasses, sliding them onto her face in a surprisingly familiar motion. She has watched Harry do it so many times that it doesn't feel foreign to her at all. Still, the cold metal thrills against her skin. She moves over to the mirror, nearly tripping over herself in the process, so distorted and rounded is the world through the spectacles. She has to squint in the mirror to see herself.

She hears Harry moving around in the bed behind her and spins around, caught. She suddenly realizes, with a hot rush of guilt, that she has gone too far. Harry found it amusing when she used to try on his clothes back at school, but doing it in secret, when she isn't his girlfriend anymore...

"Ron?" says Harry. "What-- I can't find my glasses." He is squinting and reaching around on the nightstand. Ginny briefly considers fleeing before he can correctly identify her, but knows that it would be stupid and pointless.

Instead, she takes the glasses off, crosses the room once more, and hands them to him. "They're here."

"Ginny?" He puts the spectacles on quickly, staring up at her. "What are you doing?" She sees his eyes travel over his own shirt. She tries to read his expression. He is surprised, she can tell, and hurt. Then it changes into something like a dawning comprehension. "What are you doing here?" he repeats, and this time his voice is terribly hollow.

"Erm..." She can think of nothing to say. "Er, I was borrowing a shirt?" This is, of course, ridiculous, as Hermione or even Ron would have better-fitting clothes.

Harry looks away, and Ginny fancies she can actually feel him slipping away from her like water, inevitably drawn away by something more cruel than gravity.

"Look," she says desperately. "I'm in love with you. How many times do I have to say it?"

There is a moment's pause. "Never again," he says, without expression. "Please don't ever say it again. It's a lie."

Ginny stands frozen for a moment. Then bursts out, "How can you say that? I'll do anything for you. I'll give you everything I have, all of me. I'm yours. My body, my blood..."

Harry shivers, and then shakes his head. "Please. Just go."

"Fine." Fighting tears of frustration and rejection and heartbreak, she pulls off his shirt and throws it violently to the floor.

He glances at her, and then does a double take. She has forgotten she wasn't wearing anything underneath the shirt save her pajama bottoms, and she sees Harry close his eyes and shift the blankets to better cover his lap, shaking his head once more.

If he wants her, he should take her. Ginny doesn't see how it's fair that he should deny them both what they want.

Softly, she whispers his name and climbs onto the bed, straddling him.

He chokes, and it is almost a sob. "You don't want me," he whimpers into her ear, and then gasps as she moves her hips.

"Don't tell me what I want and don't want." She bites his neck and tastes blood.

"Fine, then. I don't want you."

She stops, raising herself to her hands and knees. His hips arch up in protest at the broken contact, and he wraps his hands around her waist to pull her back down. She almost enjoys the pained look of

frustrated lust and helplessness on his face. "Your body disagrees," she says, then obligingly presses close to him once more, as close as possible, trying to eliminate every slightest distance between them. She has thought before, in crazed and heated moments like this, when her mind rushes furiously in the rhythm of bodies and she just wants to be part of him, that she would cut off her breasts just so their hearts could be closer together.

Harry is holding her tight now, burying his face in her neck, in her hair. She comes before he does, but doesn't stop grinding her hips against his, keeping up the blessed friction through soaked pajamas. When he does come, it is with a little cry that sounds like "No," and he grips her even more tightly for a moment before slumping back against the pillows and bringing his hands up to cover his face. And he really is sobbing now, though he bites his lip so that the only sign is the uncontrollable shaking of his chest.

Ginny runs a hand through his hair. "It's alright, love."

"Go away," he says through his hands. "Just leave me alone."

"What? Harry, I--"

"GO AWAY!" he shouts in the voice that by now everyone knows means that Harry Potter is truly angry.

Ginny topples backward off the bed, and even in that moment isn't sure whether it is out of shock or if he has pushed her. All she knows is that she is now on the floor and Harry is standing on the other side of the bed, clutching his shoulders, his red and teary face turned towards the floor. She doesn't see that she has any choice. She scrambles to her feet and runs for the door.

Once out in the hallway, the door closed firmly at her back, she realizes she has left her top on his floor. She is so shocked and numb that she hardly cares. Still, she folds her arms across her chest and rushes to her room. Thankfully, she runs into no one on the way.

Once on her own bed, Ginny lies with her face down in the pillows. What has she done? Hurting Harry was always the last thing she wanted to do, but somehow she fucked up and made him more upset than

she has ever seen him.

* * *

Draco wakes up and instantly wishes he hadn't as the full force of all that has happened in the past months bears down on him. He had been enjoying a pleasant dream involving himself and the team of house-elves he'd had as servants as a child. In the dream he literally made them jump through hoops of fire, and it was great fun. Still, there's no point staying in bed trying to recapture the dream, so he wearily gets to his feet and begins to dress, wondering if there are house-elves in the afterlife and, if so, whether he will still be able to boss them around. What he tries not to think about, of course, is the events of last night, the last shreds of his much-abused dignity trampled, all sense of self-worth and any possibility of happiness gone forever.

Well, perhaps not all possibility of happiness. There are still Fizzing Whizbees.

He checks his fake smile in the mirror before leaving the bedroom, although this is hardly necessary. He has been polishing this very smile since he was old enough to be told to do it. His mother tells him it is irresistibly charming, and with the exception of a certain house at Hogwarts, he has found no evidence to the contrary in people's reactions to it.

But Potter isn't at breakfast to receive Draco's Charming Smile. Draco scowls at the only person who is in the kitchen, eating porridge and drinking coffee over the Daily Prophet.

"Where is everyone?" Draco asks her.

Granger shrugs. "Asleep, I suppose."

"Did you and Weasley get any sleep at all?" Draco inquires innocently, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

"Oh, very funny. You aren't nearly as witty as you think you are, you know."

"I very much doubt that. For example, I am clever enough to notice that you didn't answer my question, despite your misguided attempts to distract me by attacking my personal skills of rapport."

Granger raises an eyebrow at him as he takes the seat across from her. "To answer your question, yes. We did get some sleep. And, as I said before, we were just talking."

Draco thinks of a dozen witty comments bursting to be said aloud at this, but before he can decide which one to go with, the moment is gone and he would look stupid if he said anything now. Instead, he asks, "What's the big news today?" He caught a glimpse of the scrolling red headline earlier, something the Prophet did only for particularly important events.

"Azkaban's fallen," says Granger darkly. "Of course, it wasn't very hard for Voldemort to take it, considering the Dementors are back on his side."

Draco says, after considering her bowed head for a moment, "I don't understand how you of all people can dare to say his name. I mean, you're a Mudblood. You'll be the first to go after he takes over."

"Actually," says she, "Harry would be first to go. And if I'm doomed anyways, what would be the point in being afraid to use his name? Everyone who knows anything about names knows that it gives you power over someone to call them by their true name. So perhaps I should call him Tom Riddle? Is that what you're suggesting?"

"Tom Riddle? Who's Tom Riddle?"

Granger looks up and grins at him. "Why, that would be your friend Voldemort's birth name. Didn't you know?"

"That's stupid," Draco pronounces forcefully, knowing how childish he sounds. "There isn't any noble bloodline called Riddle."

"Actually, there is," says Granger, grinning more broadly still. "Only you won't have heard of it, as it's a Muggle one."

Draco rolls his eyes. "Oh, here we go again. Are you still going to insist that the Dark Lord is a common Mudblood like you?"

"I don't think I would ever suggest that he's like me. But if he's of such noble blood, then what family is he from?"

"Well," says Draco uncomfortably. "No one really knows, do they? But most people sort of figure he's from one of the Old families, like the Gaunts or the Starks or the Wellers. And, of course, he's the heir of Slytherin."

"Of course," says Granger. "And you are right about the Gaunts, I'll give you that. But his father was a Riddle and a Muggle."

"Look, Granger, if my father doesn't know for sure what the Dark Lord's parentage is, then you sure as hell wouldn't."

"You keep believing what you want, Malfoy. But the truth is that Harry learned a lot more about Voldemort from Dumbledore than you could ever hope to know."

Draco scowls at her. She folds up the newspaper and puts it aside. "Today we start our research on the objects historically used as Horcruxes," she announces.

* * *

At noon, Hermione decides that enough is enough, and goes to wake Harry. She knocks on his door. "Harry? Wake up! It's noon, for heaven's sake! We have work to do."

"I am awake," Harry's voice comes faintly.

Worried by his tone, Hermione opens the door and steps in, carefully shutting the door behind her. Harry is lying on the bed, staring up at the canopy, with one arm thrown over his forehead. It is his classic sign of brooding melancholy. Hermione comes and sits at the foot of the bed. He draws up his knees to make room for her, another customary gesture, meaning he is ready to talk, but only to her. She lays a hand on his knees and rests her chin there, studying his face, waiting for him to begin.

"Ginny was in here," Harry says. "She was here when I woke up."

"Ah. I thought I saw her shirt on the floor."

"Yeah, she left it here. Don't tell Ron, will you?"

"I think he might be pleased, considering the way he's been treating her," says Hermione bitterly. Then she waits for Harry's explanation, because she knows it is coming. She doesn't need to scold him, though she has the urge, for taking advantage of Ginny's vulnerable state. At least, not until she hears the whole story.

"She took her shirt off because she was trying on mine," Harry says slowly. "While I was asleep. She stole my glasses, too."

"Oh." Hermione ponders this. "So nothing happened?"

Harry shifts uncomfortably. "Well, it sort of did, after that. But I didn't.... I didn't want to. She wouldn't stop, though, and well, after that I didn't want her to. But I can't-- Argh, I hate this! That was the last time-- it has to be. Or else I'll go mad."

"You know," says Hermione. "She might not be a lesbian. Have you considered that? She might like girls and boys. It's called being bisexual."

"Hermione, I know what a bisexual is! No, she doesn't love me. She's just obsessed. It's like.... It's almost like she wants to be me or something."

"Oh," says Hermione, as the pieces begin to fall into place. "Ohhh. You know, Harry, I think you may be right."

He looks at her. "About what?"

"That she wants to be you."

There is silence for a moment, and then Harry says, "You really think so? I mean, I just said that. I didn't mean... Who would want to be me?"

"Stop it. You know it makes sense. I can't believe I didn't see it before. She's been obsessed since the age of ten, maybe longer! Always going on about you, training to be a Seeker even though she's better as a Chaser, her short-lived crush on Cho Chang that ended when you broke up.... Her accent has even changed a little, have you noticed? She talks more like you. And Ron says he once found her looking at that photo album of your parents."

Harry groans. "Oh my God."

"You did save her, in the Chamber of Secrets. Maybe she just wants to be able to save herself, and this is

her psyche's weird way of expressing it."

"This absolutely sucks," Harry says miserably. "What am I supposed to do?" He looks at her, his eyes wide and bearing the marks of recent tears.

Hermione feels her heart break for him. "I don't know," she says, and feels it has never been more true. "I don't know what we're supposed to do." And that wasn't quite his question, but he says nothing.

* * *

Later that day, Draco is still sitting at the kitchen table, pretending to read the book Granger has forced upon him. She is across from him, and also at the table are Weasley and Potter. The latter has not so much as looked at Draco all day, but then again he seems to have fallen into one of his famous Moods and isn't even really talking to his friends. The Weaslette is nowhere in sight.

"Malfoy, stop staring into space," Granger snaps at him. "Do some work or we'll throw you out." She glowers at him, her hair frazzled from running her fingers through it in frustration.

He scowls back and, just to irritate her, says, "And how much progress have you made?"

She huffs angrily, snapping one of the several books spread out in front of her shut with a bang. "All you have to read is English. I'm trying to translate Latin. So don't talk."

Draco glances at the book she has just shut and realizes it is a Latin dictionary. "Are you serious?" he laughs. "You're that bad at Latin?"

She flushes crimson. The Weasel says, "What, I suppose you're fluent?"

"Of course I am. I wasn't born in a barn, you know. Wait a minute... D'you mean none of you know

Latin?" Draco is genuinely shocked.

"Not everyone has private tutors, Malfoy," says Granger, with an almost Malfoy-worthy scowl.

"How do you do spells, then?" Draco starts to laugh. "Oh my God, do you, like, memorize each one separately? Ha!"

They all glare at him. Granger says, "If you're so knowledgeable, you get to read the Latin books." She shoves the whole pile before her over to him. "Have fun." Draco tries his best to give a Withering Look, but the truth is that he actually does quite enjoy reading Latin.

He hasn't so much as identified the indirect object of the first sentence, however, when they are interrupted as someone enters the room. Draco looks up to see their former Defense Against the Dark Arts professor.

"Professor Lupin!" The others all seem very pleased to see him. Potter almost smiles.

"Hello," Lupin smiles wanly, nodding to them. He turns to Draco. "Hello, Mr. Malfoy. I was pleased to hear that you were with us."

Draco regards him suspiciously. Lupin is looking worse than ever, still in the same shabby clothes and premature wrinkles, the permanent rings under his eyes even darker now. But he smiles politely at Draco, so Draco sneers politely back, and nods his head in acknowledgment. He can’t exactly risk offending Potter’s friends, now can he?

Lupin takes the seat Granger offers him. She asks, "What brings you here? Not that we don't appreciate the visit, mind you. Is there any.... news we should know about?"

He shakes his head. "Nothing you won't have read in the papers. Actually," he says, "I've just returned from a mission and I stopped by the Burrow to talk with your father," he nods towards Weasley, "and

Molly asked me, well, pleaded was more like it, to come here and try to talk some sense into Ginny, as she put it." Lupin's tone is neutral, if a little cold.

Draco, in keeping with the fashion of the afternoon, slams his book shut. "Not more of this rubbish! You're mad! You're all bloody mad!" He thwacks the book against the edge of the table to emphasize his point. "Why the fuck do you care who she shags?"

Weasley glares at him, Potter gives him a sidelong glance, and Granger raises her eyebrows, one corner of her mouth quirking up into a half-smile. Lupin blinks, and says, "Actually, Draco, I agree with you."

It is everyone else's turn to be surprised. "You do?" Weasley says incredulously.

"Yes, which is why I decided to come here to talk to you all. Nothing I say will change Molly and Arthur's minds, and perhaps you, too, have your minds made up, but I ask you all to consider the other side of the issue. Where is Ginny?"

The Weasel stands up, shaking his head slowly. "No. I can't... What you're saying is... It goes against everything I've learned."

"Weren't you also taught that werewolves were savage creatures?" Lupin asks quietly, and a little sadly.

Weasley, looking extremely uncomfortable, does not meet his eyes.

"Ron," says Granger, "If you can't trust Lupin..."

"What if he told you that Dark Magic was okay?" Weasley says harshly, through clenched teeth. "That really Death Eaters were a bunch of really decent guys that were just misunderstood?" He turns to Lupin. "I'm sorry, but I can't let you talk to my sister if you're just going to tell her that it's okay for her to be... how she is."

"What is it going to take to change your mind, Ron!" Granger explodes. "Can't you at least consider that you might be wrong? Can't you at least try to think about this logically?"

"I am thinking about it logically! And no, Hermione, nothing will change my mind."

Draco scoffs. "Mad Gryffindor git. How can you stand there and say that you'd rather call your sister a freak and a monster, keep her locked up and miserable and scared of who she is, than even listen to another point of view? If you're so right, then why are you so afraid of hearing the werewolf out?"

Weasley has by now turned redder than his despicable hair. "She's dangerously close to not fighting it anymore." He looks around. "Can't you see that, any of you? Riddle is taking her over. She needs help fighting him, not giving in. What is wrong with all of you? Harry, surely you know what it's doing to her, where it's coming from?"

Up to this point, Potter has been watching silently, betraying no reaction to what was being said save his slightly bowed head, which he raises now. His eyes dart towards Draco before settling on his best friend. "I think you're right," he says slowly, deliberately. (Granger, looking shocked, hisses, "Harry!" but he continues, ignoring her.) "But I want to hear what Lupin says, and I think Ginny should, too. Maybe... maybe it isn't what we think, not completely."

After a moment's solemn consideration, the Weasel takes his seat once more. "Alright."

"I'll fetch her; she's probably in her room," says Granger, rising.

While they wait for her return, Lupin says, "I'm glad you've agreed to listen. I only hope that you will keep an open mind. Just because they do something in Slytherin doesn't make it wrong."

"You're fucking right, it doesn't," Draco mutters. He keeps one eye on Potter, as always, but Potter is still impassive, his mouth turned down slightly into a not-quite frown.

Granger reenters the room, the Weaslette trailing behind, with pink cheeks and eyes on the floor. And now Potter shifts uncomfortably and folds his arms tightly across his chest, determinedly not looking at his ex-girlfriend.

Once Granger and the Weaslette are seated, Lupin begins.

"Homosexuality is not a Dark Art. The belief that only Dark wizards practice it is an old one, beginning famously some thousand years ago with Salazar Slytherin, who, as I'm sure Draco could tell you, had a well-known taste for adolescent boys."

"But Slytherin wasn't a Dark wizard," Granger interrupts.

"No," Lupin agrees, "not exactly. But he was the only one of the founders who wished the Dark Arts to be taught at Hogwarts. You wouldn't find that part in Hogwarts: A History, for the same reason you won't find any mention of his philandering. The school does not want it known that one of its founders supported such things. But at the time this was all widely known, and many people saw his actions as unnatural. Remember, there was still a lot of superstition back then and people were afraid of what was different. They started to refer to homosexuals as being 'in the Slytherin way' and as the rift between Slytherin and the other houses grew, so did the divide between homosexuals and people who accepted them, and the majority of the wizards, who disapproved. Now, the Muggles have recently discovered that sexuality does sometimes tend to run in families, and values certainly do, and so it came to be, largely through chance, that homosexuality was associated with the Dark Arts and with Slytherin. Then there were a few infamous wizards who used sodomy to fuel some of their Darker spells, and there you have it. There have been equally Dark wizards using heterosexual sex for the same purposes, but their acts were never as well known, never made into horror stories and scandalous rumors."

Lupin pauses, letting his words sink in. The older Weasley is still glowing red, though he says nothing, his eyes firmly on the table in front of him, and Draco can see his hands gripping the seat of his chair, knuckles white. His sister is watching Lupin with a kind of desperate hope, as though she is afraid to believe him. Granger's eyes are alight with academic interest. Potter is leaning forward on one arm, his hand over his mouth, watching Lupin with a serious, considering look.

"Now," Lupin continues, "I ask that you take all of this into consideration, and I ask that you trust that the

history I have just given you is accurate."

"It is," says Draco. "I've studied it."

Lupin nods. "As have I, extensively, because it affects me particularly. No, Ron, I am not gay. It was Sirius Black I had in mind when I did this research."

Weasley's head snaps up. Potter's eyes grow wide and he says, "Sirius was gay?"

Lupin nods again. "He had a time of it at school. Because he came from a largely Slytherin family, he at first saw nothing wrong with it. But as he settled into Gryffindor, learning to let go of his prejudices against Muggle-borns, he also picked up prejudices against homosexuals."

"So he learned it was wrong!" the Weasel cuts in. "Are you saying he should have held on to all his old ideas? Lupin, have you seen this house?"

"Things are not that black and white, Ron." There is a little bite in Lupin's formerly calm voice. "Just because some disreputable people agree with something, does not mean it is wrong. You know that Sirius was a good man. He would never have had anything to do with Dark Magic. Still, he was smart enough to figure out, in time, that what he felt was not evil or wrong, especially after I did my research for him."

"He told you?" Potter asks. He is leaning forward in his chair, rapt.

"No," Lupin admits. "I figured it out. James and Peter were so entrenched in their prejudice that they didn't notice, because they could not imagine a friend of theirs having what they would consider such deviant tendencies. I, however, having dealt nearly all my life with the same sort of prejudices, was less blind. Harry, are you alright?"

Potter looks up. He has gone very pale. "I'm fine," he says.

"Harry, it isn't wrong--" Granger starts.

"It isn't that," Potter says. "I..." he stops. "Thank you, Professor Lupin. I see what you mean."

Lupin smiles. "I'm glad."

The Weaslette says, "But he was from a Slytherin family. Are there ever gay people from families like ours?"

"Yes, of course there are, but they aren't often open about it. Still, I do know of some who have come out. There was a lesbian Prewett, for example, who kept quiet but lived with her girlfriend."

She nods thoughtfully, while her brother watches her apprehensively. He doesn't speak.

Granger beams at them all. "I'm so glad you came, Lupin," she says. "I was having trouble trying to talk some sense into them."

He smiles fondly back at her. "I wish I could stay longer, but Tonks will murder me if I don't make it for dinner." He pauses before leaving. "Harry, if you want to talk more, I wish you would write. I have another week before I go back." Potter nods silently in response, still white-faced.

* * *

Hermione watches Harry carefully as Lupin leaves. He caught her by surprise when he said that he agreed with Ron. Is this why he looks so stricken? Is he feeling guilty?

As for Ron, she is still deeply disappointed. He told her the night before that he thought maybe it wasn't all that bad if Ginny was a lesbian. He had lied to her about how he felt, and she wouldn't be forgiving him soon.

"Ginny?" Hermione says. "What do you think?"

"I don't know," Ginny replies. "I don't know what to think anymore."

"Ginny!" Ron gasps. "Are you really going to listen to him over Mum and Dad?"

"I don't know. But Mum and Dad aren't perfect, you know."

"Neither is Lupin."

Malfoy rolls his eyes. "You really are hopeless. At least Potter has more sense." Malfoy flashes a smirk in his direction, and twin patches of color appear on Harry's cheeks, though he looks away. Hermione notes this with interest.

* * *

Draco wanders the house, as the Gryffindors are all too preoccupied with their own Gryffindorish problems to check him. He comes across many locked cabinets and such bearing the Black family seal. He also finds a large tapestry mapping out the Black family tree. He has known all this by rote, of course, since he learned to talk, but it is interesting to see who batty old Mrs. Black decided to remove from the tree. Sirius Black is gone, of course, as is his mother's sister, Andromeda. Regulus Black remains, which Draco finds odd. In his family's version, Regulus was disowned for his dishonorable death: betraying the Dark Lord. Draco shudders when he remembers that he is in the same situation. He runs his fingers over his own embroidered name, and wonders if, were Mrs. Black still alive, he might be gone already. Has his name disappeared from the family books at Malfoy Manor? He swallows hard, thinking about the implications of the path he has chosen to take. He has cast his lot in on Potter's side, betting against the

Dark Lord. By refusing to kill Potter, Draco is essentially fighting against his master as well. The world is changing, and with Potter's lot victorious, families like the Malfoys and the Blacks will most likely be wiped out, their influence, prestige, and gold gone. How many of Draco's relatives and friends will end up in Azkaban, or Kissed?

Suddenly he feels all the strength leave him. He slumps against the wall, his forehead on his arm between himself and the tapestry. The knowledge of his betrayal beats in his body like poison, with every pump of his heart. He tries to tell himself that he cannot be expected to put anyone else above his family. Not friends, and certainly not lovers. The Dark Mark burns dully on his arm, the cut from last night aching slightly, along with the bruises of Potter's bite marks. He feels sick and tainted. No, he doesn't belong on this tapestry... "Toujours Pur." If he had his wand, he would remove his name himself.

After a few moments' constricted breathing, Draco forces himself back together. He simply won't think about the future, about what will happen after the war ends. His family will be safe. This is the only thing he can do anything about, and the one thing that matters.

With this resolution, he stands up straight and heads back to the kitchen. Some Latin should cheer him up.

* * *

Ginny wanders through the halls, thinking of Tom. At first she hadn't attributed her feelings to him. She knew that the things she was doing with Luna were wrong, but when she was that young-- twelve, thirteen, even fourteen-- it felt more like an acceptable deviance, like lying, or cheating on someone even though you like them a lot, or drinking when you shouldn't, or stealing from your mum's pocketbook. The sort of thing that kept you up at night, but not the sort of thing that made life unbearable. But then Voldemort returned and Ginny's forearm started to burn with the phantom pain of the imitation Dark Mark that Tom had given her in the Chamber of Secrets. Everything changed. If before Riddle had been a ghost in the back of her mind, he now became a living presence in her life, a shadow over her shoulder. Around the same time, her sexual desires began to increase, and were focused mostly on girls, which became more and more disturbing. And then she discovered that being with Harry lessened the pain of both. She began to turn towards him more and more, and was delighted when he seemed to respond, if only in a friendly way at first. To distract herself, she got involved with boys and learned how to be the girlfriend of a boy. All the while, her eye was on Harry, though she was never sure exactly what she wanted from him. She wanted to be close to him, always, wished she was part of that exclusive clique that was the trio. But even after fighting alongside them, she wasn't allowed in, was

never told the whole truth. Even now, even now they have told her nothing. She doesn't know what they are doing here, what they are researching... She knows less than Malfoy!

Coming to this last thought, Ginny kicks hard at a cradenza she is passing to vent her frustration. The cabinet door falls open and a pile of rubbish comes tumbling out. Well, not exactly rubbish, she realizes as she bends to inspect it. It is one of the piles they made two years ago while they were cleaning house. This must have been one of Kreacher's hiding places, or perhaps simply somewhere Sirius decided to stick all these things he hated.

It is all priceless junk, most of it gaudy or disgusting. But something catches her eye. She pulls it out of the heap, swearing as the lid of a trinket box snaps down briefly on her fingers. No, the interesting thing is a heavy locket, engraved with an S. But what has drawn her is the thrumming dark energy of the thing, as if the gold were alive. It reminds her.... it reminds her of the dark places in Harry, the parts of himself he tries so desperately to hide, though the hiding itself is what gives them this slippery, cold feel. She slides the trinket into her pocket and feels the cold even through her jeans. She shivers, not unpleasantly.

* * *

The next morning, Draco sneaks in to Potter's bed and kisses him awake. Potter's mouth opens under his, even before his eyes, and when he sees Draco his breath hitches a little, but then he lifts his head slightly to deepen the kiss.

Draco pulls away. Potter makes sounds of protest, but is too sleepy to do anything. Draco shifts and repositions himself between Potter's legs, then leans forward so that his mouth is just above Potter's hardening cock.

"Oh, fuck," says Potter groggily, when Draco pulls his bottoms down to his knees.

"Oh, fuck," he says, less groggily, when Draco takes him into his mouth.

And when he comes, he says nothing at all, as he has bitten his way almost clean through his bottom lip,

and the kiss he gives Draco is bloody.

All in all, Draco, though disgusted, is much more satisfied with these events than with those of two nights previous. Afterwards, Potter lies panting and pulls a pillow over his face. Draco runs through a list of things to say, but decides that he will save talking for later. First, the physical. When that gets boring, Draco will start working in earnest on Potter's emotions. So Draco stands up and leaves. His plan is good. It's good to have a plan. He will deal with this all like a game of chess, which really he was never very good at.

Granger accosts Draco on his way down to breakfast. "We need more books," she says.

"Too bad," says Draco. "My mother is in America." But his heart is racing. With the house empty, they will need him to get in. They will have to take him along.

Granger narrows her eyes at him. "First of all, how do you know that? Have you been in communication with her?"

He rolls his eyes. "No. It's common sense. She has to leave the country, and that's the only place we have relatives. Although I suppose she could be with her friends in Germany, but that's not really the point, is it?" At Granger's unrelenting Suspicious Glare, he continues. "Okay, let's suppose she didn't leave. In that case, she is probably dead and the house may be overrun with Death Eaters. Either way, she is in no position to let you in the house."

Granger thinks for a moment, and finally says, "Then you'll let us in."

He quirks an eyebrow. "So that I can go first in case the place is overrun with Death Eaters? No, thank you."

"Well you don't really have a choice, do you?"

He scowls at her, and she beams back. His stomach flips in triumph.

* * *

"I want to come!" Ginny cries, to no avail. "I can't believe you're taking Malfoy and not me."

"He has to come; he's letting us in," Hermione says sharply. "Are you ready, Ron?"

"Of course I'm ready." Ron and Hermione have been coldly furious with each other all day.

Ginny hates him. This is easy, because he is her brother. She isn't fond of Hermione at the moment, either, however. And she's always hated Malfoy. She now fixes the latter with her best Spiteful Look. He smirks back. Bastard.

Ginny can feel Harry behind her, watching his friends leave. When the others are gone, they will be alone together. Ginny tries not to think about him.

"When will you be back?" Harry asks, voicing the question on Ginny's mind.

"It shouldn't take more than a few hours," says Hermione. "Where did I put the Floo powder? Oh, there it is. Well, see you in a bit. Ron, you go first, then Malfoy."

And in a few bright flashes of colored flame, they are gone. When Ginny turns around, Harry is already almost to the top of the stairs.

What has she done that hurt him this much?

* * *

While Granger and Weasley are browsing through titles on opposite sides of the vast library, Draco slips out. Congratulating himself on his impressive slyness, he goes straight for the nearest fireplace.

"Father," he calls, throwing the sparkling powder on the fire. The flames flicker and morph slowly to show the face of Lucius Malfoy.

"Draco!" His eyes dart around, taking in the room. "Why are you at home? Why isn't Potter dead yet?"

"It's only been one day! They took me here to let them in because Mother's gone. They're using our library. Father, you have to help me!"

But Lucius is shaking his head. "Draco, I can't help you now. Twice you've had the chance to rise to glory, but this is the last time you'll fail."

Draco starts to feel numb at the tone of his father's voice. He has seen house-elves decapitated to that tone. But never has Lucius used it on Draco before. "What do you mean?"

"I've just sealed the Manor, Draco. I'll be there in five minutes. Don't try to escape."

"Escape?" Draco's voice is much higher than he ever wants it to be.

"I'm taking you to the Dark Lord. It's the only way to save your mother and I. Surely you understand."

Draco stares at him. "I'm your son."

Lucius's face darkens. "An unfortunate fact that shall soon be remedied when I am pardoned in exchange for your life. As I say, I will be there in five minutes. I suggest you prepare yourself to face the Dark Lord's judgment."

Lucius flickers out of sight.

"NO!" Draco lunges at the flames, as if he could reach through and grab hold of his father, but the connection is broken and his hands hit the back of the fireplace, searing heat burning the hair off of his bare forearms.

He doesn't have time to register the pain, though, or his bloodied palms, as he leaps up. "NO!" he screams again. Then he starts running. He tears from the drawing room, not caring if Granger and Weasley see him as he rushes past the library. It can't possibly matter now.

He doesn't seem to be breathing. His vision is tunneling. Tapestries and portraits of ancient Malfoys shout at him as he races down the wide corridors, suddenly unfriendly. He comes to a halt by slamming hard into the front door, twisting the handle desperately. But the silver knob doesn't turn.

"FUCK," Draco screams. "I AM DRACO MALFOY AND I ORDER YOU TO OPEN!" He beats his fists against the oak until his knuckles are shredded and the door is shouting its own protests at his abuse, then whips around. The house has turned against him. His brain isn't working. He knows somewhere that he has to stop panicking, but he is also experiencing something of an epiphany:

He doesn't want to die. He really really really doesn't want to die. In fact, he hopes to never die, ever. That would be nice.

He starts to run again, headed in wild hope towards the garden entrance, and shortly collides with something rather solid, and then finds himself on top of said something, who says, "Oooph. Malfoy, what on earth is going on? Have you lost your mind? Are you trying to escape?"

"NOTHING," says Draco, in as normal a voice as he can manage. "NOTHING'S WRONG. EVERYTHING IS

UNDER CONTROL. THERE IS NO NEED TO PANIC."

Granger pushes him off of her, looking very confused. And then Weasley is there, too, and they are both asking Draco questions, which he answers by trying to break a nearby window in the hope of crawling out of it.

And then none of it matters anyway.

"Draco," Lucius snaps, "get off of that windowsill; you look like a house-elf."

And Draco does, automatically, because his father sounds so normal, and for a moment he forgets why he was on the sill in the first place. But then he turns around, and his father's wand is pointed at him. Lucius is standing serenely in the center of the hall, flanked by his masked Death Eater friends, two of whom have already seized Granger and Weasley.

Draco squeaks. Or perhaps it is a whimper. But it is a pathetic sound, like a dying rodent. "Father! You can't do this! I'm your son! Father! Please, don't!" But even as he pleads, there are Death Eaters grabbing hold of him, twisting his arms behind his back. "NO! FATHER! You CAN'T! DON'T DO THIS!" He doesn't stop screaming and begging and weeping, fighting uselessly against the men holding him fast.

* * *

Hermione stands still as the large Death Eater tightens his grip on her arms for the Portkey journey. She doesn't know what's going on, but her guess is that Malfoy betrayed them and is now being double-crossed by his own father. Serves him right.

They hit ground hard, and Hermione's Death Eater chooses this moment to let go, sending her crashing to the marble floor. She feels her kneecap shatter under her, but looks up. They are in a large and elegant ballroom, complete with elaborate pillars and high windows now covered with black velvet. But none of this registers.

Hermione has never seen Lord Voldemort before. She has heard Harry's descriptions, and always knew it would be much worse in person, but.... She was right. It is so much worse. She wants to vomit, to look away, to do anything except see what she is seeing, but she is petrified. The only comfort is that he doesn't look at her. No, those horrible red eyes are focused on the two Malfoys.

The Death Eaters throw Draco to the ground and slightly forward, so that he is almost at Voldemort's feet. He shakes on all fours and keeps his head down, tears falling freely from his face straight to the growing pool on the white marble floor. He has suddenly gone completely silent, in contrast to his former ear-piercing protests.

Lucius steps forward and kneels beside his son. "My Lord, I have brought you my son, who has betrayed you, and the friends of Harry Potter."

"Yes, Lucius, I see." Voldemort's cold voice is almost worse than his appearance. Hermione shudders. "You may rise. I will forgive you, but only because your son will prove useful." He casts his eyes on Draco. "It isn't merely revenge I seek, my dear boy," he hisses, twirling his wand. "Though I will enjoy torturing you." And without further ado, he aims his wand at Draco, and the boy's screams fill the hall.

Draco is on the floor, writhing, making noises Hermione has never heard any human make. Her stomach churns and she squeezes her eyes shut.

Finally, it stops, and Draco lies still, ragged breathing replacing the shrieks.

"Where is Harry Potter?" says Voldemort, almost lazily.

Draco doesn't even hesitate. "The old Black house in London."

Hermione hears Ron choke, about six feet to her right. She turns her head and they share a terrified glance.

"Then he shall know I have captured his friends, and he shall know, too, that you have betrayed him so easily." Voldemort smiles horribly.

* * *

Ginny is sitting in the living room, brooding and staring at the fire, when suddenly a piece of parchment comes shooting out of it and hits her in the face.

"Ow! What the--" She unfolds it, irritated. Suddenly, a high, chilling voice fills the house. Ginny drops the parchment in surprise, and something falls out of it, which she ignores.

"Harry Potter," says the voice-- Voldemort's voice, she is sure-- "I thought it might interest you to know where your friends are. Try to guess." What follows is unmistakable. Ron, Hermione, Malfoy... screaming. Being tortured.

Ginny finds herself on her feet, stomping on the parchment and shouting, trying desperately to drown out the horrible noise, but the sound continues. "STOP!" she screams. "STOP!"

Harry is suddenly there, and he seizes her around the waist, and shouts, "Shut up a minute!" She does, and he says, "Okay. That's Ron, Hermione, and Malfoy. I thought for a moment you-- but where did this come from?" He has to speak loudly over the sounds of torture.

"Fireplace," Ginny chokes. The screaming isn't stopping. But she takes a deep breath and tries not to lose her head.

"What's that?" He points at a coin on the floor-- this is what fell out of the parchment before, Ginny realizes.

She picks it up shakily. "It's a Portkey."

He moves to take it from her. "How d'you know?"

Before she can answer, the Portkey is activated and they are both thrown into space.

* * *

"Harry!" Hermione gasps, struggling to her knees, drinking in the sight of him. He landed none too gracefully in the middle of the hall, but now, a second later, is standing tall before Voldemort, though Ginny is soon held captive by a nearby Death Eater. Her first feeling is a wave of relief-- Harry is here! He will save them. Then fear creeps in and she remembers that this is in fact the worst thing that could have happened, that he is the last person who should be here.

"Harry Potter," says Voldemort softly, smiling once more. "At last we meet again. It has been too long, I think." He rises from his throne-like seat and steps forward, reaching out and taking hold of Harry's chin. Hermione sees Harry's body tighten, his eyes flutter closed for an instant, and she knows he must be in terrible pain. His scar stands out bright red, raw on his pale face. Still, he stands his ground. "Have you still not learned to fear me, boy?" Voldemort hisses. "You no longer have your precious Dumbledore to protect you. How does it feel to be all alone and about to die?"

"I'm not going to die," Harry says, through clenched teeth. "It's my specialty, not dying."

Voldemort releases him and lets out a cold laugh. Hermione misses what he says next, however, as something very odd and unpleasant happens to her brain.

It is as if she is being invaded, in the most intimate and forceful way imaginable. She gasps in shock and pain, but has no time to register her horror as foreign thoughts begin to bloom across her mind.

To her right is an oriental rug, next to where Voldemort was sitting. She is forced to note this as well as

the giant snake curled lazily on top of it. She sees the rug glow faintly for a moment. No one else, even the snake, seems to notice it. Then she knows, or is told somehow, that the rug is now a Portkey. Suddenly she understands, and is released from the strange presence in her mind.

It takes a moment for Hermione to recover herself, to realize that Harry and Voldemort are still talking and threatening each other, in a strange ritual sort of dance that only they understand. She is still trying to figure out exactly what happened to her just now when one of the Death Eaters abruptly breaks ranks. "Now!" he barks in an unmistakable voice, and immediately Hermione knows what to do. So do Ron, Ginny, and Malfoy, apparently, because they all leap for the Portkey rug, Ron (who was closest) dragging Harry with them. They knock several stunned Death Eaters out of their way, and Ginny catches their wands in midair.

Just before they are Portkeyed away, Hermione turns back in time to see Severus Snape, wand drawn, fall in the green light of Voldemort's curse.

* * *

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Chapter 6: Marked

Chapter Six

There are a few moments in which Hermione is not at all sure which way is up. She is dimly aware of voices around her, and then she feels a hand on her shoulder.

"Hermione? Are you alright?"

Hermione looks up to see Luna Lovegood looking at her with concern. This is almost as disorienting as the Portkey trip. "Luna?" she says uncertainly, and the girl nods, smiling a little in encouragement. Hermione sits up, suddenly realizing how much her body aches, and looks around. They are, incredibly, in the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts. Professor McGonagall is helping Harry up.

"Goodness, Potter, are you alright? What happened?"

"I'm fine. Nothing happened to me," says Harry quickly. "And I'm not quite sure what happened-- Ginny, you might want to move."

Ginny leaps up as if bitten. Hermione looks to see the giant snake is beginning to stir, evidently recovering from the shock of being sat upon and Portkeyed. Malfoy is lying sprawled half on top of it, and he groans as it slithers, trying to untie itself.

McGonagall gasps and points her wand at the snake. "Malfoy," she says sharply, "Get away from that thing!"

Harry kneels and pulls Malfoy away from it, at the same time hissing at the beast. It stares at him, apparently surprised at a human speaking to it. He says something else, and it responds. Everyone else in the room watches in awe, except for Malfoy, who seems to be only barely conscious.

Suddenly, the snake hisses again, and lunges forward, heading straight for Harry's neck. Harry reacts almost as quickly, and curses it a split second before its fangs make contact with his flesh. It falls limply to the floor under his Killing Curse.

"Potter," says McGonagall shakily, "That spell--"

"I know," says Harry quietly. "That's the first time I've used it. Don't worry, I won't.... use it on people, or anything." His face is pale as he shoves the snake's body away from him and gets to his feet. Hermione

sees Ginny edge closer to him and clasp his hand in hers. He doesn't resist.

"So," says McGonagall, "What, exactly, did take place? Why have you all appeared in my office? And does Mr. Malfoy need to be taken to the hospital wing?"

Harry glances at Malfoy. "I don't know." He looks at Hermione and Ron worriedly. "Are you two okay?"

Hermione exchanges looks with Ron, who is pale and slightly shaky, but seems alright. "We're fine," she says. "And I think Malfoy is just shell-shocked." She tries to stand up, but stumbles, gasping, as pain explodes in her right knee. She forgot all about that. Ron catches her before she hits the floor. "Okay," she admits, "maybe I'm not fine."

"I'll take you to Madam Pomfrey," says Ron quickly.

"You have to stay and tell them what happened," Hermione points out.

"I'll take her," says Luna, and even in her state of pain, Hermione notes Ginny's double take as she notices the blond. Ginny looks away quickly, however, and shifts closer to Harry, who stiffens and sets his jaw.

* * *

When Ron nears the end of the story, he has to pause. He really can't explain what happened to his mind back there.

"But how did you all know the rug was a Portkey?" Harry asks.

"I don't know, exactly," says Ron truthfully. He looks at Ginny.

"It was weird," she says. "It was like... Well, it was like someone was sort of in my brain..."

"Snape," says Malfoy. He looks rather green, slumped against the wall.

"Snape what?" says Harry.

"He must have done... some sort of Reverse-Legilimency."

"It was really weird," says Ron.

"Wait a minute," says McGonagall. "Severus Snape told you that the rug was a Portkey?"

Ron, Ginny, and Malfoy all nod. "I told you he was on your side," Malfoy mutters with his usual sneer.

"Unlike you," snarls Ron. He turns to McGonagall. "Can we kill him now?"

"Don't be stupid, Mr. Weasley."

"He didn't actually do anything wrong," says Harry. "If he hadn't told Voldemort where I was, I wouldn't have known where you were at all."

"That was the idea!" Ron shouts. "Malfoy just helped lure you into the trap! And, anyway, it's not like you actually did anything this time. You didn't exactly rescue us."

Harry turns red and opens his mouth furiously to retort, but McGonagall heads him off. "Boys! Control yourselves! Now, I want all of you to go down to the infirmary." She glares at them through her

spectacles.

"I'm fine," Harry protests. "I want to--"

"Potter!" McGonagall says warningly, and with the look she gives him, Ron is highly impressed that Harry even hesitates before clenching his fists and turning on his heel. Ron, Ginny, and Malfoy file out after him, and the door closes behind them.

"And now she's going to call everyone else from the Order in," Harry says furiously, as they descend the spiral staircase. "And they're going to talk it all over and make plans and never think to tell me anything, or ask me what I think."

"Well, you aren't technically in the Order, are you?" Ron says, not because he disagrees with Harry, but because he is angry at him for defending Malfoy.

Harry spins around, and looks so angry that for a moment Ron is afraid that he has gone too far and they are about to have a repeat of fifth year. But Harry's mouth just twists and he turns back and hurries down the steps without saying anything else.

They reach the corridor and haven't gone ten feet before a retching sound makes Ron turn around to see Malfoy being sick next to one of the gargoyles. Ron feels rather sick himself, so he looks away. Harry pauses, then walks back to Malfoy, who finally stops heaving and sinks to the floor. After a moment, Harry reaches out and helps Malfoy up.

Does Harry think that Snape turning out to be on their side means that they should trust everyone? Or is he just trying to annoy Ron? Well, it has worked, and Ron is irritated. He grabs Ginny's arm-- in a way that he hopes seems elder-brotherish and not as if he is suddenly realizing how weak and exhausted he feels and needs something to support himself-- and walks the rest of the way to the infirmary without looking back at Harry and Malfoy, though he notices Ginny does several times.

* * *

Madam Pomfrey fusses over everyone, and puts Ron, Hermione, and Malfoy to bed with liberal amounts of potions. Harry watches, feeling terrible. He hates all this, hates that they have to pay such a high price for being his friends. He knows they chose to come with him, that they wouldn't trade it for the world, but that doesn't make him feel any better.

Still, he can't stand here being miserable forever. He has things to do. He is Harry Potter, and he has responsibilities.

He goes back upstairs to Dumbledore's old office. He doesn't know, nor can he guess anymore, the new password to move the gargoyles and summon the winding staircase. So he leans against the opposite wall and waits.

He waits for the better part of an hour. The stone is cold on his back, but he doesn't move. He isn't tired yet, because there is still work to do before he can think of resting.

Not that Harry did that much today anyways, as Ron pointed out. Harry scowls, mostly angry at himself. He shouldn't be hurt that someone else saved them this time. It isn't even as if Harry didn't have enormous amounts of help every other time.

He knows that what bothers him most is that it was Snape. Harry can't forgive him, though he supposes he has to accept that Malfoy was telling the truth. Either that, or Snape had some sort of strong fatherly feelings for Malfoy. Unlikely.

But it's impossible to forget that night on the tower. The pathetic sound of Dumbeldore pleading for his life, the hateful look on Snape's twisted face, the green light of the curse and the emptiness afterwards. Equally impossible to ignore is the fact that it was Snape who handed the prophecy to Voldemort, thereby condemning Harry's parents, and turning Harry's life into this. Even Sirius's death can be traced back to Snape taunting him about staying in the house. No, Harry can't forgive Snape any of it.

He is grateful when the door before him finally opens and releases him from his painful thoughts.

"Wotcher, Harry," says Tonks. Her hair is bright purple, and she flashes him a smile. She looks significantly better than the last time he saw her. Somehow he feels this isn't right, because Dumbledore is dead and Hogwarts is closed and there is a war on.

"Hi," he says.

"What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be in the hospital wing with Ron and Hermione and Ginny?"

"I'm not hurt," says Harry quickly. "I need to take care of that snake."

She raises her eyebrows in surprise. "We couldn't get rid of it the body," she says.

"Of course not. She wasn't an ordinary snake. Could you let me in?"

She hesitates, and Harry says impatiently, "Why doesn't anyone trust me anymore?"

"I trust you, Harry," she says. "It's just that... Dumbledore didn't tell us anything about what you're meant to be doing, and what we should do for you. They're just looking out for you, trying to keep you out of harm's way."

"'Out of harm's way?'" Harry repeats incredulously. "How am I supposed to defeat Voldemort while staying out of harm's way?"

Tonks flinches at Voldemort's name, or maybe it is at the rising volume of Harry's voice. He tries to control himself, and she comes forward to put a hand on his shoulder, which he shrugs off.

"You don't have to defeat him," she says. "Harry, you're seventeen. You can leave this up to the Order."

Harry stares at her. They don't know. Can they really not know? "I want to talk to McGonagall," he says.

She frowns, but says, "Kneazle," and the stone gargoyles jump aside.

Harry knocks on the door to the Head's office. He hears the several voices inside pause, and McGonagall says, "Come in."

He opens the door to find Kingsley, Lupin, Moody, and, of all people, Fleur Delacour, along with McGonagall.

"Potter." McGonagall stands up at her desk. "I thought I told you to go to the infirmary."

Harry scowls. "I did go. I need to talk to you. About that snake.... Well, about everything, actually."

"Perhaps," says a familiar voice, "this would be a good time to look in the bottom drawer of my desk."

Harry jumps and looks around, and finds Dumbledore's portrait. There he is, smiling at Harry.

"It isn't really him," says Lupin, at the look on Harry's face. "Just a faint echo, if you will."

"I know," says Harry quickly, recovering himself. It was a shock, that's all. He had somehow expected a longer stretch of time before Dumbledore's animated portrait was hung in the office. Also, why hadn't he spoken earlier?

McGonagall rubs her forehead, and opens the bottom drawer of the desk. After fishing about for a few

moments, she straightens up with a letter in her hand. She unfolds the parchment and reads it quickly. When she is done, she sighs and sits down. "Alright, Potter. What did you want to say?"

Harry feels a rush of gratitude towards Dumbledore. He had obviously left this note telling McGonagall to listen to him. Perhaps he had mentioned the prophecy. But does it mention Horcruxes? Harry isn't sure how much he should say.

"Erm," he says. "Can I see the letter?"

The Headmistress looks at him sharply, but hands it over. It is as he thought, a letter from Dumbledore instructing the members of the Order to trust him, to follow his judgment, to help him defeat Voldemort. Harry is so overwhelmed for a moment by the faith Dumbledore has in him, that he feels his throat go tight, and he has to swallow several times before he can speak. The letter does not mention Horcruxes, but does indicate that Harry knows more about the situation than anyone else.

"Right," says Harry. Now that he has been given all this power, he feels a little awkward around all these adults who will now be looking to him. He feels the heat rise in his face. "So..."

"I believe you said something about the snake?" growls Moody.

Harry jumps. "Yes. The snake. Er, what did you do with the body?"

Fleur points to the dark form at her feet. "We could not figure out 'ow to destroy it."

"Can I have it?" says Harry.

"What?" says McGonagall.

"It's... I need to destroy it. And I know how." He doesn't actually, but Hermione said they were very close

to finding out.

McGonagall raises her eyebrows and looks at the other members of the Order. They all exchange uncomfortable glances. Then, she says, "Whatever you think is necessary."

* * *

Draco wakes up some time in the evening to the familiar ceiling of the hospital wing. Even in his drugged sleep he was wracked by nightmares, though in truth none of them were more horrible than what actually happened today. Draco can still feel the faint sort of humming in his body left from the Cruciatus Curse. This, combined with his empty stomach (he dry-heaved some more upon arriving at the hospital wing) and the heat of his nervous fever gives him the feeling of profound hollowness, a disturbing lightness, like death.

He never thought his parents would betray him. He gave up everything to keep them safe, sold himself twice over. He thought, before, that he had nothing left, no support or net to catch him if he fell. He had felt alone and terrified. But now he realizes that he was always assuming that his parents, even if they had no power to help him, would at least love him, would do anything they could to keep him alive, just as he was doing for them. They had always told him-- always-- that family was more important than anything else. Higher than the individual, God, or country, was Family, the heart of all social institutions and the uniting concept upon which their world was built.

But in a heartbeat Draco's parents turned against him. In a way it is almost fitting, because now the universe's inversion upon itself is complete. Draco Malfoy is fucking Harry Potter, and old wizarding families are tearing themselves apart as everyone double-crosses each other on a whim.

Maybe Draco will wake up someday and it will all be dream. Perhaps he will go to school and lose to Potter at Quidditch and complain about Transfiguration homework with Pansy and spend the night with...

No, stop, don't think about that. That's the sort of thing that will get him killed if he isn't careful around Potter. He tries to shake his head to clear his thoughts, but even this slight motion sends pain shooting

through him. The potions must have all worn off...

Being tortured was actually worse than what Draco had feared it would be, even though he had been quite terrified of it before. And he knows the Gryffindors were even less prepared than he was, from the looks of raw shock on their faces afterwards. He doesn't think that even they still believe that anyone could hold up very long under the Dark Lord's Cruciatus, no matter what Weasley says.

Of course, they are stupid Gryffindors and they have to keep up their stupid appearances of bravery. And they probably don't know that the Dark Lord has made even Potter beg for death.

Then again, just a few nights ago Potter actually asked Draco to try and kill him with no provocation at all. Raving mad. Draco decides that he isn't going to try to figure Potter out-- certainly not now and probably not ever. As long as Draco follows his cues, he should be fine.

* * *

When Harry finally returns from wandering the castle and trying to argue with the adults about including him in meetings, he throws himself moodily into the chair in between Hermione's bed and the one Madam Pomfrey forced Ron into, and which he would never admit he actually really needed.

"Sorry about what I said earlier," Ron whispers, not wanting to wake Hermione. "Only you have been rather insufferable these past few days."

Harry looks at him incredulously. "I've been insufferable? What about you? You got Ginny kicked out of the house!"

"It's your fault," Ron hisses back. He has formed the theory that the only reason Ginny has been acting out is because she is heartbroken over Harry. "You shouldn't have left her. She's my little sister, Harry, and I can't believe I let you do that to her."

Harry stares at him for a moment, his cheeks bright pink and mouth open in shock. "I can't believe you! I cannot even believe we are having this conversation! How could it possibly be my fault? Unless you're suggesting I've got girl parts--" He pauses, breathing hard. "I mean, she's bent, Ron. She really fucking is. She is as bent as they come."

"Don't say that about my sister!" Ron considers hitting Harry, but his entire body hurts too much to move. Even all this talking is making his head spin. Or maybe that's the anger. Instead, Ron stares furiously at Harry, who meets his eye, scowling.

"It's true," Harry whispers. "And you know it. She never loved me. She never wanted me at all. She wanted Harry fucking Potter." Weariness seems to overcome him and he slumps back against the chair. "I didn't break her heart. She's the one who's doing it to me. She's going to be fine. I am not." He pauses again and covers his face with his hands, an old gesture that Ron hasn't seen in years. "She never loved me," he says again, and it is barely audible.

Ron swallows hard. He has known Harry too long and had too many lessons about empathy literally beaten into him by Hermione, to miss the unspoken, possibly even unformed, thought behind the words: Who would? Very rarely do these things surface, the dark remains of a childhood spent in a cupboard, a family that refused to love him as every child should be loved. All of these thoughts float through Ron's mind, but all he can grab hold of is the feeling. It's a feeling he hates, though, because if he had to name it he would call it pity.

It's really quite unfair of Harry to turn the argument around like this. Ron can't exactly be angry with him now. He tries to think of something to say. Anything would do. Anything to break this horrible silence. But when he looks back at Harry, he realizes that his friend has fallen asleep in his chair. Well, Ron thinks, it has been a pretty stressful day, though probably not Harry's worst.

* * *

Ginny, unwilling to leave the others, sits awkwardly in a chair as far away from Harry as possible. His responses to her are getting colder again, and she has decided to leave him alone for the time being. Unfortunately, this means she is near Malfoy's bed, and she can't sleep because he is moaning in his nightmares, the selfish bastard. Around midnight, Luna comes in. Ginny tries to hide behind Malfoy's curtain, but Luna finds her anyways.

"I'm so glad to see you again," says Luna, smiling in her vague way.

"Er, me too," says Ginny. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

"Oh, I'm helping the order. Neville's here, too. And Cho Chang and Ernie Macmillan, and some others."

"Wow," says Ginny, with interest. "What are you all doing?"

"Mostly we try to keep the castle from falling apart." Luna delivers this somewhat alarming statement with her usual rather dreamy expression.

"Oh," says Ginny. "Is there, erm, much danger of that?"

"Well, odd spells keep creeping in, don't they?"

"Do they?"

"Yes. Are you all going to stay here?"

"I don't know," says Ginny. "I don't think we'd better. You-Know-Who would expect Harry to come here." Ginny still doesn't use Voldemort's name unless she's talking to Harry or Hermione, mostly because she hates the fact that she has something of an interesting history with Tom and doesn't want to bring people's attention to it.

Luna nods. Malfoy whimpers quietly and turns over in his sleep. Both girls turn to look at him. Even in the dim light from the corridor, his hair shines like water. Still, Ginny is struck, not for the first time, by

how ill he looks.

"He's not really human, you know," says Luna abruptly.

"No?" Ginny raises her eyebrows.

"All the Malfoys are Veela. They take a special potion to regulate their powers. That's why Lucius Malfoy could always get his way with the old Minister. Some people say male Veela don't exist, but my father says they do."

"Really." Ginny doesn't argue that Lucius didn't need to be a Veela when he had so much money. And even though sometimes, from far away, Draco does seem to have an unearthly sort of beauty, up close he is all pale colors and sharp angles and malicious grey eyes, and Ginny cannot imagine anyone being enchanted with him. Especially not now, with his hollow cheeks and bruise-dark circles under his eyes, and real bruises from thrashing about on the floor, and...

What is that?

When Malfoy shifted, the blankets fell off of his chest, exposing the skin about his twisted shirt collar. And on his shoulder... A small row of puncture wounds, dark with bruising and painful-looking: Teeth marks.

Ginny goes numb. Then, suddenly, she is on her feet, but can't think of a good reason for being there, so she sits down again. Luna is looking at her strangely, which is rather unsettling, because usually Luna is the one receiving such looks. Ginny isn't really sure what to do. She tries to think logically. Surely there could be many explanations for Malfoy's peculiar wounds. But there is a fading scar on her left breast, over her heart, that argues it was made by the same mouth.

A dull ache grows inside her. Part of her wants to kill Malfoy, but another, possibly larger, part mysteriously doesn't.

"Are you alright?" Luna asks her. She doesn't sound concerned, because Luna is never concerned about anything, but Ginny knows she is being kind.

"I think so," says Ginny. "It's been a very long day."

"Why don't you go to sleep?" asks Luna curiously.

"I can't."

"You could sleep in my bed, if you like," says Luna. Ginny stares at her, until she adds, "I'm not tired. I still have some work to do."

Ginny relaxes, but all the same she says, "It's okay. I'd rather be here when the others wake up." Really, it is Malfoy she is most interested in speaking to. Luna walks away, leaving Ginny to try to sort through her emotions.

* * *

Hermione wakes up to find her knee completely healed, thanks to Madam Pomfrey and a small dose of Skele-Gro (Harry was right, it was hideously vile and painful). The constant ache in the rest of her body remains, however, and it is hard not to wonder whether it will ever go away. She sits up and looks around. Harry is sitting to her right, apparently lost in thought. "Hey, Harry," she says, and he starts, looking around at her.

"Hey." He smiles. "How are you feeling?"

"Better. What's the new plan?"

"They're saying we should go into hiding in the Muggle world. You know, stop using magic completely so no one can trace us."

She nods, thinking. "That'll be hard. But I suppose it's better than staying here, isn't it? And of course it will be a great learning experience for Ron. Where is he anyway?" His bed is made up, as if he has been up for a while.

"Talking to his parents," Harry says, his expression darkening. "They're both here. Ginny's hiding from them, of course."

She studies him for a moment, watching as he loses himself in thought again. Now is as good a time as any, she supposes. So she takes a deep breath and says, "Harry, I never got a chance to ask you what you thought about what Lupin said the other day."

He raises his head. "Which part?"

She shrugs. "All of it?"

After a pause, he says, "Do we have to talk about this now?" Then he sees something past her and adds, "Look, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley are here." He stands up.

There is a pink tinge rising in his cheeks that tells Hermione no good will come of this. "Harry, you aren't thinking of telling them to take Ginny back, are you?"

"Why not?"

"Do you want them to hate you?"

"What? You tried to talk to them, and they don't hate you."

"Yes, well, I'm not known for exploding at people when I'm hacked off."

"No, you just slap them. I'm not going to shout at the Weasleys. And I don't think they're going to hate me."

"Harry... I know they love you and all, but do you really think they love you more than Ginny?"

He stares at her for a moment, then collapses back into his chair. She knows she has hurt him, hates that she had to remind him that the Weasleys aren't his family. But she believes in facing the truth, which is why she then says, "You just want them to take her back because you don't want her with us."

"Hermione, I hate you sometimes." But he leans forward, resting his elbows on the bed, and says, "I just don't know if I can take it. It's so unfair. I can't handle her trying to get close to me, touching me when I'm not prepared, smelling like that perfume..."

She rests a hand on his. "It's only been a few days. You have to give yourself time. And I'll talk to her, I promise. She doesn't know what she's doing, but I'll tell her--"

"Tell her what?" Harry looks horrified. "That I'm horribly in love with her? That she's driving me mad? You can't tell her that!"

Oops. Hermione had briefly forgotten that she was talking to a boy. "Okay, I won't," she says soothingly. "Sorry." To change the subject, she says, "Look, why don't we stay at my house for a while, if we're going to be hiding out as Muggles? You can meet my dad."

He gives her a look as if to say she can't expect to repair the damage she has just dealt him by offering

the promise of a new foster family, but nods.

* * *

At breakfast, Ginny watches Malfoy carefully. She still doesn't quite know how to feel, how to react to her situation. It has all gotten rather too complicated. This must be why Harry is pushing her away, though. It wasn't about her at all; he must have just been feeling guilty about Malfoy. He was trying to turn it around on her, accusing her of not loving him enough, when really it was he that didn't love her. Inexcusable behavior, surely, so why isn't she angrier? Of course, she is still in shock. Harry hates Malfoy. Malfoy is a Death Eater. It just doesn't make sense.

She watches Malfoy, a little ways down at the table where they are all sitting together, as he puts syrup on his eggs (disgusting) while stealing a sidelong glance at Harry. He catches Harry's eye and Harry almost drops his fork, but recovers himself quickly enough that he continues to talk to Neville and no one else notices anything. Suddenly, Ginny realizes what must be going on.

Malfoy is bewitching Harry.

And yet, even as she thinks it she knows it isn't true. Harry threw off Voldemort's Imperius curse; he is not very likely to fall for any sort of spell cast by Draco Malfoy.

And really, though she doesn't like to admit it, it isn't as if she can't imagine Harry doing something like this. After all, he has just as much a connection with Tom as she does (if indeed that is where all this sort of thing is coming from, which she is no longer certain of). No, she knows too much of Harry and the way he handles his sexuality to pretend that he wouldn't be able to do this.

It might even be better, she thinks with a sinking heart. Harry wouldn't feel guilty about doing to Malfoy all the things he used to do to her. She always hoped she could cure him of his shame, but they simply didn't have very much time together. And now he has found a way to completely separate his sexual life from the rest of his life, and abandoned her in the process. Maybe she shouldn't have asked him to sleep with her, shouldn't have tried so hard to get so close to him so fast. But it had been so good, and he never protested when it came down to it-- it was only afterwards that he always looked desperately

ashamed.

Harry glances at Ginny and she realizes that she has been staring. They both look away quickly.

"Weren't you and Harry going out?" says Cho Chang, who has just sat down across from her. Cho smiles charmingly when Ginny looks at her. "Ginny Weasley, right?"

Ginny bristles. As if there was anyone in the school that spring who didn't know who she was, and that she was dating Harry Potter. "Yes," she says, determinedly meeting Cho's dark eyes, "we were."

"Ah," says Cho. "Not anymore?" She piles pancakes onto her plate.

Ginny resents the implicit question of what happened. She hates Cho, she realizes, but for all the wrong reasons. "No, not anymore." She had intended to say something else, but couldn't think of a small way to brush off the subject, no explanation that wouldn't be long and complicated and involve things that Ginny herself still doesn't understand and that she is certainly not going to tell Cho Chang about.

Cho must have caught something of the look on Ginny's face, because she says, "Don't worry, I'm not planning on grabbing him up or anything. I'm going out with Zacharias Smith now."

This is so funny that Ginny chokes on her orange juice. When she is done coughing and sputtering, she can hear Ernie Macmillan say to Harry, in between bragging about his Many Responsibilties, "Ooh, two exes. Tough luck, my friend. You've just got to wonder what they're talking about."

Cho clears her throat, turning a little pink. "So you're helping Harry now, are you?" she says, rather quickly.

"Oh-- yes." A reckless, spiteful part of Ginny wants to tell Cho about Harry and Malfoy. It isn't fair; why does Harry get to be queer and keep it a secret while she gets thrown out of her own home? She almost had a panic attack when her parents came earlier. Luckily, they left quickly, about as eager to see her as

she was them.

Sometimes she feels that no one loves her enough. She knows it is a stupid, childish thing to dwell upon, but the feeling is there. She loves her family, her friends, and Harry, but she never feels them return that love in the same quantities. Everything is conditional.

* * *

After breakfast, Harry has a long talk with the older members of the Order, and seems to do a remarkable job in checking his temper.

"Here's the plan," he says to Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Malfoy, when they are all gathered around a table in the empty Great Hall. "We're going to Hermione's house in Muggle London. You," he looks at Ginny, "can stay here and help the others."

"Oh, come on," Ginny bursts out immediately, the heat rising in her face at an alarming rate.

"Malfoy's staying, too, right?" Ron asks. "Or are we just kicking him out?"

"No!" says Malfoy quickly, paling in contrast to Ginny. "You have to take me with you! I'll be killed!"

"Wouldn't that be a shame," Ron says nastily.

"Ron, shut up," Harry snaps. "Malfoy's coming. He'll be useful. He's a Death Eater; he knows things."

"Are you serious? He doesn't know anything! And he's a traitor! Why do you keep defending him?"

There is a short silence. Harry looks down and adjusts his glasses. "I think he'll be useful," he says. Ginny is actually embarrassed for him. Then she remembers that he is trying to leave her behind.

"Oh, he's useful, but not me?" she says. "I think you need my help. You couldn't even tell that coin was a Portkey."

"What? I don't-- I don't even know how you would--"

"Exactly! You couldn't tell, could you?"

"Wait," says Hermione. "Ginny, you can sense Portkeys? What else can you sense?"

Ginny is mildly surprised. "Well, most spells, I suppose. I mean, there are plenty of people who can identify magical traces and--"

"Most of them spent lifetimes developing the skill, Ginny. Why didn't you mention this before?"

"I didn't think it was a big deal." Everyone is staring at Ginny by now, and it makes her a little uncomfortable.

"Well," says Hermione, after a moment. "I don't guess there's any question now that she's coming."

Ginny watches Harry's mouth twist in displeasure. "Fine," he says, and doesn't look at her.

* * *

They spend that night at the castle, having made arrangements to take the train tomorrow back to

London and stay with Hermione's father.

Draco comes to Potter's room again that night. Now, more than ever, this is about survival. He doesn't want to die, and he sees now that Potter is the only one who can truly protect him. He is a little surprised to find that Potter, too, seems to be shaken by the previous day's events. When Draco comes in, he is sitting on the edge of his bed, wearing only pajama bottoms, and contemplating the floor.

Draco closes the door quietly behind him, and Potter looks up. His eyes follow Draco's feet as he crosses the room. Draco reaches the bed and shoves Potter forcefully backwards onto it. He doesn't actually mind being rough with Potter. It is, after all, what he has been doing for years at school. For a moment, he thinks, this isn't so bad, as climbs on top of the other boy and kisses him roughly. Then, out of nowhere, a sharp pain accompanied by cold metal hits his stomach, and he looks down to see that Potter has drawn a pocket knife and placed it between them. Once again, the cut is not deep, but it stings, and blood seeps onto Potter, who tries to give the knife to Draco.

Draco looks back into Potter's face. His mouth is half open, waiting. He squirms beneath Draco and makes small noises of need. Gritting his teeth, Draco takes the pocket knife. He is unsure of exactly what he is supposed to do. He grips the handle in his sweaty palm and traces a line from one of Potter's shoulders to the other. Potter gasps obscenely and closes his eyes. Draco's stomach churns. Praying this will be enough, he tosses the knife aside and kisses Potter again. He twists his fingers in his black mess of hair and pulls violently. Potter's response is animal. He growls deep in his throat and begins to struggle out of his trousers.

"Fuck me, Malfoy," he breathes.

Draco stops what he was doing, which involved his hand and Potter's cock, and his mouth and Potter's neck. "What?"

"I want you to fuck me," says Potter. "Right now. No, no fingers, don't try to loosen me up, just fuck me. Please. Please, just fuck me."

"Erm," says Draco. "Arseholes don't just lubricate themselves, you know. I can't just sort of..."

"I don't care." Potter is rubbing against him. "Just do it, please."

Potter's begging has actually gotten Draco quite hard, which is good if he is really going to do this. "It's going to hurt," he says.

"I know," says Potter. "But I'm begging you. Oh God, just do it already!"

"You'll scream."

"So gag me. Hurry. Please."

Obediently, Draco takes off his own shirt and rolls it up. He stuffs it into Potter's mouth and ties the ends at the back of his head. Potter moans into the cloth, and the sound is actually pretty exciting. Draco is half turned on, and half disgusted with himself for being turned on. He isn't supposed to be enjoying this. Of course, Potter is forcing him to enjoy it at least a little.

So Draco does fuck him, and Potter does scream, arching against Draco but holding on to his hips, digging his nails into Draco's skin. There is a lot of blood- more than Draco expected. He ends it quickly, pretending to come inside Potter and finishing him off with his mouth.

After lying there breathing heavily for a few minutes, Potter reaches up and unties the gag.

"I told you it would hurt," Draco tells him tiredly.

"Stay here tonight, will you?" says Potter to the ceiling.

"Here? You mean, in your bed?"

Potter doesn't answer, possibly already regretting his invitation.

Draco thinks carefully. "Okay," he says.

* * *

Harry's whole body aches, but he doesn't mind. He asks himself for the fortieth time what he is doing with Malfoy. He wants him, certainly-- wants him to stay here, wants him to keep distracting Harry from... everything. And the amazing thing is that Malfoy seems to do whatever Harry wants him to.

He doesn't like to think that this is why he is doing it-- simply to exercise his power over Malfoy, get him back for years of torture by humiliating him... only Malfoy doesn't seem humiliated. On the contrary, it is Harry who is ashamed of himself, as he always is.

Why is it better that Malfoy see him like this than anyone else? Why doesn't it bother him more that Malfoy knows what he is really like?

No, Harry interrupts himself. No, that's not what I'm really like. Harry is a Good Person. He has to be. Who wants a hero that belongs in Slytherin? He doesn't. It's just that sometimes he is overcome and lust gets confused with all sorts of other feelings and he loses himself, horribly, terrifyingly, to some insane and dark part of himself that rises up like nausea, all-powerful and irresistible.

Perhaps it is because he doesn't like Malfoy, doesn't care what he thinks of him. It doesn't hurt that Malfoy's pride was ruined first, that he is in no position to judge Harry for anything...

Or stop him from doing it. Harry's gut clenches in guilt. But he didn't start it. He never wanted to get involved in anything this complicated. Malfoy pushed him, literally and figuratively, even after he found

out what Harry would do to him. No one would blame Harry.

Well. Except for all of Harry's friends... and Ginny.

He tries not to think about her, but of course he can't really keep her from intruding on his thoughts. It is hard enough to keep her from intruding on his body. Rationally, he knows that he needs her to leave him alone. But part of him still believes that he just plain needs her.

Which is ridiculous, really. They weren't together all that long. But they moved so fast, and she asked him for so much so soon, took from him what he wasn't really ready to give. And it is so tempting to believe that somehow she did it all out of love, so hard to keep himself from giving in and letting her pretend to love him.

But there is the awful truth that she just simply doesn't. She doesn't.

He should have seen it far before now. There were signs everywhere. And he did know how obsessed she was, back in second year. Why couldn't he see that she hadn't actually changed all that much, just gotten better at her game? He is, irrationally, angry at Hermione for not recognizing this and warning him. She is supposed to be the one who actually knows what goes on in the madness of girls' brains. Ron, too, should have known his own sister better.

Harry wishes Ron had forbidden him to go out with Ginny. Not only because she has hurt him, but because now Harry has this thing hanging over his head whenever he speaks to Ron.

Harry slept with Ginny. Didn't just sleep with her. Left bruises and marks on her. If Ron knew.... Well, he certainly would never speak to Harry again, and with good reason.

Although...

Harry looks over at Draco, eyes shut so tight that Harry knows he is not asleep, slightly blurry, with pale

hair reflecting pale moonlight and shadows falling across just the right planes and hollows. (Harry never thought shadows could be erotic, but he was apparently wrong.)

.... There are now other things Harry does that Ron would not approve of.

Harry still hasn't decided what he thinks about the whole... gay... thing. He had never thought about it much before, because he didn't think he was a poofter, and didn't know anyone who was, apart from rumors about Malfoy, which he had enjoyed but not really believed.

When Malfoy asked him if he thought it was evil, Harry had said yes, mostly because it did feel so very wrong. But sleeping with Ginny was even more wrong. Everything that turns him on is wrong and sick and twisted and generally fucked up. He rather thinks that sex itself is wrong, and wishes that everyone, including himself, would just stop being so obsessed with it so that they can get on with their lives and not have anything more to be ashamed of.

Harry turns over and buries his face in the little spot where the back of Malfoy's shoulder meets the pillow. He closes his eyes and tries to quiet his thoughts enough to sleep.

In the middle of the night he wakes up again when Malfoy shifts in his sleep. This small motion stirs Harry, and out of impulse he bites Malfoy's slender shoulder-- not hard enough to draw blood, but just enough to wake him up. Malfoy gives a little grunt and rolls over to face Harry, opening his eyes blearily.

"I was sleeping, Potter," he says.

"Sorry," says Harry, and waits, watching the other boy with growing hunger.

"It's okay." Malfoy looks back at him, then runs his eyes down Harry's body in a way that makes him shiver.

He wants Malfoy to do something. He opens his mouth, to say what, he doesn't know, but then he

doesn't have to because Malfoy moves forward and kisses him, hard, bruising his lips.

Harry starts to lose control. He bites at Malfoy's mouth, and tastes blood.

Malfoy pulls back and begins to move his head down, but Harry is seized by a new and wild idea, utterly irresistible. He catches Malfoy by the hair and pulls him back up to look him in the eye. "No. Let me do it."

Malfoy's flushed face pales. Then he laughs. "You don't know how."

"So do it for me. Fuck my mouth."

Malfoy's eyes grow wide as twin silver coins. "Are you serious? Look, Potter, I don't think you really understand how all this stuff works... I mean... What are you trying to do?"

"What's the worst that could happen?"

"You could throw up. You could-- I don't know. But it could be very unpleasant... for you."

Harry is frustrated and impatient with all this talking. "Look, you said the same thing before, but I took it, didn't I?"

Malfoy says nothing, though he looks angry. "I don't think it's a good idea," he says finally.

This sounds familiar to Harry, but he can't think where he has heard it before, so he brushes it aside. He is more interested in the way Malfoy flinches when Harry reaches for him.

"Malfoy," says Harry. "I'm not going to... to bite down or anything, alright? Do you really think I would do that?"

Malfoy raises his eyes to meet Harry's. "You could do it accidentally," he says quietly.

"So tell me how to do it right."

"Tell you? Potter, that is the most--"

"You must have had a first time. How did you know what to do?"

"It's in my blood," says Malfoy haughtily. "There is not a single Malfoy who can't pull off a decent blow job."

Harry makes a face at the thought of Lucius Malfoy giving anyone a blow job. If Malfoy was trying to kill his desire, he has succeeded.

However, it takes just one look at Draco to bring it back again at full force. His blood may not be pure, but at the moment it is rushing hotly through his body in a decidedly southerly direction.

He leans over Malfoy and bites his nipple, making Malfoy mew and a pink flush rise in his cheeks. "Potter," he says roughly, "I really really like my cock, okay?"

"I'm not that terrible," says Harry. The word cock coming out of Malfoy's pretty, sneering, mouth makes him light-headed.

"Sit up," Harry tells him. "It'll be easier." Malfoy looks skeptical, but obeys, kneeling on the bed in front of Harry.

Harry is a little nervous when he is face-to-face with Malfoy's erection, but he is even more excited. He liked doing this sort of thing for Ginny, hated it when she did it for him, because he didn't like seeing her do something so dirty.

Harry opens his mouth and slowly lowers it onto Malfoy's cock. Malfoy holds his breath, watching Harry carefully.

Then Harry almost chokes, and he feels Malfoy flinch, but he manages to relax his throat enough that he doesn't gag.

When Harry has taken Malfoy's cock completely into his mouth, he stops.

Malfoy makes a noise of impatience. "Come on, Potter. Are you really that dim? You're supposed to move, for fuck's sake."

Harry raises his eyebrows at him.

"Fuck," says Malfoy heatedly. "You are the most-" he thrusts, and Harry almost collapses, the pleasure of the fullness, the violence, overwhelming him, "masochistic-" another thrust and Harry sees stars, "fucked up-" Harry isn't sure how much he can take before he himself comes, "slut I have ever met!"

Malfoy comes hard into Harry's mouth, and he doesn't have any choice but to swallow, and wouldn't want to do anything else anyway. Malfoy collapses backwards to lean against the headboard, still staring at Harry.

Harry looks back dazedly, and moves forward when Malfoy reaches out a hand. It doesn't take long before Harry, too, falls forward in exhaustion, face pressed firmly into Malfoy's neck.

* * *

Draco spends an unpleasant night, lying there in Potter's blood and come, feeling Potter's breath hot and foreign on his back.

It isn't that he didn't enjoy Potter's mouth, though it was bloody terrifying to think of those teeth that had left so many marks on the rest of his body. No, the problem is that he did enjoy it. He'd never done anything quite like that before, and it was disturbingly erotic.

This isn't exactly how this is supposed to go. He isn't supposed to like this. What if he starts wanting Potter?

But then he thinks the unthinkable: Why shouldn't he? Wouldn't it be easier if he wanted this, if he learned to enjoy it? .....If he could convince himself to fall in love with Potter... ?

Oh, god!

Easier, yes. It would be easier. But so horrible. Draco feels tainted enough already with Potter's sweat, sleeping secretly in his bed like a mistress, obeying him like a whore. He thought he was done with his pride, but now it is still hard to shake the humiliation, and, even worse, the sense of his own betrayal.

Fuck. He squeezes his eyes shut. This is inexcusable. Inexcusable for him to find even the slightest bit of pleasure in his trysts with Potter, apart from the strictly physical sort necessary for this kind of thing.

Draco tries to calm down. If he keeps up this train of thought, he'll go mad. He takes several deep breaths and tries to think logically.

As long as he is here, he rationalizes, there is really no reason why he shouldn't have some fun, right? After all, it is at Potter's expense. No one could expect him not to take every chance to hurt his arch rival.

Yes. That's it. That's how he will get through this, and get Potter to protect him at the same time. It will be like they are back at school, and this is just another game, more elaborate than anything Draco has cooked up before, but also more effective in the end. If he gets Potter to fall in love with him, and then leaves as soon as the war is over, shows Potter how he was just using him... Potter will be devastated.

A very suitable goal. Draco pictures the look on Potter's face when that day comes, and the image lulls him to sleep.

* * *

The next morning, Potter shakes Draco awake. "Malfoy, you have to get out of here. Everyone else will be up soon."

Draco groans. He didn't get much sleep. Then again, he thinks dully, when has he had a restful night since leaving Hogwarts?

Still, he doesn't want to get up. Stupid Potter, waking him up at unreasonable hours in the night and morning.

"Won't they notice," he asks him, "when you can't walk or sit down?"

"You think I don't know magic?" snaps Potter irritably. He is already dressed, and Draco notices the sheets are clean, too.

Draco scowls, but rolls out of bed and pulls on his jeans, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He hunts around and finds his shirt buried in the bedclothes. It is not looking its best.

"Potter," Draco says mournfully, "you've ruined my shirt."

Potter glances up from trying to make the bed, looking guilty. "Sorry," he says.

Draco looks back at him and pouts.

"It wasn't, like, your favorite or something, was it?" Potter asks nervously.

"Well, sort of," says Draco, "as in, it's the only one I own at the moment."

Potter's eyes go wide. "Oh," he says. "Erm..."

"The decent thing to do would be to lend me your wand so I can mend it."

"You must be joking. No way am I giving you my wand."

"Oh, come on. Do you really still think I'm going to kill you, Mr. 'I-think-I'll-give-the-former-Death-Eater-a-knife-every-time-we're-alone-together?'"

A spasm crosses Potter's face, but he recovers himself quickly and raises his eyebrows at Draco. "Does it bother you that I'm not afraid of you?"

Draco scowls. It does, a little, but he isn't going to tell Potter that. "I just want to rescue my shirt from its horribly wrinkled and slightly bitten state of shame. Now are you going to let me use your wand or not?"

"No," says Potter shortly. "You can't do magic, or they'll be able to detect it, remember?"

"Inside Hogwarts? Don't be ridiculous. Potter, there is enough magic around here, including all sorts of

cloaking wards, to confuse Merlin himself into thinking the sky is green."

"Is that some sort of expression?" Potter asks curiously.

"Just give me the wand or fix my shirt for me!" Draco yells in frustration. He really wishes he could punch Potter.

"Okay, okay. Here, just don't blame me if your dear old dad shows up to kill you."

"That's great, Potter. Take the fact that my own father hates me and rub it in my face. Real classy." Draco takes the wand without looking at Potter, and sets about mending his shirt. It feels good to be holding a wand again. It is tempting to get up and run away with it, cackling and casting spells at random.

"I'm sorry," says Potter. Draco glances up at him and is surprised to see that he really is.

"Well," says Draco, embarrassed, "it's okay. Your family hates you, too, don't they?"

Potter shrugs. "And I hate them. It sort of works out."

Draco goes back to his work, but after a moment comes to a decision and says, "You're a terrible liar, you know."

There is silence for a moment, before Potter replies, "Well, I'm not about to discuss my childhood with you, anyway."

Draco shrugs, still not looking up. "Suit yourself." At least now Potter thinks Draco is interested in his

feelings.

When he is done with his shirt, Draco does not run off cackling with Potter's wand, partly because the symbolism of even having it in his hand has occurred to him, but hands it back peaceably.

"Okay," says Potter. "You really do have to leave now. It's a miracle no one's come in already."

"It's because they think you're wanking or something," says Draco wisely.

"Then you'd better not let anyone see you come out, had you?" Potter shoots back.

"Whatever you say, Potter." Draco bows, and leaves Potter fuming.

* * *

Ron and Hermione aren't speaking to each other, as they had another row yesterday, so when Hermione follows Harry quickly into a compartment on the empty train, Ron glowers at her and keeps walking. Ginny and Malfoy, too, each take a compartment to themselves. It's not going to be a very cheerful journey.

Hermione sits across from Harry, and after some time of both of them looking out the window, she decides once again that now is as good a time as ever to ask him about what Remus said.

"Harry," she says tentatively, "is there.... is there anything you want to talk about?"

He looks at her with vague dread. "Doesn't that just mean there's something you want to talk to me about?"

"Okay, look. Everything's been happening so quickly, we still never really got a chance to talk about all the things Professor Lupin said the other night."

"We had the chance," Harry counters. "'We' just preferred not to take it."

"Really, there's no need to be difficult. Just tell me what you thought of it."

He shrugs and looks out the window at the green hills rushing past. "I believe him, I guess." When she sighs, he turns back to her. "What exactly are you looking for?"

"Like I said, I want to know what you think. I was really surprised at you, Harry, when you said you agreed with Ron..."

There is a pause, in which Harry looks like he's trying to keep himself from saying something, but says it anyways. "You kept telling them to keep an open mind and try to see the other side of the argument, but you never listened to them. I mean, you and I were raised by Muggles! What if there is something about it that's got to do with Dark magic? How would we know?"

Hermione bristles. "I have looked into both sides," she says icily. "And you're the one that's clueless about the wizarding world, not me. I pay attention, remember?"

He scowls and looks away again. "It just seems like a bit of a coincidence," he says quietly.

"What is?"

He shakes his head. "Nothing."

"Harry, do you really think Ginny might be possessed by Voldemort and that he's using it to make her want to have sex with women or something?"

"Of course not," he sighs. "Can we just drop it?"

"Why? Why can't you just talk to me? What is it that you're hiding?" She knows she's getting too worked up. She even finds herself unconsciously leaning forward in her seat as if she could literally push him in to telling her.

"NOTHING!" he shouts finally, and throws his hands up over his face, rocking forward so that all she sees is the top of his head.

"Oh, Harry..." She really hadn't meant to upset him, but if this is what it takes to get him to open up to her, then this is what has to happen. She can't help him if she doesn't know what the problem is. She slides off her seat and kneels before him, taking hold of his wrists and gently pulling them from his face. "Harry, you don't need to hide from me."

He gives up and lets his hands fall. She catches one of them in hers, squeezing briefly and straightening slightly so that there foreheads meet, and she can actually see over his glasses into his bright green eyes. He meets her gaze, inches away, and says softly, "You can't just--"

But at that moment the compartment door slides open. Hermione looks around to see Ron, standing in the doorway, rapidly turning as red as his hair.

"Ron, don't--" Harry begins, because it is him that Ron is glaring at.

"Shut up," says Ron. "I don't want to hear it." He pauses and draws a deep breath, then bursts out again. "You take everything!" he shouts. "Everything!"

"Do you mind?" says Hermione irritably. She is definitely not in the mood for Ron's irrationality.

"OH, I'M SO SORRY! PLEASE, CARRY ON. DON'T LET ME INTERRUPT." Ron slams the compartment door shut again.

After a moment of rather stunned silence, Hermione stands up. "Harry," she says tersely. "I'm sorry but there's a murder I have to commit." She doesn't wait for a response.

She catches up with him a little ways down the corridor. "Ron!" she screams at him before she even reaches him. "What is wrong with you?"

He stops and turns on his heel. "Me? What's wrong with me?"

"FIRST OF ALL," Hermione drowns him out. "I am not some piece of property to be taken by Harry or anybody else! SECOND," she yells as he opens his mouth to argue. "We were only talking!"

"You could have just told me. You should've said something a long time ago."

"THERE IS NOTHING GOING ON WITH ME AND HARRY!" Hermione doesn't know quite why she is so angry, but she is shaking.

"Really?" Ron raises his eyebrows. "Because it looked pretty intimate to me."

"Intimate? We were talking!"

He steps forward and takes her face in his hands, presses his forehead against hers. "You don't think this is intimate?" he breathes.

Hermione feels dizzy. His mouth is very close to hers. Her breath hitches and she says haltingly, "Not... with Harry..."

He pulls back very slightly to examine her face. His thumb moves down on her cheek and catches on the corner of her mouth. She shivers a little and her mouth opens almost involuntarily. He leans in again and says softly, almost against her lips, "If you're in love with him, I'll leave you alone."

This is so unfair. She has to keep herself from sighing as she whispers, "I'm not. I'm not," and moves her head the centimeter forward it takes to make her lips touch his.

But almost immediately, she remembers herself. She breaks away and steps back. "But I still haven't forgiven you."

"What?" He doesn't let go of her, so she grabs his wrists and pulls them down, shoving him away from her.

"I don't want to have anything to do with you-- I don't even want to speak to you-- until you accept Ginny for what she is."

He stares at her in horror. "Hermione, you can't do this to a bloke. It's not fair!"

"Watch me." She walks away to find an empty compartment where she can kick the seats and be angry with everyone, including herself.

* * *

Draco is sitting innocently and quietly in his compartment, browsing through an interesting Dark Arts book in Latin, bothering no one, when the Weaslette slides the door open with a bang.

He looks up at her. "Can I help you?"

She stalks in and slams the door behind her. "You slept with him."

Uh oh. "You're going to have to be more specific," he says. "I've slept with a lot of 'hims.'"

"First of all, I very much doubt that. And you know bloody well that I'm talking about Harry."

Draco tries to look confused, which actually isn't that hard, because he can't imagine how she knows. "Why would I shag Potter?"

"I don't know." She is staring at him hard, her jaw working furiously. "I just wanted to let you know that I think it's disgusting, and that I hate you and I don't need your help with my family and also Blaise tried to kiss me at one of Slughorn's parties, so... so now you know how it feels, you bastard!"

She turns to leave, but Draco leaps up and catches her on the shoulder, spinning her around to face him. He wants to kill her. He hits her across the face, hard, so that she is thrown against the compartment door. She gasps, and before she can recover herself and stand up properly, he grabs a handful of bright hair and tugs, pulling her head back. She reaches for her wand, but he takes hold of her wrist and twists until she drops it to the floor with a cry of pain.

"You watch what you say, whore," he hisses into her ear. She whimpers and squirms in a vain attempt to ease the pull on her scalp. He gives one last cruel tug and releases her.

She stumbles, and it takes a moment for her to steady herself. Then she turns around with a strange, pained look on her face. Before he has time to react, she steps forward and, of all things, kisses him.

Or makes a valiant attempt at it, anyway. He shoves her so fast that once again she slams into the door,

this time with such force that it rattles the whole car. (It is good that all the compartments are sound-proofed as a matter of course, so no one can actually hear it.)

"What the fuck is WRONG with you?" he screams. It isn't as if a girl has never tried to kiss him before, but it doesn't usually happen after he duffs them up. "What is it with you BLOODY GRYFFINDORS?" He is so angry he can hardly breathe. She is still lying crumpled and shaking against the sliding door.

He picks up her wand from where it fell a few feet away from him.

He is rapidly losing all control of himself. It is very hard not to kill her. On the other hand, there are worse things he can do.

She stares up at him fearfully. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to..." And then it comes to him. A brilliant, beautiful plan. "I'm going to make you watch."

"What?"

"Shut up." He waves the wand and Petrificus Totalus forces her jaw shut. Wingardium Leviosa lifts her up into the air.

He stows her on the luggage rack above the seats, and casts a quick Glamour over her. It won't hold up to scrutiny, but he doubts Potter will be in any state to look very closely. Draco stuffs her wand in one of the cracks between the seat cushions and then, smirking to himself, leaves to find Potter.

* * *

Harry is glad that Hermione doesn't come back anytime soon, as it gives him time to think. He is annoyed at her both for pressuring him to tell her about things he doesn't want to talk about, and for getting Ron

angry at him. Still, sitting around thinking about how irritatingly stupid she can be doesn't make him feel any better. He decides to go to the bathroom, more for an excuse to stretch his legs than for any real need.

Malfoy is waiting for him in the corridor. For a moment, Harry has something of a flashback to all the times before that he has met Malfoy on this train. But instead of hexing him, Malfoy darts forward and, in one fluid motion, pins Harry against the door of one of the compartments.

Harry squirms, trying to escape. "Not here," he whispers hurriedly. "Someone will see us. Not here!"

"I'm not stupid, Potter," Malfoy says smoothly, his mouth centimeters from Harry's, his whole body pressed up against him so hard that Harry feels his knees go weak.

While Harry struggles to breathe, Malfoy takes a step back and at the same time reaches behind Harry. He throws open the sliding door, and Harry tumbles backwards into the compartment, falling on his back on the floor.

For a moment, Harry panics, having the irrational feeling that someone is in the room. He looks around, however, and the compartment is empty. Then he is distracted anyway by Malfoy, who has stepped across the threshold and slides the door closed again. Even looking sickly pale and unhealthily thin, Draco Malfoy is still beautiful. His hair never dulls, and his eyes are glinting with an intensity that Harry hasn't seen before, or at least not in a long time. Harry shivers as Malfoy's mouth twists up at one corner.

"It suits you, Potter," Malfoy purrs. "This position. I like you on your back."

Harry blushes, and realizes his legs are also spread indecently wide. He doesn't move, however. He waits to see what Malfoy will do.

Malfoy says, "Tell me how much you want it."

Harry, though not unexcited before, goes instantly hard at this. "What?"

Malfoy grins wickedly and steps towards him. "Go on." He kneels in between Harry's open legs, so that Harry can feel him through the two layers of denim, and runs his hands up Harry's hips, digging his nails hard into the soft skin under his shirt. "Beg me like you did before. Tell me what you want."

He scratches his fingernails deeper into Harry's skin, and Harry feels his reason dissolve, chased away by Malfoy's intoxicating, overwhelming, physical presence.

"I want you," Harry pants. "I want you to fuck me."

Malfoy starts to slowly undo Harry's jeans. "How much do you want it?" he says casually.

Harry makes a very undignified sound and tries to help Malfoy get Harry's jeans off, but Malfoy slaps his hands away. "No. You be a good whore or I won't do it at all."

Harry, hoping against hope that he isn't drooling, says, "No... Please. Don't stop. I want... I want you so much. Oh god..."

Malfoy pulls Harry's jeans and boxers down together, roughly. Harry makes more embarrassing noises. "Come on," he babbles, "Please... I'm begging you... Fuck me... hard..."

"I've changed my mind," Malfoy declares matter-of-factly. "I want you on your knees."

Harry wastes no time in obeying. He sits up and turns to kneel before the seat, bracing himself against it. "Do it now," he says roughly, urgently, over his shoulder.

"What if I refuse?"

"No!" Harry cries. "No, please..."

"What would you do then, Chosen One?" Malfloy's voice is at his ear now, and he bites at the spot where Harry's jaw meets his throat.

Harry screams in a combination of pleasure and frustration. "Stop it! Stop... torturing me!" He is almost weeping.

Malfoy laughs against Harry's neck. "Here," he says, and he presses two fingers against the side of Harry's mouth.

Harry is so desperate to be doing something that he seizes Malfoy's wrist and takes his hand as far into his mouth as it will go, gagging as squirming fingers fill his throat.

Malfoy laughs again. "Good job, Potter. Now let me go and hold nice and still while I fuck you."

Harry lets go, but can't help biting at Malfoy's fingers as they pass his teeth. Then he lays his forehead against the leather of the seat cushion and tries not to moan too loudly as two slick fingers enter him from behind. "Oh god..."

Still, this isn't what he wants. "Malfoy... Come on.... Fuck me.... I need your cock... I want you inside me..."

"My, my, you are a slut, aren't you? Come-hungry whore."

"Alright, I'm a whore. Just fuck me!"

Malfoy makes a satisfied noise deep in his throat, and a moment later he is giving Harry what he wants.

It is both infinitely better and slightly worse than last time. Worse, because Harry comes too quickly, after all of that build-up, and because it doesn't hurt as much. Better, because without the blinding pain he can actually feel Malfoy moving inside him, and because Malfoy lasts longer, still thrusting mercilessly long after Harry has finished, which somehow doesn't stop being intensely pleasurable.

After Malfoy comes, he spends a few moments collapsed over Harry, panting into his ear. Harry doesn't mind.

"You have no stamina, Potter," Malfoy says finally.

"You teased me for about an hour, what did you expect?" Harry replies tiredly.

"I expected the Boy Who Lived to be able to do a job properly."

Harry scoffs. "Well, it isn't as if it ruined much of anything for you."

"No, thank god. If it did, I would be considerably more upset."

"Well, since you're not, do you think you could get off of me?"

"Oh, this is a change of pace. Now you want me to get off of you?"

"Shut up, Malfoy."

Malfoy sits back, leaving Harry free to turn around and lean back against the seat. He hasn't quite recovered his breath, and for all that is was less painful than last time, he still hurts.

He hasn't seen Malfoy post-orgasm in proper light before. His pale hair is damp and sticking to his forehead, where he sweeps it away from his eyes. His cheeks are flushed feverishly and his chest is rising and falling rapidly under the newly-mended shirt. Harry wants to put his lips to the hollow at the base of Malfoy's throat, but he doesn't.

Malfoy meets Harry's eye and grins, in a glitter of teeth. Something about the wicked smile both excites and shames Harry. He stands slowly, wincing, and pulls his trousers back up.

"Going so soon?" Malfoy asks him, still grinning. "You never want to cuddle."

"Sod off," says Harry.

"I think I just did," Malfoy points out.

Harry can think of nothing particularly intelligent to say to this, so he wipes his glasses, which have become drenched in sweat, and continues his journey to the bathroom.

* * *

Malfoy stands up once Harry has gone, and zips up his jeans. Then he fishes Ginny's wand from its hiding place between the seats and turns it on her. She feels the Glamour melt off of her like water, and then he un-Petrifies her. She starts to tremble, but somehow scrambles, with very little dignity, down from the luggage rack.

When she is on her feet in front of him, Malfoy grins at her. "Good show?" he asks innocently.

"You're horrible," she says shakily. "I'm going to tell everyone what you're doing to him."

"All the worse for him. And even then, do you really think he'd give me up?" He steps towards her.

She quivers but doesn't back away. He laughs. "You're just the same as him, aren't you? Look at you, I bet you're wet right now." He grabs her hair again, jerking her roughly forward so that she stumbles into him. Then, without warning, he stuffs his hand down the front of her jeans. She gasps in shock, feeling his fingers squirm uncomfortably over her knickers. He is right, of course. She can't help her arousal, or the way he is making her rub her knees together and grasp at his shirt until her knuckles turn white, for all that she knows where those fingers were not fifteen minutes ago.

"You don't even like girls," she growls through her teeth. She wants him to stop, desperately, and also needs him not to.

"I don't like Potter, either," he chuckles. "But I do like torturing stupid Gryffindors. This is my revenge, Weasley."

"Haven't..." She gasps, and clutches him tighter. "Haven't you done enough to us? ... To him?"

"It's never enough," he says, and pulls his hand away. She chokes, and he makes a face as he wipes the damp on her shirt. "You're disgusting," he says. "Both of you. Shameless sluts. I could make you do whatever I want, couldn't I?" He gives her hair one last tug before releasing her. "It's lucky for you lot all I want is protection."

"And he's given it to you!" she screams as he turns to leave. "And this is how you repay him?"

"Of course," he says softly, looking back at her. His features have hardened, with no trace of that terrible smirk or that cruel laugh. "He made me beg. It's only fair."

He slams the door behind him, and Ginny lets herself fall into one of the seats, her mind full of haze and

fury and frustrated lust.

* * *

Draco spends the rest of the train ride gloriously alone and undisturbed in his compartment, basking in the joy of his Brilliantly Executed and Most Excellent Plan.

Oh, it was good. Draco has been waiting for just such a chance to grind Potter and his stupid friends completely into the dirt ever since Potter shunned him that first day on this very train. Even stomping on Harry's face, though admittedly one of the better moments of Draco's life, pales in comparison to this, and to what Draco is going to do to Potter when this is all over.

He begins to plan how he will do it, how he will leave Potter. It would be best, so good, to do it in the midst of Potter's victory. Yes. Draco will celebrate with him, and then he'll get Potter all worked up and cut up and choking for it, and then-- then Draco won't give it to him. He'll leave. Walk away, laughing. Tell Potter what he's been doing all along.

Draco spends a few moments imagining the look on Potter's face, grinning broadly to himself. Then he has another thought.

Potter will be angry. Very, very angry.

Perhaps, thinks Draco, it would be best to do something about Potter's wand beforehand. That should do it. He feels better. Time to continue his joyous basking.

He can enjoy fucking Potter now, can enjoy that the Weaslette knows everything that he does to Potter, that it will play in her imagination until it puts her off sex for good, even with girls. And that, one day, it will come out, in some quarrel between her and Potter, and she will tell him she knows, that she saw, and Potter will be broken all over again. He might even kill her, if he loses control. How delightful!

But it isn't, not really. Draco ignores this fact, ignores the sneaking consciousness of what his life has become. It's only been two days since his father turned against him. There will be time to sort things out.

He will wait, and amuse himself with Potter in the meantime, and in the end he won't be alone. He will leave Potter, but he won't be alone. He has betrayed everyone, but surely, surely, there will still be something for him out in the world.

He will amuse himself with Potter in the meantime. Because it is good, very good. He is immensely satisfied with their session today, and certain that it won't get old any time soon. No, he'll never get tired of torturing Potter, of teasing him and hearing him beg and watching him writhe with need... Need for Draco, the one Potter was too good to shake hands with.

Ha. Who's in charge now, Mr. Potter? Who gets to hurt you and make you ask for more?

Me. The little bubble of pure joy in Draco's chest, the sublime feeling of victory and pleasure, doesn't subside the whole way to London.

* * *

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Chapter 7: Marked

Chapter Seven

They arrive at King's cross station and Hermione talks to her father on what she calls a "public telephone," and then they take a Muggle cab to her flat. Ginny doesn't talk to anyone on the way. In fact,

the only person saying much of anything is Hermione.

"It's not very big," she tells them nervously. "We'll have to share rooms."

She is right; it isn't very big. Ginny didn't know that people lived in places this small. The Burrow is small from the outside, but there is never any shortage of space inside, and it's strange to be in a place that doesn't magically change itself to accommodate the needs of its occupants. Malfoy looks around with nothing short of horror on his face. Even Ron is too slow to disguise his shock. Hermione blushes furiously.

Harry smiles at her and says, "It's really nice. It's actually quite big for this neighborhood, isn't it?"

"Well," says Hermione, "yes, there are two bedrooms. Most of these flats are just one room."

Malfoy's jaw actually drops and Ginny hates him for putting on this show. "It is nice," she says, and she isn't lying. Once she is over her initial reaction, she sees the apartment is tastefully decorated, with much nicer things than Ginny and Ron have at home. She wonders if Hermione is rich.

"Mm, thanks." Hermione is still very pink. "So I thought that I could sleep in my father's room with him, and then two of you could stay in my room, and two of you could be out here."

Ron turns to Ginny immediately and says, "Ginny, you're with me."

"What?" she says indignantly. "What if I don't want to room with you? You snore."

"Well I'm not going to let you sleep in a room alone with Harry or Malfoy."

"Not going to let me?"

"It's okay," says Malfoy, leering at her. "She can room with me."

A shock of disgust rushes through Ginny. "I'd rather die," she spits.

"I'm so sorry we don't have enough rooms for all of us to sleep separately," Hermione says.

"Oh!" says Ginny guiltily. "No, it's okay. Don't worry about it. I'll room with Ron."

"Oh, good," says Hermione, in a way that lets Ginny know she has just been tricked. "You two can have my room. Harry, Malfoy-- sorry, but you'll have to sleep out here. There are two couches, so it shouldn't be too bad, I hope."

Harry nods, stone-faced. Malfoy sneers, but says nothing.

* * *

Many hours later, Draco has extricated himself from Potter's sticky limbs and moved, for propriety's sake, to the couch across the room. Potter is pretending to sleep, but Draco can tell by his breathing that he is still awake, too.

Draco is beginning to have second thoughts about his actions on the train, mostly because the Weaslette hasn't Healed the wounds he dealt her. There is a purple bruise blooming on her left temple where her head hit the wall of the compartment. She has combed her hair over it and kept her head bowed to hide it all evening, but still he is surprised no one has said anything. He really can't believe she didn't just use magic. Is she really that scared of giving them away? Maybe she just doesn't know how. Or maybe she wants someone to say something so she can tell them who did it. His mouth goes dry for a moment. For all his bravado, he isn't actually certain yet that Potter won't turn him out.

One of the bedroom doors, both of which open into the living room where Draco and Potter are, opens with a creak. Draco squints in the darkness, and from the light of the street lamps coming through the shaded windows he can make out the Weaslette.

She starts forward, but hasn't gone very far before she collides with Potter's couch. "Bugger," she says.

"Ack," Potter says. He sits up. "Ginny? What are you doing? Is something wrong?"

"No." She sweeps the hair out of her eyes and winces. "I was just trying to get to the bathroom."

There is a short and awkward silence, in which neither of them moves, and they just sort of look at each other in their mad Gryffindor way.

"Well," says Potter. "It's that way."

"Yes," she says. "I realize that now."

"So go. What are you trying to do?"

"Well, mostly I'm trying to figure out why you're sleeping without a shirt when it's actually pretty cold in here, and who gave you that love-bite and those cuts."

Draco almost laughs out loud. The Weaslette has more balls than he gave her credit for. He wishes he had a clearer view of Potter's face.

"It was you," Potter tells her.

"I know who it was," she says, and leans over the back of the sofa so that she is looking directly down at him. "It was--"

She cuts herself off with a small shriek, because Potter seizes her shoulders and pulls her over the back of the couch. She tumbles on top of him and almost falls off, but steadies herself with a foot on the floor. "What are you--" she stops again as his hand closes around something gleamingly pale hanging from her throat.

"Where did you get this?" he asks softly.

"I... I'm sorry I took it. It was in one of those piles of junk from when we were cleaning house at Grimmauld Place...."

"Grimmauld Place," he repeats slowly. "It was there the whole time..."

"What? What is it?"

"Ginny, I'm going to need to take this back."

"Only if you tell me what it is."

Potter glances over at Draco, whose face is partly covered in shadow.

"Is he asleep?" says the Weaslette.

"I don't know," says Potter. "Let me get up, will you?"

She slides off of him awkwardly, and stands up. "Are you finally going to tell me what's going on?"

"Yeah, I reckon I have to, don't I?"

They go into the room the Weaslette came out of. Draco rolls over and scowls to himself. He would rather know everything that is happening. After all, it is his friends and family that the Gryffindors are trying to defeat, and Draco would like to know if either side is making progress. Then again, he thinks with a shudder of foreboding, maybe it's better that he not know.

* * *

Ginny sits down next to Harry on the floor of Hermione's bedroom. Ron is snoring in the bed. Harry watches him for a little while before saying, "The locket is a Horcrux."

She reaches up to finger it, feels the cold like an electric shock. "What's a Horcrux?"

"It's a bit of Voldemort's soul. He made six of them. The idea is that as long as one of those still exists, he can never actually die."

Her hand clamps around the metal. "I see. Was the diary one, too?"

He looks at her through the dark. Light from the street lamp outside glints off his glasses, one bright spot in the darkened room. "Yes," he says. "How did you... You felt it?"

"Yeah." She swallows and looks away. "It feels the same. It feels like him. So what's a bit of Voldemort's soul doing in Sirius's house? And how did you know what it was, if you can't feel it?"

"It's Slytherin's locket; I recognized it. It's the one Dumbledore took me to get the night he-- you know."

He clears his throat. "I don't know why it was in the house."

Ginny unhooks the chain from the back of her neck and slides the locket off. It falls with a noise like falling water into her palm. The snake on it glints at her, so obviously Slytherin's now that it has been identified. "Here," she says to Harry. "I suppose you need to do something really complicated to it."

"Yeah." He takes it, brushing her hand with his. Her head reels. It is all so confusing. The locket, the diary, Tom's handsome face, the way Harry touches her, the way he touches Malfoy, the marks he leaves, and the way he feels, warm, next to her. It isn't fair. It's so painful to be here, so close to him, to the body she used to be allowed to touch. She leans her head experimentally against his shoulder.

She gets no response. She doesn't think she's ever seen Harry not react to being touched before. It's as if he doesn't notice. She looks over and sees that he is absorbed in the locket, turning it over in his hands.

He hisses softly, and the locket opens smoothly and silently, like a night-blooming flower. A small stream of ash falls through Harry's fingers, some of it billowing upwards and outwards on the eddies in the air.

Harry coughs, sending more grey clouds swirling about. "Ashes," he says. "Why is it full of ashes?"

"Don't ask me," says Ginny. She reaches up and brushes some of the fine dust from his hair. She turns to look at the carpet, about to say something about how it is ruined, but as she does, she feels him brush against her cheek and she snaps her head back to look at him. But it is too late. He draws back quickly and looks away. He focuses once more on the locket, closing it delicately with greyed hands, looking as if he has already thought better of trying to kiss her.

Maybe he's right; maybe it is better this way. Ginny just hates that they have both lost so much. She says, "What are you going to do with it?"

"We're not sure yet." He doesn't look at her. "That's part of what we're researching."

"And the other part?"

"Well, we have to find the other Horcrux. We have this one, the diary, the snake, and the Gaunt ring that Dumbledore destroyed. There's also Hufflepuff's cup. We think it might be in the Muggle orphanage where Voldemort grew up, and there's one more, only we don't know what or where it is."

She stares at him for a moment, though he still won't meet her eye. It all sounds so hopeless. At the same time, she feels a small surge of anger. "So how come you didn't tell me any of this before? I can help, you know."

"Yes, I do know," he says slowly. He doesn't answer the question, but then again he doesn't really need to. She knows very well, now, why he never wanted her with him, why he keeps trying to leave her behind.

* * *

The next day Hermione wakes up when her father leaves for work.

"Did you sleep well?" he asks. She nods sleepily, though in truth she didn't. She's never shared a bed with anyone before in her life, and spent the whole night as close to the edge of the mattress as she could get without falling off. He sits down on the bed next to her, already dressed. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yes," she says. "We're just... well, there's sort of a war on. In the wizarding world, I mean." She had meant to tell him this later, when they had more time to talk about it, but she doesn't like the thought of them staying here and taking up his house without even a decent explanation. She looks down and fiddles with the blankets. "And remember how I told you that Harry's sort of a big deal? Well, he... I don't know how to explain it without taking hours to do it, but basically Harry is the one who has to beat Voldemort, the guy who's trying to take over. It has to do with a prophecy and some other magical ties and I don't really understand it-- I don't think anyone does, even Harry. But we're helping him and we need to stay away from magic for a while, because magic is traceable. That's all. There's no way they'd be able to track us here, though, because we aren't doing any magic..." She finishes and looks up at her

father.

He looks at her for a moment, and his mouth twists all around, as if he is tying to make up his mind about something. "Hermione," he says, "I don't like the thought of you getting involved in dangerous things for some boy."

"Dad! He isn't some boy; he's my best friend. I've known him almost half my life. And it isn't just him. If he-- if we lose this war, then Britain will be... well, I don't even know. Voldemort will probably either kill or enslave all the people who aren't wizards and just... it would be horrible. I know that everyone I care about would be killed." She meets his eyes. "I have to do everything I can to stop it. We all do."

He sighs and looks away, and she knows he is thinking hard. "Well," he says finally. "If it's like that, then I'm very proud of you."

She beams and throws her arms around him, relief washing through her. He squeezes her back, kissing the top of her head, and says, "I have to go to work. I'll see you tonight. Don't burn the house down or have any wild parties."

"You've just ruined all my plans," Hermione says sarcastically.

He ruffles her hair as he gets to his feet, and she smiles at the gesture, as if she is a little girl again.

* * *

Draco makes a game of tormenting Potter. He seeks him out in the middle of the day, corners him in the hallway, and kisses him until they hear someone approach. Potter is left flustered and red-mouthed, jumpy before his friends. But he doesn't stop taking everything from Draco. Draco slips a hand briefly down Potter's hip as he brushes past, and Potter shudders. He strokes a quill across his lips in an absent manner, and Potter sweats and has to leave the room. This is how Draco amuses himself while no one will tell him what is really going on.

He knows a little. Their things arrived from Grimmauld place a few days after their arrival here, sent via Muggle post by someone from the order named "Tonks," whom Draco suspects to be related to his estranged aunt Andromeda. He was put to work immediately with more Latin to go through, but Granger isn't searching through the Malfoy tomes any longer. Instead, Draco watches her flip through an enormous white-and-yellow book of incredibly thin paper and speak into a bizarre Muggle machine rather like the one guarding the entrance to the Ministry. Whenever she catches him looking, she somehow manages to give him her best "why aren't you working" glare before he can avert his eyes. But really, she is rather distracting. She sometimes talks very loudly into the device, always saying things like, "Hello, I'm doing some family research. Is there any way that you would be able to tell me if my grandfather stayed there when he was young? Any information would be helpful..."

And often enough, Draco catches snippets of the Gryffindors' more mysterious conversations. When they have been there only a few days, Draco is reading quietly one morning in what passes for the living area with Granger, when Potter and Weasley come out of the bedroom.

"What I still don't get," Weasley is saying, "is why it was in the house."

Potter shakes his head. "I don't know what it was doing there. I can't believe we missed it all this time."

Suddenly, Granger gasps rather loudly.

"Are you quite alright?" Weasley asks her.

She turns to him. "R-A-B," she says.

Potter and Weasley look at each other with raised eyebrows as Granger abruptly dives into the pile of books on the floor, rummaging around until she finds what she is looking for-- a small black-and-gold volume that Draco recognizes immediately as the Black family history.

"Aha!" she shoves the open book under her friends' noses, pointing to the relevant part of the page.

"Oh," says Potter. "Ohh." Then he looks up. "Still, how much does this help us? Do you think..."

They are talking in their stupid code again. Draco feels his insides burn with jealousy at the way the three of them can communicate so much with so few words. He and Pansy used to have that. Before he betrayed her along with everyone else.

He mentally shakes himself to bring himself back to the present.

"It's a possibility, I suppose," Granger is saying. "Though not likely. And it isn't as if we can..."

"Well, we're going to have to stop hiding eventually," the Weasel says. "Right?"

"But not until we get everything figured out!" Granger scolds. "There's no point in running about if we don't know what we're doing."

Potter looks thoughtful. "How close are you, do you reckon?"

"Well, I've been doing other things as well, so I... I don't know. There are a few more pieces I need. I wish we could get more books." She sighs.

But she keeps going through the books she has, and keeps taking Draco's translation notes (with some skepticism) and somehow keeps finding new things. Draco rather suspects that she didn't really understand the French books the first time around. Then there are the strange terms buried in indices to be deciphered, the pages mysteriously rotted away at the important bits, and the books that keep turning out to be different each time you read them, as if only willing to divulge their secrets to the most determined of seekers. Luckily, Granger is definitely determined.

* * *

One morning, Draco wakes up, as he usually does, to the sounds of Potter stirring on the couch across the room.

"Hermione," says Potter, sounding mildly alarmed. "Did you sleep at all?"

Intrigued, Draco opens his eyes to see Granger slowly raise her head to look at Potter through red eyes.

At this one look from her, Potter is transformed. His whole body goes taught and he snatches up his glasses and is on his feet in and instant. "What's wrong?" he asks, an odd bite in his voice. Draco follows him more slowly over to Granger.

“Harry,” she says. “I’ve been here all night trying to think whether I should tell you... but you have to know, of course...” She gives a little gulp and pushes an open book away from herself and towards Potter. "This, with what we saw the other day, about accidental Horcruxes..."

He hesitates only for a moment before stepping forward and bending down to read the page. His eyes stop moving across the parchment long before he finally says, “We can’t be sure, though.” He doesn’t look up.

“There is a way to find out,” says Granger quietly.

He looks up suddenly. “How?”

She looks vaguely terrified. “Well, it’s, it’s not...” She falters, but at the look on Potter’s face rushes forward. “Well, if we could go back in your memory and, and take the memory of... that night... and put it in a Pensieve, we should-- you should-- be able to see exactly what happened.”

As Potter stares back at Granger, his expression darkening, Draco edges forward and manages to glimpse the title “Humans as Horcruxes,” before Potter, seeming to suddenly come to a decision, slams the book shut with a cloud of dust particles that glitter in the morning light from the window.

“Alright,” says Potter. “That’s what we’ll do, then. Do you know how to do it? Do you think you can?”

Granger flushes and says, “I think so... I’ll need to do some research, but I think I could.”

“When? How soon can you be ready?”

“I don’t know, Harry. Tomorrow? I guess I can’t really practice, so I don’t need to worry about that.” She laughs nervously.

He nods soberly, almost absently. Suddenly, he says, "I have to tell Ron and Ginny, don't I?"

"I could, if you want." she says earnestly.

He shakes his head. "It's okay. You work on this."

* * *

Ginny jumps when the bedroom door opens, and whirls around, hugging her shirt to her chest. She'd been in the middle of dressing, but Harry doesn't even seem to register this.

"Where's Ron?" he asks, shutting the door softly, and going to sit down on Hermione's uncharacteristically floral bedspread. He looks up at her, biting his lip.

"He's in the bathroom," says Ginny slowly.

"Hmm," says Harry, and looks away, still worrying his bottom lip. Ginny takes the opportunity to slip her shirt on.

"Harry? What's wrong?"

He frowns. "Possibly nothing. I'll tell you when Ron comes back."

Ginny doesn't know what to say to this, so she stands awkwardly, watching his impassive face, until a knock comes at the door.

"Ginny? Are you decent?" her brother calls.

She opens the door, and Ron's eyes narrow when he sees Harry. But then he catches something of the expression on his friend's face, and says quickly, "What is it?"

Ginny feels the familiar sick jealousy at the way the Wonder Trio can read each other. "Now can you tell us?" she asks Harry.

He stands up and begins to pace. Ron watches him, patient but tense. Ginny can imagine how they have gone through this countless times before, Harry having to tell his friends something horrible about his future, his past, the present threats to his life; Ron knowing by now from all the signals that he isn't going to like the news. She can see him brace himself for it.

"You remember what we found the other day about how Horcruxes can be created unintentionally?" Ginny and Ron both nod, and Harry continues. "Well, last night Hermione found.... Well, it's possible to make a Horcrux out of a person."

"Well, I suppose that makes some sense," says Ron slowly, "if the snake was a Horcrux..."

Harry nods. "There's always a mark, though," he says. "A scar..."

Ginny gasps, suddenly comprehending. "Harry! You don't think-"

"I don't know," he says quickly. He looks from her to Ron, who has gone very pale. "But all the signs are there. The way the spell went wrong, the fact that I'm a Parselmouth--" He cuts himself off, looking sick.

"Oh, god," says Ginny. She sinks onto the bed. A new and horrible thought is roiling in her mind...

She remembers how the locket felt, the diary, Tom-- and how Harry feels even now, the dark undercurrents just below the warm waves of magic that radiate from him.

"What are you going to do?" Ron asks him quietly.

"I don't know. Hermione reckons she can figure a way to find out by going back in my memory."

Ginny closes her eyes. She has to tell him. There is no possible way she can not tell him. Still, opening her mouth to speak feels like the hardest thing she's ever done.

"It's true." Her voice is oddly calm, and sounds strange to her own ears, though she can barely hear herself above the overwhelming silence of the knowledge. "Harry, you're a Horcrux."

He stares at her in shock, and suddenly she sees crystal-clearly, as if it was all laid out for her in a map of her entanglements with Harry, how she is like the embodiment of all of his nightmares; how it is she, more than anyone else, who hurts him, she who represents everything about himself he doesn't want to know or face. No wonder he is terrified of her, no wonder he hates her even as he wants her. And this is just the perfect summation of their relationship-- she, the angel of death, telling him the horrible truth,

and at the same time delivering his sentence. All this she understands in an instant.

"Ginny," Ron croaks, "how can you say that? You don't know!"

"I can feel it." She doesn't take her gaze off Harry's. You know I can, she thinks.

He shivers. Then, abruptly, he tears his eyes away and seems to recover himself. "I'm not going to do anything until we're absolutely sure."

And what are you going to do then? she wants to ask, but she is too afraid of the answer.

* * *

Draco figures it out even before he overhears it. Potter is a fucking Horcrux. He briefly considers using this information to slink back into the Dark Lord's good graces, but dismisses the idea. This just means that Potter's side is even more likely to win, and anyway there is never any guarantee that the Dark Lord will forgive him even if he brings him England on a silver platter. Still, it is unnerving now, being so physically close to someone who has a part of the Dark Lord's soul buried inside him; and also worrying in that Draco cannot predict how Potter will react. So it is with some trepidation that Draco watches the others retreat behind closed doors for the night, leaving him alone with Potter.

When Draco hears the sounds of clinking metal in the kitchen behind him, he turns to face what he feared. Potter has removed a knife from its drawer and is staring at it as if it holds the secrets to his existence. Draco suppresses a shudder. He has come to hate knives of all sorts. He might start spreading his butter with a spoon if this doesn't stop.

Presently, he realizes that, as always, Potter is waiting for him to make the first move. But Draco doesn't know what to do. His instincts have deserted him. So he tries something completely out of the blue.

"Harry," he says.

Wrong. Potter starts and stares at Draco, all the color of his face rushing to form the telltale blotches high on his cheeks. Draco takes a step back. To his surprise, however, Potter throws the knife away from him, sending it skidding, clattering and glinting, across the counter top. Something in Draco's stomach says that this is somehow a Bad Sign.

Potter rushes forward and knocks Draco to the ground, fists striking every bit of Draco he can find. Yes, definitely a bad sign, Draco realizes. Knives are for sex. But this is Potter from school, younger (but stronger, much stronger than Draco suspected) and more savage and with no control. No calculated depth to injuries he is inflicting, no careful restraint to ensure Draco's overall safety. Draco fights back, but there is a heat surging through Potter that is impossible to overpower.

Finally, Potter knocks Draco's head against the floor so hard that Draco's vision is momentarily obscured, dark clouds dissolving into little points of colored light, and he can't help but whimper a little, and that little gets rather out of hand and turns into a high-pitched moan.

Potter stops. He sits back, straddling Draco. In the harsh fluorescence of the kitchen light, he looks suddenly pale and somewhat stunned, as if suddenly seeing the damage he has done. After a moment, he says, "Why didn't you fight back?"

"I did." There is something running in Draco's eyes and he hopes against hope that it is sweat, not blood. He brushes it away and doesn't look at his hand, because he doesn't want to know.

Potter blinks. "No, you didn't."

Draco scowls, feeling sick from the coppery taste in his mouth. "I broke your glasses," he says, attempting to salvage some shred of dignity.

Potter glances over to where his spectacles landed. "No," he says. "You just knocked them off."

It's true. "Oh," says Draco.

There is silence for a moment, except for the faint buzzing of the overhead light. Then Potter sighs and lets himself fall forward, resting his forehead against Draco's chest. "I'm sorry," he says. "You shouldn't have let me do it. I'm sorry."

It seems pointless to remind him that Draco didn't actually let him do anything. "I'd better not have a black eye tomorrow."

Potter says nothing, but after another moment he gets to his feet and goes over to pick up the paring knife he dropped earlier. He comes back and kneels beside Draco.

"I'll make it up to you," Potter says.

Draco very much doubts this.

Potter leans in close and kisses his bruised mouth, running his tongue along swollen lips, and Draco can feel him getting exciting. "I'll let you hurt me," says Potter. "As much as you want. Do whatever you want to me."

"How is that different from usual?" Draco mutters painfully. He is so tired of these games and goddamnit his whole body hurts. But he sits up and takes the knife, the handle slippery in his grasp-- from what, he is still afraid to find out-- and lashes out at Potter, tearing his shirt off and carving a gash across his chest. And it's surprisingly easy, because he is angry, so angry, at Potter for hurting him and making him do this and taking advantage of him and making him betray Blaise and taking him away from his family and friends and after all this is Potter's stupid fucking war in the first place isn't it and Draco never wanted any part of it he never wanted to kill anybody or be so scared so scared for so long...

He stops. Potter is still kneeling in front of him, shaking. His hands are covering his face, and his chest and shoulders, stomach and forearms, are covered with shallow red cuts. "Keep going," he says thickly,

brokenly. "...What did you stop for?" He isn't even hard anymore. He is about to cry, not get off.

Draco feels sick. He puts the knife down quietly on the floor beside him. "I can't do this."

Potter raises his head to stare at him through mad, red-rimmed eyes. "Of course you can. Keep hurting me. It's what you're best at, isn't it?" His voice cracks and he draws a shuddering breath, but doesn't cry.

"No," says Draco, and swallows hard. "No, this isn't what I'm for."

"Isn't it? What are you for, then? Shagging? Latin translations?"

"Stop it!" Draco hisses. "Stop trying to make me like.... like you!"

"Me?"

"Yes, you! I don't like this and I don't want to like it. I just want--" Draco cuts himself off. He has regained enough of his composure to recognize that he can't say what he really wants-- to go home, to talk to Pansy, to be safe in Blaise's bed at Hogwarts...

Potter leans back against the counter. His face is bloody now, transferred from his hands after clutching his arms. Draco even wonders if he did it on purpose. If only his friends could see him now. If they knew-- if the world knew-- what he was really like...

"What?" says Potter. "What do you want?"

Oh. Draco never finished his sentence. He wants to be safe. Potter isn't safe, but he is as close as Draco is going to get. He leans forward and brushes a lock of blood-dampened hair away from Potter's eyes. "I just want you."

Potter gives a small gasp and his eyes fly wide open. He stares at Draco for a moment, as if searching his face for the lie. He must have been fooled after all, however, because he leans into Draco and, grasping the back of his head, drags him forward into a crushing kiss, bruising Draco's lips even further. Draco responds just as passionately. This is no time to tease. This time, he is feeding a deeper, psychological need. This time, Potter is trying to ease the ache of whatever it is that makes him so damn eager to please everyone, to make them love him. This time, everything Draco does is calculated to imply that yes, he does love Potter; yes, he needs him; yes, he wants him; yes, Potter has value apart from being The Chosen One.

So Draco kisses Potter as if he was dying and Potter was the only thing that could save him (which, in a way, is true), until he can feel Potter's erection through his jeans. He touches Potter lightly all over, caressing what they'd never bothered with before. Potter responds in kind, and Draco lets him undress him, lets himself be exposed and naked in the harsh light, lets Potter run his hands all over him possessively, searchingly, hungrily.

And then, somehow, they are both so naked and their bodies are touching everywhere and Potter is on top of him and kissing him with such intensity that for a moment Draco closes his eyes and loses his head and doesn't know who it is that's making him grind his hips up with need, until he runs his hand up a smooth bare back and straining neck and comes in contact with Potter's untidy hair. Draco's eyes snap open and he pulls away from Potter's hot mouth. "Wait."

Potter's eyebrows ascend in question. His lips are red and wet, and the blood on his face is smeared across his cheeks and in his dark hair, contrasting startlingly with his green eyes. He smells of blood.

Draco doesn't know what to say for a moment, and then recovers himself. For some inscrutable reason, in order to do this it is necessary to look away from Potter. "We're going to need..." He stops, swallows, because it is actually hard not to keep doing what they were doing. "Let me up a minute."

Potter looks a little frightened, as if afraid that if he lets go of Draco he will lose him, but he obeys all the same.

Draco gets to his feet, stumbles a little as a wave of dizziness hits him, and starts opening cabinets until he finds what he is looking for-- a jar of vegetable oil. Not incredibly romantic, but Draco is beginning to

feel that might not be such a bad thing, mostly because another, traitorous part of him is beginning to feel that sex with Potter is not such a bad thing.

"What's that for?" Potter asks.

"What do you think it's for?" Draco smirks as he sits down on the floor next to Potter.

"Oh. Do we have to use it?"

"Yes," says Draco seriously. "I'm not hurting you anymore."

Potter says nothing, but something in his expression changes. Draco thinks Potter is a little pleased.

"Now," says Draco, "where were we?" Although, really, he doesn't pick up where they left off, because now it is he who lays Potter down and straddles him. Potter watches eagerly as Draco slowly and deliberately unscrews the cap of the bottle and pours a good amount of clear oil onto his palm. Draco keeps his eyes on Potter's flushed, excited face as he applies the oil to his cock in long smooth strokes. He feels Potter shudder beneath him.

Next, Draco moves down and repositions himself between Potter's legs for better access. Potter moans and puts a hand over his face, tilting his head back and arching his neck against the tile floor, as Draco slips two heavily-oiled fingers into him, then three, moving them around and exploring, thrusting in imitation of what he's going to do next.

When Potter is panting and twisting and sweating sufficiently, Draco whispers, "Ready?"

Potter moans again. "Oh, god, yes."

Draco enters him slowly, delighting in the way Potter groans and squirms under him, and almost losing

himself to all that heat and pressure around his cock. When Potter gasps sharply and bucks his hips, Draco knows he has hit that spot. He can't help smirking and doing it again... and again-- because, after all, stamina is somewhat overrated-- and again, until Potter gives a strained cry, muffled for decency's sake against his hands, and comes, shuddering and bucking so much that it brings Draco off, too, and he comes hard inside Potter. He lets himself slump down onto Potter, resting his forehead against the still-slippery cuts that form a strange network of red lines on his body. He kisses the largest of these-- the first one, running across Potter's chest-- because it feels like a good thing to do. Potter's hand crawls into Draco's hair and tangles itself there.

"Wow," says Potter after a few minutes. "I didn't know that.... That was.... What was that?"

It feels like a lot of effort, but Draco turns his head to the side so that he can speak, and says, "Why did you think gay blokes did it? Did you think we were all masochists?"

"Well," says Potter. "Well, yes. Or that it was very important to take turns."

"Well now you know." Draco smirks again, and then yawns as a wave of tiredness sweeps across him.

"Hey." Potter nudges Draco's shoulder with his free hand. "You can't go to sleep here. Imagine if they found us like this in the morning."

With great effort, Draco raises his head and looks around. He groans. "We have to clean all this up, without magic."

Potter frowns. "Maybe we could lie here for just a few more minutes."

"For once, I like your plan, Potter."

* * *

Ginny is just drifting off to sleep when a muffled crash jerks her awake.

"What was that?" says Ron, sitting up immediately. He must not have been sleeping well, to wake up so easily.

"I'll go look," Ginny says quickly, getting up from the bed they share so awkwardly. She goes to the door and opens it a crack, just enough to confirm her suspicions-- that nothing is wrong, but Harry and Malfoy are engaged in Certain Activities. At the moment, they are still fully clothed, and Harry is straddling Malfoy on the kitchen floor. She closes the door before either of them can see her. She turns back to the dark room and says to Ron, "Harry and Malfoy are still asleep. Maybe it came from next door."

Neither of them actually knows anything about how sound would travel through a building whose walls aren't magically enhanced, so Ron just nods. What follows is something of an awkward silence, as Ginny sits back down on the bed. She tries generally not to be in the same room and conscious with her brother for too long. But she is awake now, and disturbed by memories of what she'd been forced to witness on the train. She doesn't know how she feels about it all, and having Ron right there next to her makes it even more uncomfortable and frustrating that she can't shove it out of her mind.

Ron doesn't lie back down, either, but remains sitting up in bed. He is looking everywhere but at her. Finally, he says, "I suppose this is as good a time as any to ask you this. Do you really think you're... you know..."

"Hermione been telling you off?" Ginny says dryly. "I don't know. But would it be so bad if I was?"

He looks at her from the corner of his eye. "Mum and Dad..."

"Right," she says. "Never mind."

"No, Ginny, listen. I just want you to be sure about what you want. Is it worth being thrown out? And if I... If I try to talk to them for you, they might kick me out, too. I don't think Bill and Fleur are even going

to get married. Mum says the wedding's been postponed indefinitely."

"She writes to you?"

"Well, yes." He pauses. "She doesn't mention you."

Ginny feels a great ache in her chest, in the back of her throat. She lies down against the pillows, and can't help rubbing the back of her hand against her eyes as she fights the tears.

"If you're sure...." Ron says. "If you can swear to me that all this has nothing to do with that diary, that it really isn't Dark... I'll believe you, okay?"

She clears her throat. "Okay." A warm feeling is spreading through her now, as she remembers why she loves Ron so much. She isn't actually sure yet, isn't ready to promise him or herself anything, but at least he is on her side.

* * *

By the next morning, Harry has almost forgotten about being a Horcrux. He is reminded as he wakes up and feels a new and heavy fear along with all the familiar ones. It takes him a moment to identify it as a result of the news-- or rather, possibility, he reminds himself-- of yesterday. Present, too, is an utter confusion as the events of the night before come back to him.

How did this happen? This was not supposed to happen. How did this turn into some sort of... relationship? He tries to think back and recall whether there was any time that he could be said to have led Malfoy on. Yes, he slept with him, but in a way that didn't exactly imply deep feelings of affection. Until last night, that is. Which was really just ridiculous. Utterly ridiculous.

But even as Harry thinks these things, even as he mentally shakes his head at his absurd actions, he can't

ignore the small part of him that is overjoyed by what happened, that wants more.

Well, it was the best sex Harry has ever had (not that he has all that much to compare it to). What scares Harry is the intensity with which he feels, even in memory, every sensation and touch and look from Malfoy.

He tries hard not to let himself think about what Malfoy said to him. But he can't keep his mind from sneaking back to it and releasing that unwelcome burst of absurd euphoria. Was it a love confession? He can't let it himself think it! But then he does. And it's really ridiculous how happy the thought makes him.

Well, fine. Everybody likes being told they're loved, right? Nothing strange there. Everyone wants to be wanted, to feel desirable.

Harry becomes aware that he is rationalizing. His first step to deal with this is to resolve then and there never to sleep with another former Death Eater. Somehow, however, this is not very helpful at the moment. So he tries to think logically. What is the thought he has been trying to stay away from? That he could have Feelings for Malfoy.

But he doesn't. He absolutely doesn't. Why is that so depressing? Why does it make Harry feel sick to think of how, once this is all over, Malfoy will go home and Harry will have a new, uncomplicated life, completely Slytherin-free and happy about it, ready to fall in love again when the Right Girl comes along?

Shit.

Harry buries his face in the couch cushions and breathes in the dust and dry smell of old stuffing. He wonders if any of this would have happened, if he would still feel this way, if he'd had a normal childhood, or if he didn't have a bit of Voldemort's soul hidden somewhere inside him, if he and Ginny are just fucked up because of Voldemort. And when did he start to put himself in the same category as her? It isn't as if he's.... queer, or anything. No, because thinking about Ginny still hurts. Harry curses himself for the situation he's gotten himself into. In every direction, however he thinks about it, it's just more pain and confusion.

"Harry!" Hermione's voice jerks him from his thoughts.

He sits up quickly. "What? Is everything okay?"

"Yes," she grins. "I've just found out where Voldemort's old orphanage is. We can go today; I'm sure there must be something there."

"Oh," says Harry. "Oh, alright. Good. Yes, let's go." It takes all his will to keep from glancing sideways at Malfoy.

She smiles again, but as she turns away, her eye catches on something. Harry follows her gaze and sees that one long, shallow cut from last night is peeking out from his sleeve, just below his elbow, bright red against his skin. He tugs his sleeve down quickly, but it is far too late. He meets her eyes, wondering what she must be thinking, and sees her blank, shocked face. He begins to panic, the heat rising in his face. There isn't any easy explanation he can offer her. The usual one is to blame it on a cat, he knows, but Crookshanks is at the Burrow and he hasn't been allowed out of the apartment in the two weeks that they've been there.

Hermione's mouth opens, a small "o" forming the first syllable of a question, but Malfoy makes some motion that is enough to remind her that he is there, and she closes her mouth into frown and turns away. Harry knows she will corner him later, but at least this gives him time to think of what to say to her.

* * *

Weasley doesn't seem to be pleased at being left behind, but Potter needs the Weaslette to sense magic and Granger to navigate the mad Muggle transportation system, and apparently someone has to stay behind and guard Draco, though Draco can tell by the way Potter looks at him that he doesn't really believe anymore that Draco needs guarding. It's almost an apology, that look. It's the sort that says, You and I know better, but let's humor them, okay?

This is how Draco knows he has won. He has accomplished what he set out to, and gained real trust from

Potter. He is safe.

Except that evening, when Draco is working on his endless Latin translations and Weasley is making impatient and irritating noises as he rifles through indices, and Granger's father is listening to some sort of news broadcast in his bedroom, the door suddenly explodes inwards with a bang and a cloud of foul orange smoke.

Then Draco is on his feet and remembering that he doesn't have a wand anymore, and backing up against a wall, and then Pansy's voice says, "Check the other rooms."

Draco hears an exclamation and a thud in the bedroom behind him. He is also distantly aware of the Weasel dueling with another Death Eater to his right.

But Pansy is standing in front of him. Pansy. He can't see her face behind the mask. She says, "Where is he?"

"I don't know," says Draco honestly. "I would tell you if I knew."

"Alright," she says, after a moment, and the word is spoken so soft and low that for a split-second he almost feels that it is alright, that everything is all right...

Then she raises her wand and casts the Dark Mark. His left arm burns at the sound of the incantation. He remembers summoning it himself, standing alone in the chill wind on the ramparts of Hogwarts, and the way the words had burned through his whole body, the pain nearly blinding him, and then the light that was somehow even worse, filling his vision, terrible and irrevocable... He wonders if Pansy feels that way now, if anyone but him was ever so weak in conjuring the Mark.

He knows she must feel the pain, that all the Dark Lord's spells require pain, but she doesn't show it, and she doesn't linger over what she has just done. She merely calls to her companions and they leave as abruptly as they came.

* * *

When Harry, Ginny, and Hermione, with the cup safely in Harry's bag, step out of the underground, they know immediately that something is wrong. There is a crowd surrounding Hermione's building, exclaiming and craning their necks upwards, towards....

The Dark Mark. Shining even in the full daylight, it seems to make the very air around it darker so that it burns like a freshly made wound. Ginny knows a moment of real, blind panic. If Ron is dead....

But no, here he is, pushing through the crowd towards them, looking singed and bleeding a little, but alive. Malfoy is trailing behind him, sickly pale and frightened. Ginny runs to hug her brother, but Hermione beats her to it.

“What happened?” Harry asks quickly.

“Death Eaters,” says Ron, equally hastily. “They left once they realized you weren't there, but Hermione--your dad--”

Hermione pulls away from him. “What? What happened? Is he okay?”

Ron shakes his head, and Hermione clamps her hands over her mouth, then pushes past him and in an instant she is lost in the crowd.

“I'm sorry,” says Ron, and it takes Ginny a moment to realize that he's talking to Harry. “I'm not you.”

Harry, who had been staring after Hermione, wearing the look of horror that Ginny knows must be mirrored on her own face, snaps his head up and says sharply, “What? Are you saying that if I'd been here instead this wouldn't have happened? You're just as good as me, Ron. I'm sure I couldn't have done

anything...”

“I dunno,” says Ron. “I think I lost my head for a moment there. I was too scared, didn't react quick enough. It might've been alright if I was quicker.”

Harry shakes his head. “You can't blame yourself. It's my fault we were here. I never should have agreed to come here. What were we thinking, hiding out at someone's house? My God, it was stupid! Fuck.” He looks around as if in search of a wall to punch, and, finding none, bites on his knuckles. “What are we going to do?”

They all look back at him blankly.

Harry makes an impatient noise. “Fine. I'm going to go get Hermione. They might come back.” He disappears after her.

“I wish it'd been you,” Ron says to Malfoy.

Malfoy scowls. “So do I, if I'm going to have to put up with you, you stinking blood traitor.”

“Oh, shut up,” says Ginny. “You're the one who makes it a habit to sleep with half-bloods.”

“Do you really?” Ron asks Malfoy, with interest, obviously desperate for a distraction.

Malfoy sniffs. “Of course not. Your sister does, though.”

“Don't be stupid, Ginny's never slept with anybody. Right, Ginny?”

“Of course, Ron.” Ginny says quickly. “But really, how can you talk about things like that at a time like this?”

Malfoy raises an eyebrow at her. “What else are we supposed to do?”

He has a point. Ginny changes the subject. “So how come they left without you two?”

“I guess it was too much trouble," says Ron, turning pale again. "They just wanted Harry.”

Malfoy sneers. “You really think you were too much trouble for them? That wasn't it.”

“Then what was it, Malfoy, if you know so much with your inside information?”

Malfoy studies his hands. “It was because one of them was Pansy Parkinson.”

Ginny and Ron stare at him.

“Wasn't she your girlfriend?” Ron asks him.

“No!” Malfoy looks vaguely horrified. “We grew up together.”

“Okay, so she was protecting you, but why'd she leave me?”

“Because you would give me up.”

“And the others just went along with whatever she wanted? Or are they friends of yours, too?” Ginny

asks.

“I didn't recognize the voices. They listened to her, though, and she'll probably Obliviate them, and herself, before they report back. They'll say only the Muggle was home.”

Ron sets his teeth. “That Muggle happens to be Hermione's father, and you could show a little more respect seeing as how you were a guest in his house for two weeks.”

Malfoy blinks insolently at him.

“Erm,” says Ginny, “Where did Pansy learn all that Obliviate stuff?”

“She just has a lot of practice. She uses it to cheat on her girlfriends.”

“Oh, that's not creepy at all,” Ginny mutters. “So how come she didn't just do that to Ron?”

Malfoy looks somewhat annoyed by now. “Because he would be tortured. The Dark Lord can get past any memory block if there's something he's looking for. But he would have no reason not to trust his own Death Eaters.”

“Except that they're protecting you.”

“Yes, well, let's hope he trusts them.”

“But it isn't as if they'd really be giving away our location. They already know we were here, and we're leaving now.”

“You're right, Weasley,” says Malfoy coldly. “They'd just be killed, is all. They're just Slytherins, who cares if they die? We're expendable. Actually, we deserve to die, right? They should just execute us at Sorting. I'm sure all you Gryffindors would think it a lovely addition to the welcome feast.”

“Don't be horrible,” says Ginny, hurt. “I only meant that it wouldn't put the mission in danger.”

Malfoy rolls his eyes. “Ah, yes, the Holy Mission. Why should we hesitate to sacrifice everything at Harry Potter's feet, right?”

“Just shut up, already!” Ron yells finally. They stare at him as he turns away, arms tight across his chest.

Ginny comes up behind him and lays a hand on his shoulder, leans forward and rests her forehead there.

"I should go to her, shouldn't I?" He says. "Should I go to her? Maybe it's better Harry go. It's probably better. It's probably what she wants." He sits down, right there on the dirty city sidewalk. Ginny doesn't know what to say. Behind her, she can hear Malfoy scoff.

Ginny tries to change the subject again. "We got the cup, Ron. Did I tell you that?"

"Oh." He almost doesn't seem to hear her.

"Only one more," she continues. "Then all we've got to do is destroy them. Isn't that wonderful? All this will be over soon." She is mostly talking to herself by now, knowing that her brother isn't listening. "We might even be able to go back to school." But it seems impossible. Any end to this war seems so far away...

* * *

"Hermione?" Harry steps across her shattered doorway into the wreckage of the apartment. "We should

go before the Ministry shows up." Looking around, he sees her leaning against the doorway of the master bedroom, staring at a crumpled form which he realizes must be her father's body.

"I'm so sorry," says Harry, approaching her cautiously.

"I'll have to tell my mother," she says. "Do you reckon I should tell her the truth?"

"I don't know," he says. His stomach is churning with guilt and shame. He was so stupid, so fucking stupid...

"Where's Ron?" Hermione still doesn't take her eyes off her father.

Harry hesitates, wondering fleetingly if Ron and Hermione will make it through this, and hating himself for sort of, just a little, hoping that they don't. "He's outside with the others. I'm sorry; I told them to wait. He feels awful, thinks it's his fault for not protecting him."

"So he didn't want to face me?" she says quietly. "He really is a coward."

Harry can think of nothing to say to this, so he looks away as she begins to cry.

"You know," she says, voice so choked that the words are almost drowned out, "It would be okay for you to hug me right now."

So he throws his arms around her. "I'm sorry," he says to her back. "I don't know how to help you." He can feel her tears soaking through his shirt already.

She merely shakes her head and continues to sob with impressive passion.

"Breathe," he reminds her, when he starts to get worried. "I don't want you hyperventilating, on top of everything else."

Hermione lets out a small giggle that turns into another cry of misery.

"I'm sorry," he says again.

* * *

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Chapter 8: Marked

Chapter Eight

After gathering what they can from the apartment, relieved at least to be using magic again to make transportation easier, they walk as quickly as they can to the nearest park and take refuge by a solitary bench, where there is no one around to hear them.

"Where do we go now?" asks the Weaslette.

"I have to go to my mother in Dorset," Granger says, still red-eyed and refusing to look anyone in the face, especially Weasley. "I don't expect any of you to come with me."

"I would," says Potter, looking up at her from his seat on the bench. "I really wish I could. If I didn't think--"

"I know," she says. "I appreciate that, Harry. Thank you."

There is an awkward silence. Draco watches a pigeon peck at a crumb several feet away. After a few moments, Weasley says, in a rather scared sort of voice, "How are you getting there?"

Granger pulls her arms tighter around herself and looks determinedly in the exact opposite direction from him. "I reckon I'll have to take the train. I'll have to stay a few days, of course..."

"You mean you're coming back?" Weasley bursts out. "After--"

She rounds on him. "I'm not going to give up and leave you all on your own." Her face is flushed in the same way it was just before she hit Draco in third year. Draco inches away. "Harry needs all the help he can get and I'm not going to... I'm going to keep fighting, Ron. That's what being in Gryffindor is all about, you know."

Weasley stares at her as she turns away from him again with a huff. He has gone even paler behind his freckles. After a moment, he stands up and walks away, vanishing among the trees. Several small dark circles of moisture appear on the pavement by Granger, and Draco realizes she must be crying.

The Weaslette makes a girlish noise of sympathy and puts her arm around Granger's shoulder. Draco glances at Potter and is surprised to find that his cheeks are pink with anger. Presently he, too, stands up and follows Weasley.

* * *

Ron wipes the sick off his mouth with his sleeve and straightens up as he hears someone coming. Hoping that it might be Hermione, he turns around, trying to find something to say more powerful than "I'm

sorry."

But it isn't her. It's Harry. Harry, who is always there, always in the way. Right now, Ron hates him. "What?" he says, more harshly than he meant to.

Harry puts his hands up defensively. "I just came to see if you were alright."

"What do you think, Harry? Would you be alright?"

"Look," says Harry angrily, "I came here because I think Hermione's being cruel. She doesn't actually blame you. No one does. She's just upset, for obvious reasons."

"You mean like me letting her dad get killed on my watch?"

Harry winces. "Look, Ron. I don't know what happened, but I'm sure you did everything you could."

"Well, it wasn't good enough, was it? What use is that? Everything you taught us, what good is it if it I'm not quick enough or strong enough or brave enough to use it?" Ron realizes he is shouting, but doesn't bother to check his voice. Everything comes so easy to Harry. Harry never lets anyone down, and even when he makes mistakes it's only because he's so brave and has such good intentions, and it usually works out anyway. At the moment, Ron finds all this intolerable. "What if I can't do this, Harry? You expect everyone to be so perfect like you, but we're not. I'm not."

Harry is staring him hard in the eye. "I'm not perfect, and if you'd stop to think for a moment you'd remember that half of the things I've done I was only able to do because you and Hermione were there to help me. You can't say what would have happened if it'd been me there. Maybe I wouldn't have been paying attention and I'd be dead now. It doesn't matter whether or not we can do it. We just have to." He pauses, still holding Ron's eye. "Unless, of course, you'd rather not. You could go home. It's probably safer there, though maybe not for long if you're there instead of helping me."

Ron slaps him. Because, really, after that he had no choice. You don't say things like that and expect to get away with it.

Harry looks as if he is thinking along the same lines. He rubs his cheek, where an angry red mark is forming. "I suppose I deserved that. But you are being a prat."

"I'm not afraid of dying," says Ron. "Alright? That's not what I'm scared of."

"I know," says Harry. "I'm sorry for what I said."

There is a short pause, in which neither boy looks at the other. Then Ron says, "You have to end this soon. Before too many more people die."

"You don't have to tell me," says Harry bitterly. Ron feels guilty for a moment for reminding Harry that the responsibility for this entire war is his, but it's the truth and everyone knows it.

* * *

After dealing with Ron, Harry is in something of a foul mood when they are all together once again around the park bench. He has a bad headache and too much to think about. He pushes all of it out of his mind except for the task at hand. "So, I expect we'll have to go back to Hogwarts. Any better ideas?"

They all shake their heads, looking frightened and weary.

"How did they find us?" Hermione asks scratchily, after a moment.

Harry swallows the rising panic. How did the Death Eaters find them? "I don't know." He looks around, and see that both Ginny and Ron are glaring at Malfoy.

Malfoy sneers at them.

"What?" says Harry.

Ginny turns to him. "Malfoy used magic on the train getting here."

Harry looks at Malfoy. "Is that true? What did you think you were doing?" He can feel his face grow hot with anger, and maybe the beginnings of embarrassment as his trust in Malfoy falters. Malfoy won't meet his eyes.

"We got into an argument," says Ginny. "He took my wand and hexed me."

"Why were you even talking to each other on the train?"

"He came and found me because while we were at Hogwarts he found out that his boyfriend had a crush on me." She gives a little smirk almost reminiscent of Malfoy himself.

It takes a moment for Harry to process what she has just said. "Boyfriend?" He is stunned. It simply never occurred to him that Malfoy could have someone... What? Someone else? Surely Harry doesn't care about that. Someone Else implies that Harry is a Someone, which he most certainly is not.

Malfoy has gone pale, and now he seeks Harry's eyes, looking worried, almost apologetic. It's a look that is much more personal than it should have been, and Harry checks quickly out of the corner of his eye to see if Hermione is watching and picking up on it. She isn't. In fact, she and Ron don't seem to be paying attention to the conversation at all, evidently feeling that a much more productive use of time is to play a rather complicated game in which one looks at the other until the other looks up, and then both look away very quickly.

"Why didn't you say anything before?" Harry asks Ginny.

She looks uncomfortable. "To be honest, I was embarrassed about it. But I didn't think it would matter much, since it was just on the train."

Harry crosses his arms and tries to pull his thoughts away from Malfoy-- the way he is looking at Harry now, the knowledge of this small betrayal, and the ironic thought that, if Harry had thought that it wouldn't make a difference to use magic on the train he would have had a much less painful ride after their session together-- and attempts to focus. "So they detected Malfoy's spell on the train, and knew we were coming to London. They can't have tracked us all the way here, though. And anyway, if they had they would have shown up much sooner. So they still would have had to search the whole city... Unless they somehow found Hermione's address or something..."

Ginny is shaking her head. "Except that we had Horcruxes with us, Harry. It wouldn't be enough to detect from too far away, but far enough that it probably wouldn't take a few Death Eater's very long to do a sweep of the city."

Harry swears. "You should have said something before."

"I didn't think--"

"Yeah, I know," says Harry. Perhaps he is being too harsh, but he doesn't particularly care. Ginny's eyes go wide and she shuts her mouth firmly. Harry really hopes that he is imagining that quiver in her bottom lip. The last thing he needs is someone else breaking down.

* * *

An hour later, they are sitting at King's Cross, waiting for Hermione's train to Dorset. In truth, there is an earlier train to Hogsmeade, but they haven't told Hermione that, as no one is quite willing to leave her alone just yet. In her lap, Hermione has a pile of mail she grabbed on her way out of the flat. She is sorting through it slowly.

"What are you doing?" Ginny asks her.

Hermione clears her throat and says huskily, "I'll have to pay these bills eventually." She sets a piece of junk mail down carefully beside her.

"Hermione..." says Harry. "You don't... You don't need to do that now."

She shakes her head distractedly, keeps going. After a moment, she says, "This one's from Tonks." Harry looks over at the familiar Muggle envelope stuffed with parchment. Hermione opens it, and Harry reads over her shoulder:

Everyone-

You-Know-Who has invaded Hogwarts. Stay where you are until you hear from us.

-Tonks

"Shit," says Harry.

"Oh, God," says Hermione.

"What?" says everyone else.

"Voldemort's taken over Hogwarts," says Harry quietly. He feels strangely numb. The world is running out

of safe places for him as quickly as it is running out of safe people.

There is silence for a long time. Then Hermione says, staring at the air in front of her, "Where are you going to go?"

Harry wishes the others wouldn't look at him like that. The blind faith on Ron's face makes Harry's stomach clench. He doesn't answer her.

"I can't go home," says Ginny. "But you could stay there. I'll... I'll go with Hermione or something."

Harry shakes his head quickly. "No. I can't... No more of people's houses."

"What if they're dead already?" Malfoy says dully.

"What?"

"I don't think Snape is using his house at the moment, Potter. It's already set up with wards and it's unplottable, and I know where it is."

Harry can't help but grin at him. "Malfoy, you are amazing."

Ginny raises her eyebrows at this, and Ron says, "Hang on a minute. How do we know he's not just going to take us to You-Know-Who?"

"Because Voldemort would kill him, remember?"

Ron keeps scowling, but doesn't say anything else.

* * *

Hermione's train comes, and she turns around to hug Harry tightly before getting on. He blushes, feeling Ron's eyes on him, as Hermione mutters into his shirt, "Don't die while I'm gone." She tears away without looking up at him, wiping her face with her sleeve.

Ginny comes up and gives her another hug, kissing her on the cheek and whispering in her ear. She holds on for a long time, and when they break away Harry hears Hermione say, "Thank you, Ginny." She gives a horrible impression of a smile, and turns toward the train. Her hand is on the railing when Ron steps forward.

"Hermione," he says, and it sounds as if it was spoken unwillingly, almost reflexively. She snaps her head around, and he continues falteringly. "I'm coming with you."

Harry expects Hermione to at least glance at him, to look for some sign that it is alright for them to leave him on his own. Perhaps a year ago she would have. But now she doesn't look back (not smiling, not trying to, but with a noticeable amount of tension gone from her shoulders) as she boards the train, and neither does Ron as he slips his hand into hers.

* * *

On the train, Hermione lets her head rest on Ron's shoulder, trying to feel nothing but the lulling motion of the car and the subtle warmth of his body. She closes her eyes as they shuttle on into the evening. She has been trying not to ignore what has happened, and at the same time not to dwell on it. There are practical things to be considered, but she called her mother from the station and knows that this was the last of what will be required of her. Once she is with her mother again, she will be a child again. Already the strength has gone out of her, and having nothing material to work over in her mind has left her blank and chilled in the August heat.

With nothing to think about, she begins to think about the boy beside her. There are so many things she feels she oughtn't have already forgiven him for, and this vaguely guilty feeling nags at the edges of her

mind, but they both know (indeed, everyone knows) that none of it will last. She has no energy to hold on to her anger or even her hurt at the way he's been acting today. She is too tired to be anything but relieved that he is here.

Only in the past year or so, if that, have Hermione's feelings about Ron become clear even to herself. At a certain point in her friendship with Harry and Ron, Hermione began to assume that she would wind up marrying one of them. And then, for a long time, it was Harry she thought she would end up with. It made sense to her when she was twelve, and he was a brave orphan who had saved them all more than once and was always more kind to her than Ron was. There was even a brief period, after she had helped him save Sirius and Buckbeak, that she had truly believed she was in love with him. There was just something about spending that much time alone in the woods at night with a boy, even if he was her best friend, that did strange things to her stomach.

It was confusing and frustrating, therefore, when in addition to being jealous of Harry's unsubtle crush on Cho Chang, she was also resentful of Ron's obsession with Fleur and deeply wounded by the way he had slighted her, Hermione, in waiting until the last minute to ask her to the Yule Ball. In fact, sometimes when she is looking too closely at herself she thinks that maybe at one time she was in love with both of them, and would have spent forever trying to choose between them if her mind had not been made up for her in that Ron was the one to return her affections. She hates that this is a possibility, that she is the sort of person capable of doing such a thing, but even more she hates that Ron has picked up on it or created ideas of his own.

"It's such a mess." It takes Ron stiffening beside her, his shoulder shifting slightly beneath her head, for Hermione to realize she's spoken out loud, and another moment to jerk out of what had become a sort of day-dream of distraction back to the hard knowledge of where she is and why.

"What is?" he responds.

"Oh," she says. "Everything." She can feel her throat constricting again. It feels as if she's been crying all day, and she is sick of it already. Already tired of the knowledge that her father is dead and the thought that she must go on with her life without him.

Ron lays a hand in her hair. "It'll be okay. It's going to stop soon. Harry will stop it."

Hermione realizes something and sits up in alarm. "We left him behind. Didn't we? I didn't even think..."

Ron looks away. "Yeah."

Hot guilt seems to be smothering her. "This is horrible. We're terrible. We said we'd always be with him--"

"He knows we can't," Ron interrupts. "Hermione, he knows. He doesn't expect us to be there at the end, he doesn't even want us there. All we can do is help him as best we can, and right now you've got to deal with this. Right?"

Hermione nods. There isn't anything she can do now, though she wishes things were different. Away from Harry, she is terrified for him. Usually. Now she is more afraid that she will forget about him, as she already has begun to do.

"Can we not tell him?" she says suddenly. "About us, I mean."

He looks at her suddenly, eyes widening a little. "Are you saying there's something to tell?"

She blushes. "...Yes. If you still--"

"Of course I do," he says quickly. "But why can't we tell Harry, then?" Suddenly his expression of happiness is replaced by one of suspicion.

"Well, think how he'd feel. It's always been the three of us, and now..."

"It was always going to change, Hermione. In fact, he started it when he went out with my sister."

She knows Ron is trying to convince himself as well as her, that really he feels guilty, too, but she doesn't call him on it. There's nothing they can do about it now, she thinks to herself. It's too late to turn back, either to London or to their friendship the way it was before.

"He's better at everything than I am," Ron says abruptly, watching her. "But he doesn't love you like I do."

For a moment, Hermione doesn't know what to say. "You make it sound like a competition. I just want to keep him as a friend, and I know you do, too." She decides to ignore the fact that he has just used the l word, knowing that while it is the truth he would never have said it except that he is trying to make up for everything that happened today. "I know perfectly well how he feels about me, and you know how I feel about him."

"Yes, you've told me quite often how much you love him." Ron's voice is suddenly bitter, and he won't meet her eye.

Hermione freezes. "I didn't mean it like that!" She casts frantically back in her memory. Yes, she can imagine that there had been times when, terrified for Harry, she had talked about how much he meant to her as she wept... but Ron is almost willfully misinterpreting. "He's my best friend. I can say that now, because I hope that you and I aren't exactly what you would call friends anymore... Although, if you keep this up about Harry we might not be anything. Don't you trust me?"

Ron looks straight at her, and in a moment she forgets all about Harry and how they are leaving him behind in so many ways.

"Of course I trust you," he says. "I'm sorry." His eyes lower slightly to focus on her mouth, and he swallows. She waits for him to kiss her, but realizes he is still too unsure, so she leans forward and does it for him.

* * *

"I didn't know you had a boyfriend," Harry says to Malfoy that night, after Malfoy sneaks into his room.

Malfoy scoffs. "You Gryffindors really are low on the gossip chain, aren't you? Or do you lot just have very selective hearing?"

"Wait a minute. How did Ginny know? Or didn't she, before you attacked her on the train?"

"I hardly--" Malfoy stops himself, sighs, and starts over. "She knew because she is not an oblivious idiot, and because she used to go up to the astronomy tower to do indecent things with Loony Lovegood, and everyone sees everyone in the astronomy tower." By this time, a small grin is tugging at the corner of his mouth, despite his best efforts to hide it. "Was that what you wanted to hear?"

Harry stares at him. "She what? With Luna? I don't believe you."

Malfoy does grin at this. "What, shocked to hear that your little girlfriend was doing naughty things with the big bad Slytherins? Does that wound your pride, Potter? Or are you still in love with her, you bisexual bastard--" Malfoy's grin has turned to a sneer and he is eying Harry murderously.

Harry gapes at him, unable for a moment to process this sudden turn in the conversation. "I don't-- no."

"You don't know. Typical." Malfoy stands up to leave.

"Wait." Harry catches his sleeve. "Who is he, anyway?"

"Who?"

"Your boyfriend." Harry swallows, not knowing why he cares so much.

Malfoy looks at him curiously, then looks away. When he meets Harry's eyes again a moment later, his expression is closed, his eyes dull. "Blaise Zabini."

"Oh," says Harry. His first thought, inexplicably, is that Zabini is much more good-looking than Harry is. So is Malfoy, for that matter.

"But," Malfoy continues, "I'm pretty sure he's a Death Eater now, so I guess that didn't really work out."

"... I'm sorry," says Harry, because he can think of nothing else to say.

Malfoy snorts and tears his arm away from Harry's grasp. "Shit, Potter, it's not a big deal. This is why no one tells Gryffindors anything. You always take everything too seriously. It's just sex."

"Then why'd you call him your boyfriend? I wouldn't go around calling you my boyfriend."

Malfoy stands up again, color rising in his face. "Oh, that's great, Potter. Good to know."

Harry sits up, vaguely appalled at this reaction. "Draco, I didn't mean--"

He stops, because Malfoy rounds on him. There is a pause, as Harry realizes with dawning horror what he has just said.

Malfoy, still red in the face, raises his eyebrows in a mockery of casual inquiry. "Am I supposed to tackle you now and try to beat the shit out of you? Is that the new game? Because you keep switching it up and I don't know the rules."

"Me either," says Harry quietly.

Malfoy sighs. "What do you want from me?"

Harry can't resist going back to what is safe. He holds his arms out in entreaty and says, "I want you to come here and fuck me."

Still, it isn't entirely safe, because everything has changed. For example, Malfoy undresses before joining him on the bed, and kisses him on the mouth for a long time, teasing lips and tongue until Harry gives in to the pleasure, the sort of tenderness that he never believed in before.

It is worse this way, Harry thinks. Pain is its own penance, but this... Harry is terrified of how much of himself he is giving over to Malfoy. More than he could ever give Ginny, though she asked for it when Malfoy hasn't. Has he? Harry can't tell anymore. He can't even think straight when Malfoy is here, doesn't have the will to fight against this any more than he can fight the tide of desire and orgasm that Malfoy draws from him.

So Harry doesn't protest Malfoy's spells to eliminate the pain, doesn't keep knives in the bedroom, and learns a completely new way to...

It's almost making love. But not quite. Because Harry doesn't believe there is such a thing, just euphemisms people use to justify their own weaknesses. Harry already knows he's weak and he doesn't need some saccharine label to cover it up.

* * *

Being back at Snape's house is like returning to the set of a nightmare. First of all, Draco has to admit that the man was completely right about everything. He actually did steer Draco in the right direction, helped him enormously and saved his life more than once. Not to mention fed him ice cream.

Of course, Draco's attitude towards Snape was always completely justified. He really hates to think how the Potions Master knew so much about Potter's particular desires. And then there are all the times over the years when Draco has walked into a room to find him alone with Draco's mother. Snape always left before Draco's father got home, which Draco at first considered a coincidence.

Still, Granger's account of Snape's death was haunting, not because it was anything Draco hadn't heard before-- simple, she said, just Avada Kedavra-- but because it was Severus Snape, someone whom Draco, if nothing else, had spoken to every day for six years.

And now they're staying in his house, where Draco was holed up for months. He can't shake the feeling that at any moment Snape could walk through the door and then wouldn't Draco be in trouble for letting all these Gryffindors in?

* * *

Snape's house is dark and filthy, just as might be expected from the Potions Master. Ginny unpacks and cleans the best she can in the days following their arrival, while the boys sleep in and attempt to continue the research that has absorbed them all for so long, although now she notices in Harry something of a new desperation to get it done quickly. But then again, for all his fervor, he is easily distracted by Malfoy. For example, Harry will throw himself into the work, flipping frantically through books and laboring over inscrutable texts long into the night, and then Malfoy will come and ask him silently to come to bed, and Harry won't leave the bedroom until the next evening.

Ginny has never felt more alone. Ron and Hermione have left her in the most awkward situation imaginable, trapped in a dank house with Malfoy taking every chance to rub in her face his relationship with Harry, which seems to be growing in intensity, and nothing to distract her. Harry has been colder than ever to her since she told him she thought he was a Horcrux, and she tries to stay out of his way. As much as she normally thrives on confrontation, she doesn't want to hurt him any more than she already has, if she can help it. So she busies herself with housework, even going so far as to cook meals for Harry and Malfoy as well as doing all the regular chores and going out to run errands when it would be too dangerous for either of them to leave the house. Harry thanks her sometimes, but she hardly notices. The most she speaks in a day is to ask if they've made any progress in the research, and is usually greeted with a shake of the head or "I'll tell you later" with a meaningful glance in Malfoy's direction,

though the "later" never comes as Harry is never far from Malfoy even in this big house.

Three days into their stay, a hired post owl brings Ginny a letter from Hermione. It's on thin, bleached paper in a Muggle envelope, having been sent by Muggle post to the Wizarding post office and delivered from there. It's addressed specifically to Ginny, and upon reading it she sees why. Along with unconvincing assurances that Hermione is okay and the information that Hermione and Ron will be able to meet up with them at the end of the week, it includes a warning: "Also, keep an eye on Harry. I'm worried about him. Check his wrists, will you?"

Ginny sighs and stuffs the letter in her pocket. Of course, Hermione would notice something, and being oblivious to certain habits of his would think he was hurting himself, rather than getting someone else to do it for him. Ginny debates what to say to her about it. Part of her wants to tell the truth, but that would require revealing quite a lot about Harry and her former relationship with him. In the end, she sits down and writes a reply consisting mostly of sympathy, with a post script saying she hadn't noticed anything, but then again she hadn't been looking and that she would keep an eye out from now on. It is probably unconvincing, but Ginny is unwilling to volunteer anything further.

Upstairs, in the bedroom, Harry laughs at something Malfoy has said.

* * *

When Granger and Weasley join them in the house, it is obvious that something has changed between them, as the usual awkwardness and careful maintenance of a slight distance is replaced by casual touches, Weasley sometimes seeming to hold Granger up with a hand at the small of her back or on her shoulder. Draco thinks it's absolutely disgusting, and the interesting thing is that Potter seems to agree. Or at least, he averts his eyes whenever possible and looks generally uncomfortable.

For her part, Granger seems to be still fully functioning, despite all the fuss around her father's death. She doesn't smile at all, but she immediately settles down to work again, bullying the rest of them to do the same with the old ferocity that always scared Draco just a little. Under her discipline (which she enforces with somewhat renewed vigor), he sees the long mornings-that-melt-into-afternoons in bed with Potter coming to a close.

But why should he worry about that? He is sure he has Potter completely in his grasp now. Over the past week he feels he has solidified his role as more than just a physical need to Potter, but as a representation of safety. He now feels so much power over Potter that he isn't sure what to do with it. His plan had been to ask for sanctuary for his family, but now they've turned against him he has only himself to protect. He hasn't quite had the courage to say anything to Potter about Pansy yet, largely because he fears that Potter, like Weasley, will think that there is some sort of romance between Draco and Pansy, but also because he still isn't entirely sure that she did really protect him. He knows it's the only logical explanation, but there is something in him that is unable or unwilling to believe that she would just forgive him for betraying her and his own side, and then turn traitor herself, put her life in danger, just for him. He isn't even closely related to her.

Draco tries not to think about it very much, and so distracts himself with the task of making absolutely sure that Potter and the Weaslette don't get too close again. If there's anything that can take Potter away from him (which he doubts), it's her. The scare Draco gave her on the train seems to be wearing off, but luckily she still shows Potter a cold shoulder for the most part.

Unlike Granger. She has her own boyfriend now, even if she won't admit it, and still she insists on getting Potter alone and talking behind closed doors.

It isn't that Draco is worried, or even concerned. He just wants to be positive, one-hundred-percent sure, that he has Potter where he wants him. After all, his life does depend on it. So it is in the interest of his own safety that he listens at the door while Potter and Granger talk.

"What is this about?" Potter asks.

"I think you know," she says dispassionately. "Roll up your sleeves, Harry."

Potter laughs nervously. "Checking for track marks? Or the Dark Mark?"

There is a pause.

"You've Healed them," Granger says.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Harry..." she says warningly.

"Oh, are you talking about that scratch I had last week? Yeah, I Healed it as soon as we could use magic again-"

"Harry. You are a terrible liar. Stop embarrassing yourself and tell me the truth already. Did you do that to yourself?"

Silence.

Potter says, "I'm fine. Alright? No, don't... Hermione..."

In the ensuing pause, Draco can hear the muffled sounds of Granger crying.

"It's okay, Hermione. I'm okay. Really. Can't you just accept that? I promise you, it isn't what you think."

"Then what is it?" she wails.

"Look at me. No, come on, look at me. It isn't what you think."

She bursts out into sobs anew. "No, it's something worse, I can tell by your face!"

"Please... calm down... I'm fine. Why can't you use your amazing lie-detecting powers when I say that? I'm really okay. You know, aside from possibly being a Horcrux and having to kill the most powerful evil wizard in history... Oh, no. Come on, it's funny."

"It... isn't," she chokes out, in between sobs. "That's... the least funny thing I've ever heard in my life."

"Okay," he sighs. "I'm sorry. But please believe that I'm not sick. I can handle all this. You don't have to worry about me like that. I'd like it if you could concentrate that worrying on how to help me survive fighting Voldemort."

Draco is interrupted in his eavesdropping when someone grabs his shoulder and pulls him roughly from the door. It's the Weasel.

"What the fuck are you playing at, Malfoy? Spying o--"

"You might be interested in what's going on in there, Weasley. Potter and Granger... sounds pretty intimate to me..."

The Weasel's face is really an impressive shade of red by this point. "What?" He turns, as Draco knew he would, and swiftly opens the door, barging into the room, and stopping a half-step from the doorway. Draco peers around him. Granger and Potter are sitting on the floor, Potter holding her as she weeps against his shoulder.

Weasley turns back to Draco. "You--"

"I only said it sounded intimate," he points out, shrugging and grinning charmingly.

The Weasel huffs in irritation, and hurries to join his friends on the floor, murmuring those meaningless phrases people say, like "there, there." As Weasley gathers her into his arms, Potter tries to stand up to go, but Granger catches his arm. He sits back down again, and Draco can't catch his eye. Abashed and

disgusted at this wretched display of mad Gryffindor dysfunction, he leaves with a new worry: He still isn't sure if he can compete with their strange three-way relationship. He will have to keep working on Potter, keep feeding him and drawing him in, if he wants to be sure that he is always first in Potter's mind.

* * *

A few days after Ron and Hermione arrive at Spinner's End, the doorbell rings. Harry, Hermione, and Ron, who are all sitting together in the study with moldy books on their laps, look at each other in bewilderment. The house shouldn't be visible to Muggles.

After a moment, Hermione says, "I don't think he would stand there nicely and ring the doorbell. We might as well see who's there."

By the time they get downstairs, however, Ginny has already opened the door. Luna Lovegood stands in the foyer, soaking wet and looking mad as ever in a mac made out of what appears to be tin foil. She doesn't seem to have a hat, however, and is consequently dripping all over the place from her long, drenched hair. Harry can't help being instantly reminded of what Malfoy told him over a week ago. Luna and Ginny... He searches Luna's face, looking for what, he doesn't know-- some sign of guilt, perhaps, or some glimmer of something that might let him believe she has any sort of sexuality at all. But she doesn't look at Ginny any differently from the way she looks at the rest of them. Harry glances at Ginny, who slides her eyes away from his but doesn't blush.

"I was sent here by the Order," Luna is saying when Harry forces himself to pay attention again. "Owls are always risky, you know." Her voice has the same dreamy quality as it always does, but there is something about her-- perhaps it is in her movements as she casts the spell to dry herself off, or in her expression-- that seems even more ungrounded than before.

"We can talk in the kitchen," Hermione says. "I'll make you some tea to warm you up."

"Oh, it's quite pleasant out, really," says Luna, but goes with Hermione into the next room. Harry sees

Ginny put a hand to her mouth to stifle a giggle as they and Ron follow.

Hermione boils water as the other four sit around the table. Ron says, "So, were you there? When You-Know-Who came to Hogwarts?"

"Yes." Luna accepts the cup of tea Hermione hands her, blowing softly on it while it steeps.

"Are you okay?" Ginny asks. Harry forces himself not to glance between them significantly.

"Oh, yes," says Luna airily. Harry suddenly realizes that since she came in she hasn't once looked anyone in the eye, preferring to gaze into space or at some distant piece of the ceiling instead. This is quite the opposite of her usual way of staring at someone until they felt vastly uncomfortable. Harry feels a heavy sadness settle in his stomach. He should hate her for being with Ginny, but all that seems unreal and all he can think is how much he used to like Luna.

"Was..." says a voice from the doorway. Malfoy. Harry looks up to see him with his hand on the door frame, leaning on it as if it is the only thing holding him up. "Was my father there?"

Luna doesn't turn her head to look at him, doesn't change her far-off expression at all. "Yes. I saw him die."

Malfoy gasps sharply and brings his left arm to clutch at his stomach, as if at a wound. "What? Who...?" He can't finish the sentence.

"Who what?" Luna asks, looking puzzled.

"Who killed him, Luna," Harry growls.

"I think it was that Lestrange woman," says Luna calmly.

"Why?" says Harry, because Malfoy is now so pale he looks in danger of fainting. "Does she just enjoy killing relatives?"

"He set off the Dark Mark too early and let us know they were there. We escaped." Luna sips her tea. She is still staring at the ceiling. Harry stands up, ready to scream at her, wanting to shake her, but knowing it's pointless. He looks back at the doorway, but Malfoy is gone. Swearing under his breath, Harry goes after him, leaving the rest of the room to horrified silence, except for Luna's lilting voice behind him saying, "Oh, I'm sure he's fine. Male Veela have twenty-one lives, you know."

Malfoy isn't crying in a bathroom or hiding in the cellar. He isn't in their room, either. Harry is momentarily worried that Malfoy might have snuck out, but then he remembers that, officially, and as far as the others know, Malfoy does have his own room, though he hasn't slept in it once since they came here. Sure enough, the door to that room is locked.

"Malfoy," Harry calls through the door. "Let me in."

"Leave me the fuck alone," Malfoy shouts back.

Harry takes out his wand and taps the door handle, which springs open easily under Alohomora. Malfoy is lying on the still-made bed, face down in the pillows. He lifts his head enough to speak, still staring down at the pillow as Harry comes in and sits down beside him. "You bastard. Don't you understand the concept of privacy? You think it's okay to barge in here just because I don't have a wand to magic the door shut?"

"No; I think it's okay to barge in here because you didn't really want to keep me out, else you'd have dragged the dresser in front of the door."

"You'd have blasted it," says Malfoy hopelessly. He turns his face to Harry. "You can't stand being away from me for very long, can you?"

Harry reaches out to brush a lock of pale hair from Malfoy's dry cheek. Malfoy scowls and says, "It's getting bloody annoying."

Harry kisses him, and Malfoy's mouth softens and opens under his.

* * *

Draco was never too much of a fan of snogging back at school, with Blaise or anyone else. But with Potter, kissing is foreplay, something he has started doing in recent weeks to get Potter going, a breath of relief after the abuse he used to have to inflict. Consequently, kissing now being so associated with sex, when Potter claims his mouth a little unexpectedly, it isn't long before Draco is hard and running his hands up and down the skin on Potter's back, trying to get his shirt off.

Potter breaks the kiss to sit up, straddling Draco and pushing their erections together in the motion, and pulls his shirt over his head, his glasses flying off with it, as usually happens. For some reason, Draco likes that Potter can't see him well when they fuck. He doesn't have time to ponder this, however, as there is still the matter of all the other impossibly irritating articles of clothing that need to be removed right now.

It takes a whole lot of fumbling for them both to undress completely, because they are each so unwilling to break contact. Draco's cock, his whole body, aches with need and anticipation of being inside Potter. But when he tries to take Potter's wand to perform the necessary charmwork, Potter doesn't let him. Draco whines in protest, unwilling to go back to their old way of doing things.

But what Potter has planned is completely new. "I know the spell," Harry says against Draco's neck. "I've heard you say it enough times." And before Draco can even question what Potter is doing, he feels the tip of the wand in an area that has remained untouched for months now. Then he has to squeeze his eyes shut as Potter's spell melts through him, and the feeling is so shockingly familiar and so charged with memories that he has to bite his lip and think about Pansy naked for a moment just so he doesn't come right then.

"You're doing this because my father died," Draco says, not opening his eyes. "You think that this will fix me, that this will work because you think it worked for you, or--"

"I'm doing it because I want to," says Potter. "Isn't that enough?" He pauses. "Of course, I won't if you don't want me to."

Draco's eyes snap open. "What's that supposed to mean? I'm not going to beg like you did. I'm not a fucking masochist."

Potter looks annoyed. "It just means I'm not going to rape you, you stupid prat. Now do you want me to fuck you or not?"

Knowing he is going to regret it, Draco lets himself for a split-second be ruled entirely by physical desire and that instant is all it takes for him to lose control completely and raise his head to kiss Potter harshly on the mouth.

Potter is smart enough to take this as a "yes," and Draco draws a sharp breath as Potter slowly pushes into him. Draco wraps his legs around Potter's waist, letting him know he can go deeper... deeper...

Yes. Draco throws his head back and releases the moan that has been building somewhere inside him... somewhere deep inside him... where Potter's cock is filling him and stroking just the right spot with every agonizingly slow thrust...

And, yes, this is what he remembers. The fullness, the pleasure of the hard length moving inside him, the pressure on all the right places-- it's all so achingly familiar, almost nostalgic.

Still, it isn't the same. This is Potter, and he is moving so slowly and gently that Draco wants to scream, and at the same time he's kissing Draco anywhere he can reach and still sliding his hands all over Draco's body.

It's too much. Draco comes, his breath catching and cutting off the wordless moan he has kept up nearly continuously since Potter entered him. As he orgasms, his whole body tightens and he feels Potter start to move faster and faster until he, too, comes, and it fills Draco up just like he remembers.

Several minutes later, Draco still hasn't recovered. He's regained his breath, sure, but powerful waves of self-loathing keep running through him and his head is spinning. The heat and rhythm of Potter breathing next to him isn't helping. To his horror, he feels tears start to sting his eyes. He rubs them furiously with the back of his hand, but this combined with an inevitable sniff are enough for Potter raise his head, propping himself up to look at Draco properly. Though of course he can't see anything really properly without his glasses. Perhaps Draco should have let the tears fall, and maybe Potter wouldn't have seen.

"Was it really rubbish? It was rubbish, wasn't it? I'm sorry. I've only ever done it the once, and that was with a girl, so--"

"Potter," Draco growls, deciding to end the idiotic ranting as soon as possible. Potter really does think everything is about him. "If it was rubbish I wouldn't have come." He rolls over, away from Potter, and this time doesn't fight the tears that roll down his cheeks. He feels Potter's hand on his shoulder.

That's it. Draco shrugs him off and stands, pulling on a t-shirt before locking himself in the room's adjoining bathroom. He sits on the floor and cries, just as he did the first night he brought Potter off, back at the Black house. There are so many reasons why all of this is wrong. He had somehow managed to keep some small piece of pride tied up in the fact that, although he had fucked Potter, he had never let Potter intrude on what had belonged for so long to Blaise. Because, even though they switched on occasion, it was the intoxicating feeling of Blaise making love to him that Draco lived for all that time at school, that let Draco dismiss all of Blaise's infidelities as long as he kept coming back to Draco, who was the first and, he had been convinced, the permanent one. The only one that mattered.

Now, Draco has completed his betrayal of Blaise and his own sense of dignity by letting Potter do what only Blaise was allowed to do. And what is worse, Draco liked it.

* * *

By the time Harry comes back down to the kitchen, Luna has gone again, and Ginny disappeared into some other part of the house, as she often does of late. Hermione raises her eyebrows at Harry as he sits down next to Ron.

"Where have you been?" Ron asks. He thinks he sees Harry blush slightly before responding.

"I had to make sure Malfoy was alright. He was pretty..." Harry falters. "He was upset."

"That took you an hour?" says Hermione.

"Yes," says Harry firmly. "Did Luna leave already?"

"Yeah," says Ron. "We were just talking about how she was even weirder than usual."

Hermione sighs sadly. "I think the battle probably shook her up. She seems... shell-shocked, wouldn't you say?"

"What's shell-shocked?" Ron asks curiously.

"You know," says Hermione. "...Traumatized."

Ron tries to take her hand, but she snatches it away. Ron flushes a little as he remembers that Hermione is still trying to pretend to Harry that everything is the same. As if there is any chance he hasn't noticed already.

However, Harry ignores them. "What did she say?"

Ron fills him in: The news Luna gave them is ominous, but nothing too surprising. Voldemort is well on his way to amassing an army, meaning he is also leaving a trail of slain Death Eaters who made mistakes, now that he can afford to dispose of them. The werewolves are also growing in numbers, as they select certain wizards and Muggles alike to bite with purpose. Others they just eat. Voldemort seems to be using Hogwarts as his new stronghold, and advertising the fact by making no effort to hide the flocking of scared wizards and Dark creatures to the castle. The Order makes stands where it can, but mostly they are waiting for Harry. There isn't much they can do against Voldemort's growing strength, so they do their best to protect the Muggles and distract Voldemort from focusing all his energy on finding Harry.

As Ron explains, Hermione stands up and leaves the room, wandering back in sometime later with one of Snape's Potions books, which have proven somewhat useful in their research. After Ron has finished, and Harry thought for a while about what he has said, she looks up and says, "I think we're about ready to do the memory spell. Snape has a Pensieve that we can use, and with a bit of complicated magic we can go back to what you don't even really remember, Harry."

He nods. "Alright. Tomorrow, then? Is that enough time?"

"Probably. You two will have to help me find these ingredients. They're pretty basic, so I'm sure Snape has them somewhere, Ginny can probably tell us where. And, Harry..." she pauses. "You might want to think about whether or not you want to take Ginny with you. I don't know if you'll be able to see it otherwise."

Harry swallows visibly and nods again.

* * *

That night, Draco goes back to Potter's bed and does to him all the things he usually does. They don't talk, however, and the next morning Potter is gone when Draco wakes up.

Draco heads downstairs, and hears Granger and the two Weasleys before he reaches them.

"What the fuck does he think he's doing?" the Weaslette is shouting.

"Calm down, Ginny, for goodness sake," Granger says sternly. "Flying off the handle isn't going to help."

"What's going on?" Draco inquires from the kitchen doorway.

Ginny whirls around to face him. Her face is a bright Weasley red as she shoves a note in his face, looking murderous. "Do you know anything about this?"

Draco blinks, and takes the note.

I've gone out. There's something I need to get. Don't worry, I'll be back. -Harry

Draco looks up. "He's gone?"

"Yes, he's gone, you fuckwit," she says. "The question is where."

Draco looks at the others. The Weasel's face is pale and pinched with worry. Granger is solemn.

"Well?" Ginny turns back to the rest of them. "What are we going to do?"

"What can we do?" her brother snaps. "Nothing."

Granger nods. "Ron's right. We just have to hope that he's being careful, whatever he's doing."

The Weaslette gapes at them. "We're not even going to look for him?"

"And just where would we look?" says Granger.

"There's no point in it," says Weasley. "If he's being careless enough to allow us to find him, I'm sure the Death Eaters would find him first."

Draco feels ill. "But..." he stops. "He really didn't say anything to any of you?"

They all shake their heads, and the Weaslette narrows her eyes at him. "Why, did he say something to you?"

"No," says Draco.

"Why would he say anything to Malfoy?" Weasley sneers.

Draco ignores him. "Do you think he was taken?"

"I would assume," says Granger, "that if anyone was here, they would have killed all of us."

"Or," Weasley counters. "There was only one person, and he didn't want a fight so he took Harry last night and forged a note."

Draco swallows. He doesn't think that anyone could have taken Potter without his noticing, but of course he can't tell them that. Potter is such an idiot. What is he doing, going off trying to get himself killed? If he dies, then there goes the protection Draco has worked so hard to secure. This, of course, is the only reason Draco cares at all what Potter does.

* * *

Ginny spends the day alone in Snape's enormous stockroom of potions ingredients. Ostensibly, she is deciphering his narrow script and attempting to locate all the potentially useful herbs and crushed insects and whatnot. In reality she cries a lot and worries about Harry. If he ever comes back, she doesn't think she will speak to him again. What on earth could he be thinking? What could be so important that he needs to sneak out of the house alone to get it? It makes no sense, and her knees feel weak all day. She knows that Ron and Hermione must be going through something similar, but she doesn't want company, especially with the compound mania for work that Hermione has acquired since her father's death. This is why Ginny has chosen to hide here, so that she can pretend to be doing something useful.

* * *

That night, Draco stays up late waiting for Potter. When he finally does come back, Draco decides not to ask him where he's been. He's alive, and that's what matters. Draco breathes a sigh of relief. However, Potter walks right past him on his way upstairs, not even glancing in his direction.

This is new. Draco follows him discreetly up to the bedroom. Even there, Potter moves about the room, stripping off his clothes and putting clothes on! and not paying any attention to Draco whatsoever.

“Potter,” says Draco.

Potter doesn’t pause, doesn’t look at Draco. “What do you want?”

Impatient, Draco starts forward and captures Potter from behind by the belt loops, catching him with his arms still tangled in the shirt he is trying to put on. “You know what I want,” says Draco sweetly.

Potter jerks the shirt down with an impatient noise. “Let me go.”

This must be some new game. “No,” says Draco experimentally. He bows his head to bite Potter’s newly exposed neck.

A split-second later, however, he leaps back with a cry of pain as a blinding, searing heat surges through Potter’s body.

“Don’t touch me,” says Potter.

Draco touches his burnt lips, baffled. “But...” he says, and of course he doesn’t sound pathetic— he is Draco Malfoy. “But.... I want you.” Doesn’t Potter realize what a privilege it is to hear that from him, even if it is almost completely a lie?

Apparently not. Potter turns on him, his cheeks tinged with anger. “Too sodding bad. Take a cold shower or something. You wait for once.” With this, he brushes past Draco, hitting him with another wave of heat, less intense, but more exciting than the first.

Somehow very exciting. And therefore concerning. It drains the moisture from Draco’s mouth. He can’t help following Potter into the adjoining bathroom.

Potter has pulled from the cupboard under the sink a bottle of cleaning potion that even Draco, who makes it a point to be ignorant of such servant’s matters, knows is used for scrubbing the most vile stains off of stone floors, and even then usually in dilution. But Potter is running the water hot in the sink, the steam fogging up his glasses to opacity, and now he is pouring the caustic solution over his hands, scrubbing hard all the way up to his elbows.

“What are you doing?” Draco asks, shocked.

“I’m washing my hands.”

“And for you does that usually entail removing twelve layers of skin?”

Potter says nothing, but keeps scrubbing even though his arms and hands are bright red and shining raw. Draco, unable to see Potter’s eyes behind the frosted spectacles, cannot read his expression, but Potter is biting his lower lip, no doubt in response to the pain.

“Stop it,” says Draco. For some reason, this sight is unbearable. “Stop it!” He seizes Potter by the shoulders, even though the heat radiating through the boy’s shirt is enough to burn Draco’s palms, and tries to pull him away from the sink. He succeeds only partially, and Potter leans down to rest his forehead against the sink, his hands gripping the sides of the porcelain. “You have to stop,” Draco repeats.

Potter doesn’t move for a few moments. Draco examines his own palms, which are almost as raw as Potter’s. One of them is blistering. The water in the sink keeps running, filling the small room with its noise and heat and steam.

Eventually, Potter stands up with a barely audible but somehow heavy sigh, and turns the tap off, wincing. Silently, Draco hands him a towel and Potter takes it. He tries to dry his hands, but the fabric sticks to him, and he curses when he peels it away. So Draco goes into the bedroom and fetches from one of his drawers the little jar of salve, an all-purpose healing potion, and brings it back to Potter.

Potter looks at him. Or perhaps he doesn’t; it is still hard to tell behind those fogged glasses.

"Sit down," says Draco, and he is pleased to see that Potter does, almost immediately, right there on the bathroom floor. At least he still takes orders when it matters.

Wait-- this matters? How can this possibly matter? No one is dying. There isn't anything at stake. How can Draco think that somehow, right now, what he does is enormously important?

It is a question that Draco has no time (or inclination, for that matter) to answer, however, so he pushes

it aside and focuses on spreading the salve carefully and gently over Potter's hot hands and forearms, feeling the potion sinking in and healing his own burnt palms.

"Potter," says Draco, when he feels he is ready. "What happened today?"

"Do you think I'm going to tell you?" Potter says dully. The steam has mostly cleared from his glasses and his eyes are closed wearily.

"I can't believe you still don't trust me."

Amazingly, this works. Sort of. "I killed someone," Potter says, without emotion. "Are you happy?"

It isn't until later, after the potion has sunk in and begun to heal both their wounds, when they are sitting on the bed and pointedly not doing anything, that something in Potter's face makes him think to ask, "Who was it?"

Potter glances at him in surprise, then looks away quickly. The steam has somehow made his hair even more untidy than usual, though of course Draco would never notice such a thing as Potter's hair.

"You don't want to know," says Potter.

Draco goes cold. He swallows, and says, "Now you have to tell me."

Potter clutches his head in his hands, fingers gripping that black mess he calls hair. "Theodore Nott," he says finally.

Draco stands up. He sits back down again. He stands up. Then he sits down, hard, on the floor. "You killed Theo?"

Potter is watching him with green eyes that are bright with something that might be tears. Good. He should hurt as much as Draco does.

Draco wants to throw up. He wants to run away from this, from Potter, who kills people, who kills Draco's friends.

He sees suddenly, with startling clarity, the place where he has ended up, and how far it is from where he wants to be. How did this happen? How could he have let this happen?

He should have killed Potter long ago, even if it meant Draco would have to be killed or kill himself in disgust afterwards. He should have killed Dumbledore. He should have done anything to avoid being here, whoring himself out to the person who has killed Theo Nott.

How had he forgotten what this was about? How could he have lost sight of the enormous costs of getting tangled up with Potter, of fighting against his own side?

Then, Draco does vomit, right there on the carpet like a sick cat.

"I'm so sorry," Potter chokes, suddenly next to Draco on the floor. "I'm sorry I'm sorry I had to please believe me I had to I'm sorry I'm so sorry..." His hands, cold now, are on Draco's back, they are brushing hair out of his eyes, they are wiping Draco's mouth on Potter's own sleeve...

"Keep your hands off me, Potter," Draco spits, once he can speak. "Keep your bloody, filthy hands off of me, you... you murderer."

Infuriatingly, Potter doesn't take his hands away. He tenses at the word "murderer," however, and his grip on Draco's shoulder, in his hair, becomes painful. "I had to," says Potter, and his voice has become firm and steady. "I'm sorry it had to happen, but there was no other choice. I wouldn't take it back."

Draco stares down at his own sick, and thinks of all the horrible things he would like to do to Potter. The trouble is, Draco has already done most of them, and yet Potter is still here, appallingly, holding Draco and trying to tell him that Theo had to die... It is unbearable. It is too much.

"Do you want me to kill you?" Draco weeps. What has he left to be ashamed of? "How do I get rid of you? How do I get you to believe that I hate you I hate you I hate you..." He is shaking with sobs, struggling against Potter, who pulls him closer, more tightly into their awkward position.

"I know you hate me," says Potter quietly. "I know it. You don't think I know? You don't exactly act like a--"

"Don't say it!" Draco screams at him.

He says it anyways. "... Like a lover."

"Never again," says Draco. "Never again, Potter. I don't care if you throw me out, give me to the Dark Lord. I don't fucking care. You can't expect me to keep this up while you're--"

"You mean you didn't see this coming?" Potter asks. "Did you think I was going to let your friends kill me? Did you think you could.... seduce me into surrendering everything?"

"Did you think you could manipulate me into letting you murder everyone I care about, and giving you a kiss for good luck? Did you think I'd be so touched by your mercy that I would fall at your feet?"

They look at each other for a moment. "No," says Potter. "I didn't. I don't think you're capable of feeling anything towards me but hate."

"So you thought you could do it by holding my life over my head. You're abominable."

"I'm not going to kill you. You can leave if you want, go back home. You might be safe there, and isn't that what you want most?"

For some reason, that isn't what Draco wants at all. He wants to stay here and keep hurting Potter, keep reminding him of what he's done.

"Potter," says Draco, after a few minutes. "Are you ever planning on letting me go? Or are we to starve to death on your bedroom floor?"

Potter lets go, and stands up. "Alright, Malfoy. You do what you want. I won't stop the war for you."

* * *

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Chapter 9: Marked

Chapter Nine

For the Gryffindors, the next day consists mostly of shouting at Potter. "I'm not going to tell you where I was," he keeps saying. "So stop asking." He doesn't mention Theodore to them, gives no indication of anything that happened while he was gone.

Draco, finding it hard to avoid Potter, locks himself in his room. Of course, one night Potter comes in

anyways.

Draco had been looking out the window at the moon that is hanging round and orange over the warehouses and street lamps. He turns around and scowls as Potter closes the door. "I told you, Potter. Never again."

"I only came to give you something," says Potter. "When I went out, I went to find your father." He steps forward and holds out his hand, opening it to reveal a twinkling of silver in his palm. "I wanted to wait until I had calmed down to give it to you, but now you won't even look at me... Well, anyways..."

Draco stares at him. And stares. Potter's face grows increasingly pink.

Finally, after several long minutes, Draco recovers himself enough to take the ring, staring at it. It takes him another minute to find his voice.

"You took this from my father's body."

"Yes."

"For me."

"Yes."

"Is that the only reason you--"

"I just thought you ought to have something," Potter says. "This was... all I could find."

There is another long pause before Draco says, "You killed Theodore Nott to bring me this ring." He looks up at Potter now, and sees fear creeping into his features.

"I killed Nott because if I didn't he would have killed me."

Draco begins to tremble, the hand clutching the ring so unsteady that he has to close his fist around it and shove his arms at his sides, though this doesn't help much. "So," he says, his mouth dry. "You put your life in danger, nearly got yourself killed, scared everyone shitless, and MURDERED MY FRIEND, all so you could bring me a token from my dead father who sold me to the Dark Lord to be tortured to death. IS THAT RIGHT, HARRY POTTER?"

Potter seems to crumple. "I didn't mean to have to kill Nott," he says, weakly but desperately. "That wasn't supposed to happen. I just thought..."

"WHAT?" Draco spits. "You thought I would want this? That it would make me happy? You have got to be the most abysmally stupid person I have ever met. Now get the fuck out of my room. If you try to come in here again, I'll tell everyone what we've been doing this past month."

Potter turns away and retreats obediently, his shoulders shaking, and Draco slams the door behind him with satisfying cruelty.

Later, Draco sits on his bed and turns the ring over and over in his hands. He has a signet ring, as all Malfoys do, but this ring is the one intended specifically for the heir. Draco isn't sure of all of its powers, as one of them is to allow access to certain texts on its history and magic. He does know that it is the key to control of the manor and its house-elves. He could probably go back home now.

He slips the ring on, and it magically adjusts to the size of his finger, glowing with a slight warmth. There were other Malfoys, he thinks, and from what he was taught they weren't as terrible as his parents turned out to be, so perhaps one day he can again be proud to carry the name. For now, though, he tugs the ring off and hides it away in a drawer. He'd rather not think about his father or any of it if he can at all avoid it. Shit, even thinking about Theodore is less painful.

* * *

Tempers are still running high in the house when Hermione finally gives up screaming at Harry and prepares the spell to allow access to his early memories.

"You're taking Ginny with you," she informs him curtly, taking the boiling pot of potion off of the stove while being careful to keep the lid secure.

"Absolutely not," he says immediately. Ginny can understand why he wouldn't want her there. It's a very personal memory, the worst of his life. Still, she knows that at least part of his refusal is simply due to his anger with Hermione and all of them, and his general bad mood these past few days.

Hermione slams the pot down on the kitchen table with a bang. "You think you can do everything on your own? FINE. Do the spell yourself."

Huffing, she begins to stalk away, but Harry yells, "ALRIGHT! Fine. She can come." He scowls at Ginny. "If you really want to see my mother getting murdered, then you're welcome to come along to the show."

"Shut up," Hermione snaps. "Come over here and sit down." He obeys, and Ginny and Ron watch silently as Hermione opens the lid of the pot slightly, so that curls of purple steam rise up in front of Harry's angry face. "Breathe the steam," she instructs, "and concentrate on finding the memory."

Harry closes his eyes, his brow furrowing and sweating with the steam. After a moment, his face twists into an expression of great pain, and he says, "I've got it. But I can't..." He scrunches up his forehead further. "I can't hold it..."

Hermione licks her lips. Ginny has seen her practicing this on herself, but knows that it's a rather complicated spell, and Hermione has to do it silently so that she doesn't distract Harry. Hermione swallows and raises her wand to Harry's temple. Then she slowly draws out the white cloud that is the memory. Harry opens his eyes as the memory leaves him. Hermione drops it into the waiting Pensieve.

There is silence for a moment. Everyone stares at the swirling mists of the Pensieve. Then Harry says quietly, "Alright, then." He stands up, and Ginny steps forward. He flinches as she grabs hold of his shirt.

"I have to make sure I'm going the same place as you, don't I?" she whispers.

He scowls as he picks up the Pensieve and begins stirring it around. "You must be loving this," he hisses back, as they wait for the correct memory to surface. "Getting to feed your little obsession."

"What?"

"You want to be me," he whispers, and he grabs her head and plunges her face into the Pensieve. She barely has time to register her shock before the sound of terrible screaming drives all else from her mind.

* * *

While she and Ron wait for Harry and Ginny to emerge, Hermione Vanishes the potion and puts the pot back in its cupboard.

"It's so weird," says Ron, behind her. "From the way Harry talked about it, I always thought that you would actually fall into the Pensieve."

"I imagine that's what it feels like," Hermione replies. She closes the cupboard and goes to stand beside Ron, clutching his arm. They spend another few minutes watching Harry and Ginny's still forms, bent over the bowl, looking almost as if they are drowning, before Ginny twitches and then jerks her head up with a gasp. She straightens up and immediately turns to Harry, pulling him out of the swirling vapors by his hair, but he pushes her forcefully away, so that she stumbles backwards.

"Harry!" Hermione gasps. He doesn't seem to hear her, however, and storms out of the room.

Hermione turns back to Ginny. "Are you okay? What happened? What did you see?"

Ginny looks at her, pale and shaking, and falls into the nearest chair. "We both saw it. He's a Horcrux."

Hermione brings her hands to her mouth instinctively. "Oh, God."

Ron, beside her, steps back and leans against the wall for support and squeezes his eyes shut. "Fuck."

"It was horrible..." Ginny says. She rests her forehead on the edge of the table and stares at the floor. "I knew it would be horrible, but it was... It was the worst thing I've ever seen. I've never heard anyone scream like that..."

"Stop it," says Ron thickly.

So Ginny says nothing more, and the silence stretches on.

* * *

Every day Harry wakes up shocked to find half of his bed empty. He feels himself sliding steadily down into all the things that will get him killed: Depression, useless anger, loneliness, self-loathing, self-pity and, worst of all, crippling fear. He can't even say for sure what it is he is afraid of, but it seems to have little to do with Voldemort.

He feels like a child again-- utterly alone. The horror of watching his mother die, the heavy knowledge of his responsibility to everyone, now doubled with the added punch of being a Horcrux, and the complicated tensions in the house are all things he has to deal with on his own. Ron and Hermione have shut him out by intensifying their relationship, he has ruined forever any chance of being on passing

terms with Ginny, and Malfoy....

As much as Harry tries to avoid the subject, Malfoy is never far from his mind. This separation is killing him. He can't count the number of times he's gotten so far as Malfoy's door, intent on going in there and getting what he wants, consequences be damned, before he forces himself to stop with the thought that maybe, if Harry doesn't push, Malfoy will come into Harry's room one night. So Harry falls asleep each night with his hand still wrapped around his own cock, thinking of Malfoy inside him, Malfoy kissing him, Malfoy wrapping his legs around Harry's waist...

And during the day he doesn't have much to distract him. Or rather, he does, but it isn't distracting enough. In the all-too-brief period in which he was sleeping with Malfoy without blood and pain, he was able to work for long periods of time. But now there are so many things he doesn't want to think about, and no way to relieve the stress. If he hadn't always thought it was idiotic, he might even have taken a knife and started doing what Hermione thought he was doing to himself, just to get some kind of release. But he isn't going to stoop that low. He is stronger than that, even with his mother screaming in his head, Ginny hanging around, hateful and frightening and still somehow attractive despite everything, and the increasingly evident fact of his attachment to Malfoy, all mixed in with the usual consequences of being Harry Potter, the ones like saving the world, that anyone would expect to take precedence.

Of all of these things to worry about, Malfoy occupies the majority of his thoughts. It's impossible to deny the simple fact that Harry is devastated by the thought that he might never get to touch him again. He even misses talking to him. But what is worse is the overwhelming guilt that he's hurt Malfoy so badly. He just wanted to make Malfoy feel better, to ease some of the pain of his father's death. And maybe he'd been a little selfish, too, taking the chance to prove himself and the excuse to get out of the house for once.

Seeing Draco's reaction to the ring was the worst feeling in the world, only trumped a day later by watching his mother being murdered and himself made into Voldemort's Horcrux. No one in his life had ever made Harry feel quite as terrible as Malfoy did, even including Aunt Petunia the first time she told him outright that they didn't love him.

Maybe he is just an incurable masochist, and the only reason he let himself become mixed up with Malfoy was because even when he gained some small-but-precious happiness from it, a part of him knew all along that Malfoy was the last person on earth Harry should attach himself to if he wanted to avoid getting hurt. Which, after Ginny, he had thought he wanted very much.

All of it makes Harry feel incredibly stupid.

* * *

Harry stalks around the house in a foul mood, barely eating and not talking to anyone. Malfoy continues his self-imposed solitary confinement, locking himself in his room all day. Hermione cries every evening, even as she tells them there has to be hope, that there has to be some way to disable a Horcrux without destroying it. Ron tries to comfort her, but it is clear that he is certain he's going to lose his best friend in a short while. Ginny lies awake at night, haunted both by what she saw in the Pensieve and what Harry said to her: "You want to be me."

After too many nights filled with hour upon painful hour of intense self-examination, Ginny has to admit the possibility that perhaps what she feels for Harry is not what people mean by the word "love." Maybe it isn't normal or right for her to want to be so close to him that she is part of him, for her to want to go beyond any intimacy ever before achieved by two people in the history of the world. Maybe she oughtn't be so obsessed with everything about him. Probably no one else entertains crushes on the people their lover fancies.

She refuses to cry about it, or about anything that has happened lately. She feels she wept a fairly ridiculous amount the day Harry was missing, and she is determined that he doesn't deserve any more. And any way, Hermione is doing enough crying for all of them. No, something must be done.

* * *

Draco is awakened late one night-- or, more properly, early morning-- by a knock on his door. Sighing, he drags himself out of bed and growls through the door, "Potter, sod off."

However, "It's Ginny," comes the Weaslette's voice from the other side of the door. "Can I come in?"

"Considering you're going to whether or not I give permission..." He opens the door and she steps swiftly

inside. He locks the door again and faces her, still blinking sleep from his eyes and trying to focus on her in the light from the street lamps and the very first tinge of dawn. Her arms are folded across her chest, and she clutches her elbows defensively. He can see that he still makes her nervous, but he is too tired to derive any satisfaction from the thought.

"Why aren't you speaking to Harry?" she says.

"He killed my friend," he replies bluntly. It is half past four and he is in no mood for this, or any, conversation.

She scoffs incredulously. "I'm sure he didn't."

"Why don't you ask him?"

"Anyway," she says, brushing this off, "the point is that Harry can't fight if he keeps up being all... depressed like this."

"So what do you want me to do about it?"

"Do whatever it is you do that makes him happy. Fuck him, or whatever. I don't care, as long as he cheers up enough to do what he has to do."

"Why don't you do it, then? He still likes you, you know."

"No," she says, looking away. "I don't make him happy anymore."

"Well," he says, folding his arms across his chest. "That's too bad. I'm not going near him." He can't even bear the thought of looking at Potter right now, let alone putting on that act again.

She looks annoyed, which she has no right to be considering what she is asking. She can't possibly have expected him to just do what she said. "What about your revenge?" she says. "Weren't you going to humiliate him and break his heart some more? If you leave it like this, he's just going to think you're angry, not that you never wanted him at all."

He glares at her. "I thought you wanted me to cheer him up, not break him."

He can't see her face, turned away as it is and swallowed in shadow. "You can break him when he's killed Voldemort."

Draco is shocked into silence for a moment. He is genuinely baffled by the Weaslette. She always surprises him with new levels to her particular brand of psychosis. Finally, he says quietly, "Alright."

And then he opens the door and shoves her out, nearly knocking her to the ground.

* * *

Back in her own room, Ginny still can't sleep. She sits on her bed and watches the sky lighten outside her window.

"You can break him when he's killed Voldemort." She hadn't meant to say it that way, to actually give him permission. She'd merely been using the only bargaining chip she had... Right? She doesn't think she wants to see Harry hurt, but then again it would teach him a lesson. He hasn't exactly treated her fairly through this whole thing. Or ever, really, given evidence of his sexual preferences.

But Malfoy scares her. The effect he has on Harry, and on herself, scares her. Had he wanted to take advantage of her, he probably could. She would probably let him do to her all the things he's done to Harry....

Ginny groans and grabs a pillow, smothering her face in it and squeezing her eyes shut tight. Harry might be right, and she can't stand it. In the past month and a half, she has had the harshest judgments visited upon her by the people whose opinion she cares about most... and all of them have turned out to be true.

Because it is getting harder for Ginny to say that she isn't a lesbian. All the arguments she had, the facades she had built and the proof she thought she had in her feelings for Harry... all are coming down around her.

When Luna left, Ginny saw her to the door. Neither met the other's eyes, but as Luna stepped out into the rain she slid her hand down Ginny's bare arm and said to the clouds overhead, "We should get married." And then she was gone. Ginny closed the door and stood there in the front hall for a long time. Luna was mad, that was clear, but Ginny wanted so badly to help her and, what was more, wanted to hold her, to feel that hand on her arm again, to kiss her...

Ginny stands up and throws the pillow across the room. This is ridiculous. She isn't going to delve needlessly into such painful things. She'd put all that behind her long ago when she began to realize how terrible it was. Except, maybe it isn't all that terrible. Lupin must know some things; Harry always trusted him completely. And now even Ron is saying...

It is exhausting, this back-and-forth, veering from horror at the very thought she might be bent to anger that anyone would try to tell her it was wrong. She tries to remember if it had felt wrong, the things she used to do with Luna back at school.

They didn't do much, compared to what she would later get into with various boys and, finally, with Harry. They were young, after all, as Ginny put a stop to it sometime in their fourth year. But what did happen is frustratingly ingrained in Ginny's memory: Enjoying the feeling of Luna's breasts against her own, lips bumping awkwardly and sweetly, the tingle of hot breath in her ear, and most of all the indelible smell of Luna's soft hair. That scent stuck to Ginny's clothes and would sweep her off into heady daydreams at random times of the day.

And she does remember wanting more, though she wouldn't dare consider taking it. She never thought of actually running her hands over Luna's breasts, her slim shoulders, her waist. Would never have

dreamt of moving her kisses down to the other girl's neck, her chest and nipples, her stomach.... And it certainly never occurred to her that she might dare follow the strongest and most identifiable urge-- the urge for friction, for motion against that hot sensation between her legs... the same sensation that flared up whenever Luna moved her hands while she was talking or Madam Rosmerta clicked over to her table at the Three Broomsticks or when Hermione asked Ginny to fasten the back of her robes for the Yule ball, or, later, when Harry kissed her so hard she felt her lips bruising against her teeth...

It's a miracle, really, that now that Ginny can identify that odd feeling as sexual arousal, she can still go around pretending that it is an entirely different thing when it happens around Fleur than when it happens around Harry. Of course, she can't anymore, because now she has realized she is doing it.

Ginny stays in her room until Hermione comes to knock on her door to ask if she is alright.

Ginny has never felt less alright in her life, but she answers in the affirmative and tells herself that she has to face the day. She can throw up later.

* * *

When Draco lets himself in to Potter's room that night, Potter looks up at him from where he is sitting cross-legged on the bed, a dusty book open before him, and says, "What are you doing here?"

Draco crosses the room deliberately, narrowing his eyes. "Are you serious, Potter? I come into your room at night and you want to talk?"

Potter flushes and looks away, closing the book and wrinkling his nose at the cloud of ancient dust that flies up. "It's a legitimate question," he says. "What was that you keep saying? Ah, yes-- 'never again.'"

"Well." Draco sits down cautiously next to Potter, earning a sidelong glance. "You'll notice I never specified what it was that was never going to happen again. It could have referred to anything."

Potter raises his eyebrows. "So what did you mean?"

Draco sighs. "Look, Potter. I'm here. Isn't that enough?"

Potter is silent for a while, then says, "I'm just wondering, is all. If you hate me so much, why are you here?"

Draco is getting quite annoyed by this point. He has to admit that he expected Potter to welcome him back into his bed with no small amount of enthusiasm and gratitude, and a good deal of tongue. He didn't really prepare for the convincing that seems to be required. He tries to remember what was said that night, when Potter told him he'd killed Theodore.

"You said you'd never expected anything different," says Draco. "So why care now?"

"I'm not going to... how did you put it? ... 'Hold your life over your head.' Don't do this if you don't want to." Potter is now staring resolutely at the floor, wearing the face he used to wear when he was defending himself and his friends to Draco back at school. It didn't deter Draco then and it doesn't now.

"Shut up, Potter," he says, and pounces.

Potter is bowled over, and lets Draco pin him to the bed and kiss him hard, but then he turns his face away and says, "I'm serious, Draco."

Draco sits up, feeling suddenly tired. Potter keeps asking him for more. Two weeks ago Draco would have been delighted to see that he has gotten to Potter to this extent, but now he feels it like pressure bearing down on him, constricting his breathing.

The fact is, no one, apart perhaps from Pansy, has ever cared for Draco as much as Potter seems to. Draco isn't sure why this thought should come to him now. He isn't even sure it is accurate. Still...

"It was sweet," says Draco, "even though you were a prat about it, when you brought me that ring."

Potter seems to recognize that this is as much of an apology as he is going to get, because he raises his eyes to Draco's and his frown is gone. "I'm sorry it turned out the way it did," he says softly.

"Me, too," says Draco. This is quite true. He is sorry that Potter killed Theo. He isn't sorry, however, about the way he reacted. He hardly likes knowing that the boy he is straddling right now is a murderer, and that he'd killed for the sake of cheering Draco up.

"I didn't want to kill him," Potter says, as if reading Draco's thoughts. "Nott, I mean."

"Do we really have to talk about this?" Draco can't stand the way Potter is looking at him with such... it must be pity.

Potter smiles suddenly. "No, I suppose not." He reaches up to grab Draco's shirt and pull him down into a kiss.

Draco sighs with relief that the hard part is over, opening his mouth to Potter and sliding their tongues together, realizing that he has missed this. Nothing wrong with that, however. Wanking alone in his room is hardly comparable to the sheer physical pleasure of another warm body, even if it is a lovesick Harry Potter.

So Draco doesn't hesitate, when Potter begins to squirm under him, to move his kisses down to Potter's neck and then his bare chest, to lick and suck at his hardening nipples... Potter's breathing turns heavy, and the motion of his hips presses his erection against Draco's stomach. Draco grins at the way Potter's breathing changes again when Draco brings his hot mouth to his waistband-- his gasps turning from needy to delighted. Potter twists his hands into Draco's hair and even laughs in a sharp exhale of sound as Draco runs his tongue along Potter's hipbone.

Draco looks up while he draws Potter's pajama bottoms down and says, "Now, didn't you miss me?"

Potter laughs again, face flushed and already sweating, green eyes alight with a kind of happiness that takes Draco by surprise and makes something flutter in his stomach. He can't help returning that smile.

Draco reaches out and takes hold of the base of Potter's cock, earning more happy noises, and runs his tongue slowly from base to tip. Potter fists the hands in Draco's hair and says fondly and breathlessly, "Teaser."

Draco chuckles. "Oh?" He blows softly on the tip, and Potter twitches, gasping sharply. Draco smirks at Potter, and then takes him into his mouth.

Potter moans. Draco works him, moving his head up and down, sucking, and exploring Potter's cock with his tongue as if he's never done this before. Potter's moans become louder, Draco's hand becomes slippery with his own saliva, and Potter begins to put more and more pressure on the back of Draco's head, pushing until Draco feels it at the back of his throat.

Draco stops, however, eliciting a breathy protest from Potter. "Oh, hush," Draco says soothingly, working his hand along Potter's cock slowly as he moves back up to claim his lips again. "Can't have you coming yet."

Potter's only response is to pull Draco's shirt over his head and toss his own glasses aside before running his tongue along the ridges of Draco's ear. Draco shivers and kicks the book off of the bed so they can have more room. Then it is is his turn to moan into the other boy's mouth as Potter's hands run down his skin to his waist and tug down the borrowed trousers, freeing Draco's swollen and aching cock to brush against Potter's. They both gasp at the contact, but Potter is impatient and fumbles for his wand, shoving it into Draco's waiting hand.

Draco speaks the spell against Potter's neck, letting his tongue brush against the taught and shivering skin with every syllable. Potter trembles in the wake of the magic, and Draco kisses him once more as he pushes his cock inside of him.

It's been a week, perhaps, since they last did this. Not nearly long enough for it to feel quite this amazing or for Potter's sweet groans to be quite this enticing, their vibrations thrumming through Draco straight to his cock and making him move faster, thrust deeper and harder into that tight heat. And it certainly hasn't been so long that Draco can be excused for making that noise that can only be called obscene, or for never taking his eyes off of Potter's face the whole time, watching him shut his eyes tight and throw his head back as he comes, keening and triggering Draco's own climax.

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Chapter 10: Marked

Chapter Fourteen

Hermione knocks excitedly on Harry's door. "Harry! Harry, wake up! I've found out how to destroy the Horcruxes!" There is some fumbling and a distinctive thunk as Harry falls out of bed. A moment later, the door opens a crack.

"You did?" says Harry, peering around the door.

"Yes. And we need Malfoy. He wasn't in his room, though."

Harry looks down quickly, then back up at her. It isn't much, but it's enough to make her ask, "Do you know where he is?"

"No," he says quickly, meeting her eyes. His gaze is a little too steady.

"Er," she says, "okay. So... just come down whenever you're dressed. And... if you see Malfoy, tell him to come down, too."

"Right," says Harry. "See you in a bit, then." He closes the door.

Hermione doesn't know quite what to think of this behavior. At least he doesn't look miserable, though, and she has more important things to think about at the moment.

* * *

Granger has an almost manic glint in her eye as everyone gathers around the table, Draco rather apprehensive at being particularly summoned here. What could she possibly want with him? He hopes they aren't going to try to get information out of him, as he honestly knows nothing they don't. Then he remembers the way Potter looked at him last night, and can't help but smirk just a little, feeling vaguely justified in everything he's done with Potter. There's no way Potter will let his friends do anything unsavory to Draco.

"Okay," Granger begins excitedly. "I've found a way to destroy the Horcruxes. Or, er, at least the ones we can destroy." She glances nervously at Potter. "And we have everything we need right here in this house, thanks to Snape's ingredient collections. We'll be able to take care of all of them at once, and we can get it done today."

"Not if we want to do them all at once," says Potter. "There's still one more Horcrux."

She shakes her head, smiling now. "That's the best part. We have the last Horcux right here." She looks straight at Draco.

"Erm," says Draco.

"Not you," says Granger. She hurries around the table to him and seizes his left wrist. He is too shocked to resist as she tugs his shirtsleeve up to reveal the Dark Mark, black and burnt and ugly. "This."

Draco turns away from it. "What do you mean?" he says.

Potter looks incredulous. "But the Horcux would have been created before--"

"Yes, I know," Granger cuts him off. "But let me explain." It's really rather frightening, the way her face lights up. "It's brilliant, sheer genius. This particular Mark isn't the Horcrux. It's the Mark itself-- the symbol, the magic behind it... That's the Horcrux."

There is stunned silence for a moment. Then the Weasel voices what they are all thinking. "What?"

"Think about it," she says breathlessly. "No one would ever guess, because the Horcrux isn't a physical object. It's an idea, a spell."

"Right," says Potter, who, like the rest of the room, seems to think Granger has gone a bit mad. "So it can't be a Horcrux. Where did you get this idea, anyway?"

Granger finally releases Draco's arm, but doesn't move away. "Snape describes in his records-- he seems to have written down all that went on in the Death Eater meetings when he became a spy; it was in code, but with a few days work I managed to break it-- He describes the ritual used to Mark new Death Eaters. I noticed that while it included the necessary basis to prepare the Marks for the Protean charm later, it also contained a good deal of some more complicated, Dark magic. So I compared it to the process of creating a Horcrux. It wasn't exactly the same, there were a few key differences, but the changes were such as to imply renewal and strengthening of old magic. Then, just to be sure, I checked to see if there had ever been any cases of a spell or symbol being used as a Horcrux. Turns out, there was a woman in ancient Egypt who used a spoken word as a Horcrux."

"Okay," says Potter. "So... how on earth are you supposed to destroy a Horcrux like that?"

"I'm not sure how they did it in that case. Perhaps she's still alive, I don't know. But in our case, with the Mark, I think that with a few modifications on the usual Horcrux-destroying spell, we can affect the idea behind this one Mark, and not just the physical." She picks up Draco's arm again, and looks at him questioningly. "How deep does it go?" she asks, her expression shining with intellectual enthusiasm.

Draco's mouth is dry. "What do you mean? You can't--"

She frowns down at the Mark. "We'll have to cut down to the bone, just to be safe."

"WHAT?"

Draco leaps up, knocking the chair over, and wrenching from her grasp. But the cry of outrage is not his.

"You're mad!" Potter continues, also on his feet. "You can't--"

"We have to," she says firmly, all trace of her smile gone. "We need a whole Mark. We have to take it from his arm."

"No," Potter says flatly. "No." The color is rising in his cheeks, always a bad sign when dealing with Potter.

"There's no choice," says Granger.

"Do it to someone else!" Draco cries, not caring how childish he sounds. "Do it to someone who deserves it, or someone who's already dead."

Granger fixes her eyes on him, and he trembles a little under her gaze. "It has to be given willingly," she says.

"Then you can forget about it," Draco spits.

She raises her eyebrows. "Then Voldemort will win and we'll all be killed."

"Tortured to death, actually," Draco corrects her.

"Oh, come on, Malfoy," the Weaslette bursts out suddenly. "It's not like we're going to carve you up and leave you to bleed to death on the floor. We do know how to use magic, you know. You won't even feel a thing if we use--"

She stops as Granger coughs and says, "Er. Actually, the ritual does require, as a part of the 'given willingly' bit, that the pain not be dulled. But," she adds hurriedly, "we are going to patch it up as soon as it's done. You'll be fine."

"Fine?" Draco repeats faintly, feeling distinctly light-headed. "I'll be missing half my arm. How is that 'fine?'"

"You'll be alive," Granger counters. "Which is more than you'll be if you don't do this. Besides, the flesh will grow back. As I say, you'll be fine."

"Hermione," says Potter quietly. "Find another way."

"There is no other way."

Potter looks up at her, and Granger steps back. "You keep saying there's a way to keep me alive. There must be a way to do this without taking the Mark. FIND ANOTHER WAY!"

Everyone in the room jumps a little. Granger cowers, and her boyfriend steps in. "Harry, we don't have time. It's different with you; it's a matter of keeping you alive. We can't put this off just to spare Malfoy a little pain."

"Unless he refuses," Draco snarls. "Then you'll have no choice, will you?"

The Weasel stares at him furiously. "Are you really that selfish? We're talking about defeating You-Know-Who here. I'm surprised even you would be so stupid."

Granger coughs and says softly, "I didn't think this would be such a problem. But we can't do anything until Malfoy agrees." Head down, she walks quietly out of the room.

"What did you expect from me?" Draco mutters as the two Weasleys file out after her, each shooting him nasty looks.

Then Draco and Potter are alone. Potter swears and kicks a chair over, making Draco flinch. "You shouldn't have to do it," he says. "You're not part of the war."

Draco doesn't think this is entirely fair. He was, after all, responsible for the fall of Hogwarts the first time. He isn't exactly a civilian. Or, more correctly, he wasn't always. He watches Potter carefully, though, stricken once again by how much Potter seems to care. He cradles his left arm to his chest.

Draco knows, in the heavy feeling in his stomach, what he has to do. He opens and closes his mouth several times before he says, "Harry. I'll do it."

Potter stops in the middle of running his hand through his hair and snaps his head around to look at Draco. His expression softens, changing from rage to an aching sort of sadness that somehow makes

Draco feel horrible.

Draco tries to smile. "I told you I'd give you my whole arm. I suppose I could manage this much. Plus, it.... it might be nice to get rid of it. It does nothing to compliment my complexion." Still, he presses his forearm closer to his chest reflexively.

Potter takes several steps towards him, and places a tentative hand on Draco's shoulder. When Draco sighs and closes his eyes, the hand moves to his neck while the other cups his cheek to bring him in to meet Potter's mouth.

Potter, Draco thinks, you are so stupid. He can feel Potter's love for him tingling in the slight warmth of his lips, his hands that leave trails of his magic along Draco's cheeks, his back, his left wrist as Potter's fingers circle around it. Draco lets him unfold that arm from between them. He can feel himself getting light-headed, high on this feeling that Potter gives him, the way he worships him.

Potter stares at the exposed Dark Mark. He has never paid much attention to it before, seeming almost blind to it all those times that they were so naked together. But now Draco can feel his breath on the thing, and he flinches because for a moment it looks as if Potter might kiss it. Instead, Potter places a warm hand deliberately over it. He says, "I think I will be glad when it's gone," and gives Draco a half-smile. "You don't belong to him anymore."

Draco looks at him for a minute, trapped, then suddenly recovers himself. He jerks his wrist free and says, "I never belonged to him or anyone. I'm a person, for fuck's sake, Potter. It's just a stupid tattoo from a bully with a stupid club." Ignoring Potter's stunned face, he turns and storms out of the room.

* * *

Everything is prepared by that afternoon. They've cleared out one of the basement rooms for the ritual and Hermione has drawn a complicated circle of interlocking symbols across the floor in paint made from powdered unicorn horn mixed with the ashes of some other written spell and dragon's blood. In the center of the circle is a large cauldron filled with the Horcruxes and various other mysterious ingredients. Ginny saw most of what went into it, it being her duty to locate the ingredients in the first place, but once when her back was turned she saw Hermione adding something that looked like blood

from a small vial.

The room is dark, lit by only a few torches that will have to be extinguished once the ritual itself begins. Hermione has already lit the bloodroot-and-briony smudge stick and the heady, bitter smoke fills the room. Malfoy's pale form stands out in the haze, huddled in a corner with his left arm clutched to his chest. Harry is only several feet away, maintaining a careful distance and casting worried glances in Malfoy's direction that he apparently thinks are subtle. Ginny and Ron stand at the ready by Hermione in the middle of the room.

Hermione's face is glittering with nervous perspiration. She counts the objects in the cauldron for the fourteenth time. "Cup..." she mutters. "Locket... snake..." Finally, she clears her throat and looks up. "Malfoy," she says. He looks up and nods mutely.

As Malfoy approaches the center of the circle, even as Ron extinguishes all but one of the torches, Ginny can see that Malfoy is shaking. Harry, who followed him, puts a hand on his shoulder as Hermione brandishes the ritual knife. Malfoy whimpers at the sight of it and Ginny wonders for the thousandth time how someone so cowardly ever got to be a Death Eater. Perhaps his father bought his way there just as he'd bought Draco's way onto the Slytherin Quidditch team.

"Alright," says Hermione steadily. "Someone else will have to do the actual... cutting, while I do the spell."

"I'll do it," says Harry immediately. Hermione doesn't look surprised, making Ginny wonder how much she has figured out by now. Malfoy, however, goes slightly green as Harry takes the knife.

Hermione raises her wand and Ron puts out the last of the torches. Hermione begins to chant the spell, bluish light pouring from her wand and twisting along with the strange syllables. Malfoy offers up his left forearm, where the Dark Mark seems to begin to twist and writhe under the light of the spell, undulating through the smoke that fills the room. Harry is standing at Malfoy's right, gripping his left wrist, so when Malfoy turns his face away it ends up in Harry's shoulder. Then Ginny loses sight of them in the smoke and dark, and all she can see is the curling light of the spell and angry Mark expanding and contracting against the white of Malfoy's skin.

Then, Hermione says, "Now."

Harry hesitates for only a second. Then there is a flash of blue light bouncing off of steel followed by an almost inhuman scream. Ginny covers her ears against it, but it doesn't stop. And she can't tear her eyes away from the eerie sight of black blood spilling over Malfoy's forearm, over the Mark which by now is positively sizzling and, she is sure, responsible for at least some of this screaming. Tendons snap and recoil horribly, like rubber bands.

But nothing could have prepared Ginny for the noise that comes next. A low grating, beneath the high screams, as Harry pushes the knife down Malfoy's arm-- the sound of steel scraping against bone.

She wants to scream at him to stop, stop, for God's sake, STOP, but her head is filled with the haze from the incense and her tongue feels swollen, her mouth heavy. She finds she can't move at all.

Then the knife comes back up, and the large chunk of flesh containing the Dark Mark falls into the cauldron. Ginny can see the bone, can smell the blood, can see where his muscles were sliced through... She wonders how she hasn't fainted yet.

Hermione speaks the last word of the spell and flicks her wand, plunging them all into darkness for a moment before Ron casts lumos. In the new light, Ginny can see that Malfoy has collapsed, though he is evidently still conscious judging by the way he is screaming. Harry says quickly, "Hermione, you do something. You're better."

She is already muttering and pointing her wand at Draco's wound-- the wound that deserves the term "gaping" more than anything Ginny has ever seen or wishes to see. Slowly, the blood stops flowing, and Draco's screaming subsides into soft, exhausted sobs.

"Does he need to be here for the rest of this?" Harry asks Hermione.

She hesitates, but says, "No. You can take him upstairs. But come back, Harry, we'll need you."

Harry nods, and as he helps Malfoy to his feet, the light catches on his cheeks and Ginny can see tears glittering beneath his glasses.

* * *

Draco slips in and out of consciousness in his room upstairs. The pain in his arm has dulled thanks to Granger's ministrations, but it is still enough to make him miserable and nauseous, enough to scatter his thoughts whenever he tries to focus on something else. The wound is stuffed with gauze and wrapped tightly in bandages. Since her father's death, Granger has kept a stock of Muggle medical supplies on hand, for which Draco is now begrudgingly grateful. Still, even with the bandaging and what knowledge of Healing magic she has, Draco's arm won't really be healed until all this is over and it is safe enough for him to go to St. Mungo's.

He doesn't know how long he remains in bed, trying to breathe through the pain, before there is a low rumble like thunder that shakes the house, a shrill whistle, and finally a deafening bang. Draco takes it this signals that the Horcruxes have been destroyed. He is proven right when, a short while later, Potter comes up to lie down beside him on the bed, bringing with him an acrid and metallic smell like burnt flesh and iron and the powder that lights filibuster fireworks, and underneath, the lingering hints of the bitter incense.

Potter brushes Draco's hair from his sweaty cheek and kisses him softly.

Draco scowls, his face turned away. "I bet you're getting off on this, aren't you?"

Potter tenses, then rests his forehead on Draco's good shoulder and says, "Draco, how long has it been since I've done any of that? I can't believe you don't.... I mean, isn't it obvious that I--"

"Never mind," says Draco quickly, interrupting him. He suddenly doesn't want to hear anything about how Potter feels about him. "I know."

There is silence for a while. Draco can feel Potter's every breath in the movement against his back. If he concentrates on the rhythm, the pain in his arm eases somewhat.

Eventually, however, Potter has to ruin it by speaking. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Bring me twelve more potions for the pain," Draco growls.

"It's brewing."

"Alright," says Draco, rolling over onto his back and looking up at Potter. "So distract me."

Potter raises his eyebrows and grins. "Does that mean what I think it means?"

"Potter." Draco rolls his eyes. "Someday, when I am on the Hogwarts school board, I am going to insist they teach a class on innuendo so that people like you can have hope of leading normal lives."

"Mmm," says Potter, as if he isn't even listening. To be fair, he is rather busy with the zipper on Draco's jeans. Draco decides to let this one go as his cock grows hard in Potter's hands.

Draco is still slightly groggy with pain and magic, but that doesn't stop the small sigh of need that escapes him at the sight of Potter's mouth near his crotch, his breath hot on Draco's cock. Draco once again finds himself watching Potter the whole time, never taking his eyes away as Potter sucks him, taking him deeper into his throat than ever before, deeper than Draco thought possible, not that he cares a flying fuck at the moment about what is possible. His good hand fists into Potter's hair without Draco knowing how it got there as he watches Potter's mouth-- his fantastic, beautiful, amazing mouth-- move up and down on his cock. Then, when the drawing heat is almost too much, one of Potter's hands travels down and, with the wetness spilled from Potter's own tongue, pushes into Draco.

Draco gasps and bucks, but keeps his eyes trained on Potter as he comes into Potter's throat. Potter

swallows, keeping the suction up until the very last wave of pleasure has shuddered through Draco.

Draco lets his head fall back onto the pillow. "Fuck, Potter," he says dazedly, after a moment. "You've improved somewhat, haven't you?"

"I've been practicing," Potter replies with a smirk.

Draco sits up so fast that his arm accidentally brushes his side. "Practicing? Ouch. With who?"

Potter chuckles at this response and says, "Myself," as if it should have been obvious. He sticks several of his own fingers into his mouth to demonstrate.

Draco stares at him for a moment. When he finds his voice, he says, "My, God, Potter. You have got to be the crudest person I have ever had the misfortune to meet."

Potter smirks again. "But it worked, right?"

Draco is spared answering, as there is a knock at the door that makes Potter snap to his feet, suddenly tense and sobered. He wipes his mouth hurriedly, and Draco pulls the covers up. Potter sits down again just as the door opens, which is lucky because while he was standing it was still rather obvious that he was very happy about something.

It's Granger, and she glances at Potter for only a moment before evidently deciding not to ask. She looks worn, not surprising considering the spells she's been performing. "Here's some more potion for the pain," she says, setting a glass full of murky liquid down on the bedside table. "I hope it helps. If you need anything else--"

"Hermione," Potter interrupts. "It's okay. Go lie down, you look terrible."

"So do you," she tells him. "Look at you, you're covered in blood."

Potter looks down at himself. "True. I could use a shower." As he follows Granger out, he dares one last glance back at Draco, lifting one side of his mouth in what he probably thinks is an encouraging smile. Draco appreciates the effort, and the blow job, but as Potter leaves so does any hope of being distracted from the pain in his arm. He downs all of the potion Granger brought him, however, and is vaguely surprised to find that it contains a rather pleasant sleeping potion, and he almost smiles at her consideration as he drifts off.

* * *

Harry makes the water as cold as he can stand, unwilling to toss off with the memory of the ritual still fresh in his head. The truth is, he struggled with himself the whole time, fighting to keep in mind that this was real and the pain involved was more than cursory, was enough that Draco would have passed out had Hermione not filled the room with that incense to keep him conscious so that he could properly feel it.

Still, the knife in his hand was sickeningly enticing, the blood pouring down and the way Malfoy's arm twitched against him, his delicate fingers curling and uncurling above where Harry held his wrist, disturbingly erotic. Harry had to press against Malfoy just to hold him still, and could feel the boy's muscles tightening and spasming. It was enough that, had Harry still been able to pretend that he disliked Draco enough to let himself lose control, or had he not kept reminding himself of what he was doing, Harry would have... He doesn't even know, and doesn't think he wants to.

When Draco started to scream, however, Harry no longer had to fight any sick lust and instead had to struggle to keep going, forcing himself to scrape down to the bone as Hermione had insisted, cringing as the knife skidded across that surface. Down, across, up-- it only took a few seconds, he is sure, but it seemed like hours. Then Draco collapsed and Harry caught him, having forgotten long ago to worry about the others noticing anything.

He worries now, though. The hope he is clinging to is that Hermione is so convinced of Harry's heterosexuality and so cognizant of how much Harry has always hated Malfoy, that she will chalk up any oddness in their behavior to anything from fighting to some strange friendship. Or perhaps she hasn't noticed at all. She does have plenty else to think about, what with her father's death, her new

relationship with Ron, and her erroneous theories regarding Harry's mental state, not to mention that she has been the one doing nearly all of the research and magic for the group.

Harry takes a long time in the shower, and even longer drying off and getting dressed. This has brought them so close to the end of the war. Right now, Voldemort is just a wizard. Powerful, sure, and with an army of followers and Dark creatures at his disposal, but not invincible. The relief is incredible. Harry is the only Horcrux left, and if worst comes to worst, he can always kill himself along with Voldemort. It isn't a pleasant prospect, and not a plan he would share aloud with any of the others, but at least there is a way to defeat the Dark Lord even if he shows up right now at Snape's house.

When Harry goes downstairs, he finds Ron and Ginny at the kitchen table with a bottle of firewhisky.

"Harry!" Ron shouts, waving his glass high. "Have a drink! Does wonders."

Harry raises his eyebrows, but takes a seat, pulling a glass towards him. "Does Hermione know you're drinking?"

"She had some, too," Ginny giggles. "We opened it 'cause she couldn't get to sleep. Now she can!"

"Should I be worried?" Harry asks, even has he pours himself a good helping of whiskey.

Ron shakes his head. "She didn't have much." His words are only slightly slurred, so Harry decides to trust him. Guilt-free, he tips his glass and swallows, nearly unsuccessfully, a gulp of the burning liquid.

Ginny laughs at him as he coughs. "So how does it feel, Mr. Chosen One? You're the only thing left before we kill Voldemort."

"I hope you don't die," says Ron, staring morosely into his glass. "I wouldn't like that much."

"Nice of you to say so," Harry says. "I don't think I would like it much, either."

There is a short silence, in which Ron takes another swig and Harry tries to decide whether or not he wants to drink the rest of the contents of his glass. These aren't even shot glasses. They're the sort one uses for orange juice and the like, tall and thin.

Suddenly, Ron raises his head. "I wonder why Hermione doesn't just do one of them exorcism things?"

"What?" Ginny laughs so hard she almost falls out of her chair.

"You want to find a vicar?" Harry asks him.

"Don' be daft, Harry. There's that spell."

Harry is interested now. "What spell?"

"You know, the one that does the thing. We found it ages ago. I don't know why Hermione doesn't just use that one." Ron takes another sip, looking pensive.

"Maybe she forgot about it," says Harry, his mind racing. Hermione has been taking so much on herself, it is all too possible that she could have missed something.

"Hermione never forgets anything," says Ginny, still giggling.

"Bloody inconvenient, sometimes," Ron mutters. He looks up at Harry. "She's never going to let me forget I said she had no friends in first year."

Harry smiles at the memory. Not because it's a particularly pleasant one, but because it was so long ago, when the worst Harry had to worry about was Transfiguration homework.

"I said," Ron continues, "that, really, if I hadn't said that, then she wouldn't have been crying in the girl's toilet and we wouldn't have gone to save her and accidentally locked the troll in with her and then we wouldn't have fought it together and then we wouldn't have been friends at all and we certainly wouldn't be..." He stops, seeming to sober for a moment. "Well," he says to his glass, "you know. I mean... you must have figured it out by now."

"Yeah," says Harry. He looks away, even though Ron wasn't exactly meeting his eyes. Ginny, he notices, is now laughing so hard it looks like she's having trouble breathing. Harry is momentarily concerned, but Ron has lifted his eyes to Harry's face now, and Harry feels he must make some response. He drags his gaze back to his best friend. "Yeah," he says again. "I do know. What I don't know is why you didn't tell me." This isn't entirely true. He thinks he can guess what Hermione might have said: that they needn't tell Harry until all this was over, that they shouldn't add to his worries, that now is not the time to make him feel that they are leaving him behind.

Ron shrugs. "I guess she thinks you wouldn't be able to handle it. Dunno. Maybe she thinks you liked her?" Harry is rather impressed at Ron's ability to lie while he is drunk. Although, perhaps he isn't as intoxicated as he is pretending to be. This is probably a conversation he's been waiting to have with Harry, and any excuse will do.

Harry smiles. There's no way he's going to let anyone know that he does feel alone, as if they are pushing him out. It's a ridiculous feeling, and he hates that he's selfish enough to have it. "I highly doubt she thinks I ever fancied her." He pauses, and his grin widens. "Although... You did lose that bet."

"What bet?" Ron looks genuinely confused. Which is fair, Harry supposes, as it had been very silly and a very long time ago.

"It was second year, I think," says Harry. "We were arguing over which one of us was going to marry Hermione. Remember? We thought she was the only girl in the world or something. At least, the only one who was tolerable, I guess. So we decided to settle it with a game of Exploding Snap. I won."

Ron stares at him for a moment, then bursts out laughing. "You're right! Oh god, we were so ridiculous!"

Ginny lifts her head up long enough to look indignant and say, "The only girl who was tolerable? I was there your second year!"

"Yeah," says Harry. "Possessed by Voldemort." Oops. He hadn't really meant to say that. It is only then that he looks down and realizes that at some point he drained his glass. His throat feels vary warm.

"Well," says Ron. "Sorry, mate. Can you forgive me backing out on that one?"

Harry smiles again. "Call it a favor. You owe me."

"Oh, you mean I should let you date my sister or something in return?" Ron raises his eyebrows.

"Er," says Harry. "Alright, we're even, then. I think I gave up on that bet a while ago, anyways. Remember fourth year? Hermione came back from holiday with breasts, and you were the only one who cared."

"You cared a little," says Ron.

"Not much." Harry reaches for the bottle and pours himself some more firewhisky. It isn't bad, this stuff. "Parvati was much more distracting."

Ginny by this time is staring at them, open-mouthed. "Boys are pigs," she says finally.

"Oh," says Harry, his head buzzing slightly, "don't pretend like you never appreciated Parvati Patil."

Ginny glares at him for a moment, then suddenly collapses into giggles once more.

"Your sister," Harry says to Ron. "Is very drunk."

"I think we're all getting there," says Ron, grinning widely.

Harry closes his eyes for a moment, enjoying the pleasant warmth that is spreading through him and the lightness in his head.

* * *

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Chapter 11: Marked

Chapter Fifteen

Hermione wakes up with a headache, but feeling nevertheless oddly refreshed. She stretches and opens her eyes, expecting to find Ron, but it is Harry who is sitting next to her and smiling softly at her. "Feeling any better?" he asks. "I heard you had a little firewhisky."

She blushes, and decides to ignore the comment, focusing instead on the darkness outside. "What time is it?"

"Almost midnight," Harry says.

"Have you been here this whole time? Why? Is everything okay?" She sits up, suddenly alarmed, a million horrible possibilities rushing through her head.

"Everything's fine," he says quickly. "Better than that, actually. And I haven't just been sitting here. I was reading, you know." He points to a book on the bed stand, open face down in the way that breaks the binding.

Hermione flinches. "You know, that book is probably hundreds of years old. It would be nice if you didn't destroy the only hope we have of saving you."

Incredibly, Harry smiles at this, picking the book up gingerly, as if in apology. "You're right. We do need this book. There's something I think you forgot about in here. Unless I'm being an idiot and there's something about it that won't work..." He hands the comparatively slim volume to her, a treatise on "Spyrits Moste Eville," open to the page he'd been examining.

Her eyes widen. Just a glance at the page is enough to remind her what the spell, or more properly, potion, does: Exorcism. Dispelling of a foreign spirit. She looks up at Harry. "Of course," she says. "Of course, you're right. I don't know why I--"

"It's okay," he cuts her off, grinning. "So you think it'll work?"

She glances back down at the page, skimming it to refresh her memory. "Yes... I don't see why not." She feels tears stinging her eyes at her failure, even as Harry lets out a whoop of delight.

"Hermione, this is great! Hey, don't do that..." He puts a hand on her shoulder as she tries frantically to wipe her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I'm so sorry, I just completely forgot, I don't even know why. It's just-"

"I know," he says, looking bewildered. "You've done everything. You practically destroyed those

Horcruxes on your own. I'm the one who should be apologizing. It was my responsibility, but I got all... distracted. You've been amazing. Plus, no harm done. We've found the spell, now we can do it. Right?"

She takes a deep breath, and manages to get herself under control. "You're right. The important thing is that we can do this." She feels a grin spread inevitably across her face as she looks at him and remembers what this means. He will live, or at least have a good shot at it. Impulsively, she leans forward and hugs him tightly, feeling him relax after a moment and give her a little squeeze back.

* * *

In practice, the potion required in the spell turns out to include a good many questionable and potentially poisonous ingredients. Granger works at it all day, muttering over a steaming cauldron and snapping at anyone who tries to help her. "Look," she keeps saying, "the fact is that none of you are as good at Potions as I am, and if anything goes wrong it could kill him." When Draco points out, just for the sake of bragging, that he always got straight O's in Potions, she asks him how his marks were with Slughorn, at which point he decides that he no longer need waste his time talking to her.

Granger's anxiety over the potion is such that, when the time finally comes, Draco almost doesn't want Potter to take it. What if he dies and Draco loses his only means of protection? What if he loses the part of himself that finds Draco attractive? Draco, already light-headed, feels himself begin to shake as Potter takes the cup from Granger.

Everyone is watching him. The tension is so high it's almost funny. Potter stares into the depths of the goblet for a moment before raising it to them as in a toast, grinning a little. Then he tosses his head back and downs it all at once.

Immediately his knees buckle and he half-falls, catching himself on the edge of the table.

The Gryffindors give a sort of collective gasp and rush towards him. "Are you alright? Harry!"

"I'm fine," he says scratchily. "It's just really vile." He shudders violently.

"I think you should sit down," says Granger worriedly, as Weasley pulls out a chair for him. Obediently, Potter sits. He is staring at a particular spot on the table, as if concentrating hard on something else. He wraps his arms around his stomach and shudders again.

The Gryffindors exchange looks above his head.

"Is this what's supposed to happen?" the Weaslette asks.

"I don't know." Granger wrings her hands. "Harry? Can you tell us what's going on? How do you feel? ... Harry?"

Potter starts and looks up. "Huh? Oh, I... I don't know." He frowns. "I... oh." Suddenly he turns green and clamps a hand to his mouth.

Granger's eyes widen. "You can't throw up the potion!" she says urgently.

"MMMngh!" Potter says, even more urgently, as he tries to get to his feet.

Luckily, Weasley has enough sense to pick up one of the now-empty cauldrons Granger had been using to make the potion, and pass it swiftly to Potter, who promptly retches.

"Oh no, Harry!" Granger cries. "I must have done something wrong. I'm so sorry!" She begins frantically searching through the pages of her notes, then of the books she was using.

"Is this going to kill me?" Potter asks dazedly. He lays his head down on the tabletop. Draco feels a thrill of terror shiver through him.

Granger goes pale. "Of course not!" she says in a very high voice.

"Stupid Mudblood!" Draco bursts out. "What did you do to him?"

Weasley rounds on him. "Shut the fuck up, Malfoy. You aren't helping."

Granger makes a panicked noise and buries her face in her book again. "I did everything I was supposed to do," she says, the words tumbling out almost incoherently. "I don't understand. What did I do wrong? I did what it said to do."

"Are we sure this isn't what's supposed to happen?" the Weaslette asks cautiously.

They all stare at her, except for Potter, who begins to shake again. Then Granger's head snaps back down and she is flipping pages again. "The foreign enigma will be expelled and rejected by the erstwhile host," she reads aloud. "The expulsion of which is to be taken with great care. The infusions effecting the condensation and consequential exorcism of the invading spirit are as follows..." She looks up. "Then it talks more about what happens later, when you have to keep administering the potion every few hours."

"Well maybe they meant it literally," says the Weaslette.

They all glance at Potter. He really sort of looks as if he's been poisoned.

"I can't believe you gave him something without even knowing what it would do," Draco says to Granger. "Does it even say in there that the 'subject' will live through it?"

"Of course it does," she snaps. "It's right here. And I know what it does; I just don't exactly know all the side effects." She eyes Potter warily.

Potter chooses this moment to be sick again into the cauldron. "Can I go to bed, now?" he says pitifully,

when he is finally done.

Weasley jumps to help Potter out of the chair and half-carries him upstairs to bed. Draco follows and makes sure Potter is covered by the bedclothes, looking Weasley in the eye and daring him to say something about the oddness of this behavior. Weasley merely gives him a dirty look.

* * *

Harry continues to vomit every five to ten minutes, and then every half-hour, then not at all for the rest of the night, though he doesn't sleep. He tosses in bed, sweating and gasping in throes of pain that seem to shake his whole body. The fourth time Hermione tries to give him the potion, he refuses.

"No," he says breathily, "I don't want to do this anymore. I've changed my mind."

"You can't change your mind, Harry," Hermione holds out the goblet of potion. He makes a face and turns his head.

"No, I don't want this. It's killing me." A great tremor passes through him and he doubles up under the covers. "Please, Hermione."

Fiery guilt tears at her. "I'm sorry," she says. "You have to take it. Do it for me?"

His eyes search her face. She hopes desperately that she is doing the right thing. What if she is killing him? But they agreed that if it came to that, even Harry dying was better than remaining a Horcrux. She looks back at him, wondering what he finds in her expression.

Finally, he reaches out and grasps the cup. With every dose it has become increasingly hard for him to drink it all, and this time is no exception. He chokes, but squeezes his eyes shut tight and keeps tilting the goblet until it is drained. He then drops it on the floor as he tenses up again and moans. "I hate this," he

whispers.

Hermione leans forward and kisses him awkwardly on the top of the head. Then she scoops up the abandoned goblet and turns to go back to minding the simmering cauldron and rereading her research. About now the potion should be metaphysically drawing all of Voldemort's Horcrux together in one spot inside Harry, so that it can all be exorcised, and revert back to its original source: Voldemort. She wonders if it really is, as Ginny said, literal. She imagines the potion drawing the very marrow from Harry's bones, and shivers. If this doesn't go right, she will never be able to forgive herself.

Just as she is leaving Harry's bedroom, however, she hears a small sneeze and turns back around. She doesn't think it came from Harry. "Malfoy?" she says. "I know you're in here, and I know why. You don't have to hide."

Sure enough, he comes crawling out from under the bed, shirtless, eyes red and irritated. He sneezes again. "You're killing him," he says.

"I'm not," says Hermione, stung, though she knows she shouldn't be surprised. "And you shouldn't be under there, you'll get all sorts of dirt and dust who knows what all in your wound."

Harry makes a small whimpering sound and Malfoy scrambles to his feet and stands over him, swaying slightly and glancing back accusingly at Hermione. Harry reaches out and grabs Malfoy's good forearm, pulling him down until he is kneeling before the bed.

"You love me, don't you?" Harry asks him, his voice constricted and pained. It terrifies Hermione; he really does sound like he is dying.

Malfoy's mouth falls open. A painful silence stretches between them. Hermione knows she should leave them alone, but she can't make herself move.

"Of course," says Malfoy quietly.

"Then save me. Please, don't make me do this anymore. I don't want to. It hurts too much." Hermione can see Harry's knuckles turning white where he grips Malfoy's arm.

Malfoy seems to melt. He looks back at Hermione, raw terror all over his face. She meets his eye, but doesn't know what to do.

"We can't stop now," she says finally, "or he really will die."

Malfoy keeps staring at her in horror, but then Harry doubles up and lets out a real scream. Malfoy gives a little cry, possibly because Harry's hand is clenching even more powerfully to his wrist.

"Oh god," Hermione says, and she breaks down. Sobbing, she stumbles to the bed. "Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. Please don't die. Please don't die!" She tries to touch him, but he keeps twisting around.

Malfoy is much more successful. He manages to hold Harry still, wincing and gasping when Harry knocks his injured arm. "Granger, do you think you could leave us alone?"

Hermione bites back another sob and nods. As she leaves, she looks back to see Draco climbing into bed next to Harry, and Harry turning towards him the way one turns cold hands to a fire.

Envy hits her without warning, and she closes the door firmly behind her.

* * *

Potter's face is pressed against Draco's chest and he can feel his hot, hitching breath on his skin. They haven't ever actually done this before, and Draco is unsure of what to do. Come to think of it, Draco has never done this with anyone before, except perhaps with his mother, when he was very small and the

positions were reversed. Potter tenses suddenly against him, crying out a little. The pain comes in waves, Draco has noticed, and in between, there is just Potter's ragged breathing and sweat turning cold.

Potter shivers, the tension in his body giving way to exhaustion. Then he squirms a little and shifts himself further up on the bed, so that he is almost on-level with Draco, studying his face through the dark with clouded green eyes. Draco knows that look, though now it is more pathetic. So he tilts his head, bringing their lips together. Potter's mouth opens with a small sigh, and Draco remembers that Potter has been vomiting all day. It's disgusting. Still, it's what Potter wants and so Draco gives it to him, though the growing fear inside him says it may all turn out to be for nothing.

"You'd better live through this, Potter," Draco says to him. He kisses his hot cheek.

Potter actually smiles at this, before another wave hits him, and he is gone.

When Granger brings the potion next, Potter says, very distinctly, "No, I don't want to go back to my cupboard. I hate it there."

Granger looks even more alarmed. "Er," she says, "take this and you won't have to."

And he does, though he spills much of it from the sides of his mouth, where it runs down to stain his collar, black and smelling of blood. When he is done, he drops the cup and, moaning, curls up into a ball on the bed.

"If he dies--" Draco starts shakily.

"I know," she says, shaking her head. "Don't you think I know?"

"I was going to say I would kill you."

"Thanks, Malfoy. But I would probably have other... things... to worry about..." She trails off and sniffs, then shakes her head again. "I don't know what else to do."

"You could try not poisoning him anymore."

She just keeps shaking her head and leaves.

* * *

The next dose of potion, that morning, sparks no resistance from Harry. He hasn't spoken in three hours, though according to Malfoy he has been awake. He doesn't seem to be aware of anything that is going on around him. Hermione pours the horrible liquid into his mouth and he swallows. She doesn't know if this is better or worse.

"How's he doing?" Ginny is standing in the doorway.

"I really don't know," Hermione answers. "He hasn't been responsive for a while." Malfoy watches them silently from Harry's side, his chin resting on Harry's shoulder. Harry is clutching Malfoy's arm to his chest, keeping him there at Harry's side. Hermione can see Ginny deliberately avert her eyes from them.

"Did you get any sleep?" Hermione asks her.

"Not really. Ron only just dozed off, so I thought I'd leave him. You can go lie down, though. I'll take over." She is looking determinedly at the floor.

Hermione sighs and nods. "Alright. Though I doubt I'll be able to sleep, either."

When Hermione enters the other bedroom and sits down on her bed, Ron shifts and opens his eyes.

"How is he?" he asks groggily.

"Still alive," Hermione answers darkly.

"... Is he going to stay that way?"

"I don't know." Her lower lip begins to tremble, her throat constricting into a pain at the nape of her neck.

Ron sits up and holds his arms out to her. "Come here," he says softly, voice still hazy with sleep. She obeys, curling up beside him and finding more comfort than she would ever admit in the way he holds her so tightly to him. She buries her face in his neck and breathes until the urge to break down subsides. He doesn't tell her it's going to be okay, for which she is grateful. She knows that he is just as scared as she is. Losing Harry is unthinkable, and yet it's a possibility they've had to face over and over again for the past six years. It's painful and exhausting, caring about the Chosen One, but to Hermione, it's worth it, and she knows Ron feels the same way. Still, it's hard sometimes not to wonder what their lives would be like if they'd never met Harry.

* * *

After the ritual to destroy the Horcruxes was over, Draco thought the worst was behind him. What could be as bad as letting Potter carve out a sizable scoop of his arm? The answer, as it turns out, is: having to unwrap the bandages, tear out the old gauze that filled up the gruesome concavity -- exposing his own bone and a cross-section of his muscle, and releasing a tide of blood that pools sickeningly in the hollow of the wound -- stuff new gauze in, all the while trying not to gag or pass out, and re-wrap the wound painfully tightly in fresh bandages. Also, having to do this three times a day, and with carefully rationed amounts of analgesic potions, as they are running low and Granger is too busy with Potter to brew more. The two Weasleys surely aren't going to go through any trouble on his account, and he himself has resolved to be in Potter's bed as much as possible. After all, he has to make sure that Potter lives to defeat the Dark Lord. Or else half his arm will have been removed for nothing.

So Draco grits his teeth and braces his back against the headboard of Potter's bed as he peels the old bandages away, having to rip them from the skin at some points where they have stuck with dried blood. As he gets closer to the wound, it becomes obvious that he has waited too long this time to change them; without the pressure of the bandages, blood begins to seep from the already-soaked gauze. He curses himself and decides the best way to deal with the situation is to hold his arm out over Potter's erstwhile vomit-cauldron which Draco has set on the floor next to him for this purpose, and let gravity do the work to remove the drenched material. He makes the mistake of letting his head loll forward and closing his eyes, taking a moment to breathe through the pain. When he opens his eyes, there is a good deal more blood in the cauldron than he would have liked, and as he snaps his head up the world spins a little. Well, in truth that happens whenever he moves these days, but this is worse than usual.

"Shit," he says, with feeling, turning his arm over and reaching for the fresh gauze.

As he frantically stuffs his wound, he feels Potter turn over and say sleepily, "What are you doing?"

Draco glances over at him in surprise. It's been hours since he spoke, and even then he hadn't exactly been coherent. In fact, the last time Draco did this, Potter had watched him and said something about how pretty all the red was, before succumbing to another wave of shuddering pain. Draco clamps his arm tightly against his chest as he picks up the bandages, and says, "I'm changing the dressings."

Potter is sitting up now. "Here?"

Draco doesn't respond, as he is now holding one end of the bandage in his teeth, while wrapping swiftly and tightly with his right hand. He's gotten better at this, and with so much practice using his right hand he might be ambidextrous by the time he gets properly Healed. After a few passes with the roll he can let go of the cloth in his teeth, and he says, "Well, yes, Potter. If you stop breathing I'd like to know." He shoots him a sidelong look. "So are you better now?" He knows he should be more excited or relieved or something, but the pain and blood loss have cast an all-too-familiar haze over his mind, dulling everything.

"I think so," says Potter, and he smiles. "I think it's worked, as well."

"Oh, good," says Draco. He stops listening as Potter starts to talk about how awful the potion was, and isn't it a good thing it's over.... Instead, he finishes wrapping his arm and then borrows Potter's wand without asking and Vanishes all the blood. He doesn't need the bright reminder of just how much he has given to Potter.

* * *

When Ginny brings the next dose of potion, Harry is sitting up in bed and talking lucidly to Malfoy.

"That has got to be one of the worst twenty-four hours of my life," he is saying. "I'm glad that's over. Hello, Ginny. You know, I'm really feeling much better now. I think it's worked, after all."

"Oh, good," she says, bewildered. The cauldron is not anywhere near empty. But then again, Harry has certainly surprised people before. "Well, here's the next one. I guess I'll talk to Hermione, see what she thinks." She holds out the goblet of foul-smelling potion to him.

He grimaces. "Do I really have to keep taking it? It's horrible."

"I think you'd better." She steps closer, holding out the cup.

"What if I take an overdose? Couldn't I lose my soul or something?" He is actually leaning back slightly, shrinking away from the potion.

She narrows her eyes at him, suddenly suspicious. "I'm pretty sure Hermione knows at least a little of what she's doing..." she says slowly.

"Right," says Malfoy sarcastically. "She's proven that so well."

Ginny doesn't spare him a glance. "Harry, just take the potion, will you? I've looked at the books Hermione has, and I'm sure this can't hurt you. Isn't it better to be sure?"

He shakes his head, looking now like a small, scared animal. That does it. She shoves the goblet under his nose. "Take it," she says in her most deadly voice.

He hisses and scrambles away backwards on the bed until he reaches the other side and stands.

She stares at him. "Did you just hiss at me?" She glances at Malfoy, who looks just as taken aback as she feels.

Harry does it again, and this time she is sure he is speaking in Parseltongue. She advances on him, walking slowly around the bed. "Well, you're definitely taking this now."

He watches her approach and carefully backs away until she forces him into a corner. He presses up against the wall, never taking his eyes off the noxious liquid she carries.

"You're going to drink this if I have to hold your nose and force it down your throat," she says to him. He raises his eyes to meet hers, and she feels as if the breath has been knocked out of her.

He grins at her reaction and reaches a hand up to cup her face. "Do you really want to do this?" he asks her, and suddenly she isn't so sure. "Do you really want to take away what it is that makes me want to do... this?" And suddenly he darts forward and bites her neck so forcefully and so swiftly that immediately hot blood begins to pour down to her shoulder.

Ginny gasps in surprise and pain and arousal. She shudders against him and says shakily, "Are you telling me it wasn't you, all this time?" She can feel the cold waves of magic coming off of him. Her mind is hazy

and she feels weak.

"Does it matter?" His breath plays on her ear. She has a powerful and largely inexplicable urge to say that, no, it doesn't. It doesn't matter if what she is in love with is Harry or Tom or what happens when the two of them get twisted up together.

Still, some part of her struggles desperately to remember that yes, it matters terribly. It might well be the only thing that matters in her whole life.

Slowly she lifts her head to look him in the eye and finds everything familiar and foreign all at once-- everything she loves and is about to destroy. She leans forward and kisses him, his mouth burning hers the way the potion burns her when she spills a drop on her skin.

Then, summoning all her strength, she pulls away just enough to bring the cup up between them. He jerks back, but not quickly enough, and she pours the potion down his throat, clamping her hand over his mouth so that he must either swallow or choke. He ends up doing a lot of both.

As she watches him gag under her hand, she feels the fog lift from her thoughts and realizes how close she has just come to letting Tom trick her again.

Then Hermione comes in-- Malfoy must have left at some point to fetch her-- and Ginny lets her take over, shaken by this display of her own weakness and slinking off to tend to the fresh wound on her neck.

* * *

Potter starts to vomit again, bringing up the potion a half-hour after each time that it's administered, and sleeping in between. After a day of this, the cauldron is at last fully emptied, and he falls into a sleep so deep that Draco is still a little unsure if he will wake up. Or, if he does, if he will be in his right mind. The Gryffindors keep talking about whether or not it worked, and how they will know if it did. The Weaslette

seems to have little confidence in anything, including her ability to discern the presence or absence of a Horcrux in Potter. Draco doesn't see her very often, however, as she only comes in to visit Potter very rarely. Her brother comes in even less often, which is fortunate, because every time he does, Draco has to hide, and moving so quickly always makes him dizzy and hurts his arm. Granger has apparently been forced by her friends into taking a sleeping potion. Draco stays next to Potter, making occasional trips downstairs for food, bandages, and potions, but mostly lies next to Potter, dozing and worrying in turns, as he has all throughout this ordeal. He hasn't showered in several days now, but he doubts it matters, as Potter smells even worse, although he has stopped sweating recently, since he has stopped moving at all save the slow and steady rising and falling of his chest. Draco kisses him and cuddles against him and even tries whispering dirty things in his ear, but Potter remains stone-still in sleep.

* * *

Aunt Petunia is knocking on Harry's cupboard door, shouting at him to get up and help with breakfast on Dudley's special day. She won't stop, so he forces himself awake. When he opens his eyes, however, he isn't in his cupboard at all. For one thing, his cupboard is close and dark, but here there is sunlight streaming in and lighting the entire room. And he's on a proper bed, much more comfortable than his cot. The strangest thing, however, is the presence at his back. It isn't the cold wall of his cupboard, or even an abandoned mess of blankets. It is, in fact, warm and breathing. Harry sits up, trying to think. He looks at the person to his right. Blond --almost impossibly so-- slender, with even, pale skin and oddest of all, his arm wrapped around Harry's waist. A name comes to Harry mind, or rather, tugs at Harry's consciousness, because he can't quite remember what it is, only that he knows it. And also, a feeling....

Malfoy, Harry thinks, and the name brings up all sorts of complicated emotions, mostly negative. He hates this boy. And yet, that doesn't seem quite right, either. Then the boy rolls over, and Harry sees his face.

It isn't exactly a tide of memories. Harry doesn't go through each event at lightning speed. It's more like his mind has clicked back into place after floating unanchored, and he is suddenly oriented, with full knowledge of where he is and why, and duly grateful, rather than concerned, that he is no longer in his cupboard.

He looks down at Draco, mildly surprised, and more pleased than he would care to admit, at the way he was sleeping curled up so tightly with Harry. He must have made some sound, because Draco opens his eyes groggily, then quickly widens them. "Potter!"

"Hi," says Harry awkwardly. "Erm, why are you in my bed?"

A look of horror slowly dawns on Draco's pale face. "You mean... You don't remember?"

"Remember what?" says Harry, confused.

Draco sits up and puts a hand to his mouth. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"What? Why? Draco--"

Draco lets his hand fall. "You called me Draco."

Harry blushes. "Yes, well. I thought it was okay. I have been saying it." He pauses. "I can stop, if you like." He looks back up at Draco and finds him to be smiling in a way that he does only rarely-- a true smile, relieved and delighted and devoid of the condescension lurking in his usual smirks.

The smile is hidden quickly, but Draco's voice is still warm with relief as he says, "You do remember. You do see why I might be here, then."

"Well," says Harry. "Yes. Except that there is the issue of what happens when anyone else walks in. What are you even going to tell them? That you just happened to be passing by my door when you noticed I was awake?"

"I hide when they come in," Draco replies, looking nonetheless a little guilty. "And you can go tell them yourself that you're awake, can't you? You're supposed to be all better now."

Harry isn't really paying attention, however. Draco's nervous shifting has caused the collar of his too-big,

borrowed shirt to slip down over one shoulder. Harry first looked because there was something incredibly erotic about that exposed skin, but then he noticed the still-pink scars criss-crossing over the flesh, starting at Draco's neck and continuing, Harry knows, almost to his elbows and all over his chest and back. Harry remembers creating those scars, as well as the one that follows the curve of Draco's cheek. He remembers, too, that he somehow enjoyed doing it, that it was exciting.... Now, it makes him sick. He tries to breathe deeply, to fight off the urge to scream or cry or say something stupid.

Draco catches the look on Harry's face, and his eyes widen again. "Potter, are you alright?" He lifts a hand to curl around Harry's neck, but he has to do it awkwardly, using his right arm, instantly reminding Harry of the state of his left, and the day they removed the Mark. Harry can remember telling himself not to like it as he held Draco against him and began to cut, Draco's face buried in his shoulder, his body shaking with fear. He never wants Draco to be that scared again, or feel that kind of pain --or any kind of pain, for that matter. And yet the things Harry's done... He buries his face in his hands, overcome with horror. He can't stand that Draco's been so abused and hurt, and the fact that it was Harry himself amplifies it tenfold. And Ginny, too. Harry always felt guilty for the things he did to Ginny, but now they are so foreign that he can't even imagine why he would have done them...

And he never suspected that something might be wrong? He'd thought he was slightly mad, fucked-up, yes. That much he'd known all along, or at least since he started going with Ginny, maybe even before that. But it was something about the Horcrux, it had to be...

Then another thought occurs to him, as Draco tries rather unsuccessfully to pry Harry's hands from his face, only able to use one hand himself: Harry still wants Draco. More than that-- he feels it like a terrible ache in his chest, just like everyone always said it would be.

His next thought is that he must keep this secret to the grave. It does not escape his notice that this is his chance to cut it off and back away, blame everything on Voldemort's influence, and never look at Draco or any other boy again. Then Draco says his name, his given name, and Harry takes his head out of his hands and looks up. He is struck, as he always is, by everything he sees in Draco's face. He knows that in the past he has appreciated Draco the same way others might appreciate a sunset-- as a reminder that there are still beautiful things left in the world. But now he finds that the expression on that face matters far more to him than its simple aesthetics. Right now, Draco's features are twisted in concern.

He's actually worried about me, Harry thinks dizzily. He's thought it before, but has never had the courage to really examine it. It's unbelievable, when he thinks about it, when he considers the things they said and did to each other back at school, how much they had hated each other. But if he goes far

enough back he comes to two eleven-year-old boys getting fitted for robes and chatting out of nerves. No one would have said then that it was impossible they would end up here six years later, sitting in bed together with their mouths only inches apart, looking silently at each other, Harry feeling his own pulse through every inch of his body and needing this boy, and saying, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for everything I've done to you. I'd take it all back if I could. I'm so sor--"

"Shut up, Potter," Draco interrupts. He is still meeting Harry's eye with no little intensity. "I know you are. And anyway, I let you do it, didn't I? And I did the same to you. So let's just say it never happened."

Harry swallows. "Alright." He tries to smile, but can't, still acutely aware of every mark on Draco's body. However, Draco kisses him then, and Harry's mouth is suddenly involved in much more important and worthwhile pursuits.

* * *

Draco follows Potter most of the way down to the kitchen, where the others are just sitting down to lunch, and waits long enough that it could be reasonably supposed that he heard their jubilant shouts from his room and came down to see what the fuss was about before entering himself. It's unnecessary, seeing as how Granger and the Weaslette already know that he and Potter are sleeping together, and the Weasel wouldn't suspect his dear heroic friend of being "in the Slytherin way" even if said friend offered him a blow job. Still, Draco feels it would be unwise to let Potter know that his dirty secret is out. There is also the added benefit that it gives Draco time to lean against the wall and catch his breath from the trip downstairs. His arm throbs, reminding him that he will have to attend to it in a little while.

When Draco feels that enough time has past, and the hallway has stopped spinning, he slinks into the kitchen in the midst of Granger hugging Potter so long and tightly that it becomes downright indecent. The Weasel, obviously thinking along the same lines, breaks them up, saying, "Alright, alright, let him breath, Hermione."

"Sorry, Harry," she says, stepping back and looking fondly at him through her tears. "I'm just so relieved..."

Potter, blushing and looking very uncomfortable, takes immediate advantage of his freedom by glancing

at Draco, who has to suppress an eye-roll. Really, it's no wonder Granger figured it out. Potter is as subtle as a hit over the head from a mountain troll.

Potter turns to the Weaslette next. "Well?" he says to her, his arms spread.

She looks vaguely alarmed. "Well, what?"

"Did it work?" he asks.

"Oh!" She blushes. Draco can see why. Potter's gesture, though meant to emphasize the question, could have been interpreted as an invitation for a hug, which, Draco is sure, would have been an unprecedented event. The Weaslette comes over and awkwardly takes one of his hands in both of her own, looking for all the world like some phony Seer.

After a moment, her brow furrows and she looks back up at him. "I'm not sure," she says. "Come here." She pulls him by the hand, and he follows, his face a mask of confusion mixed with a good dose of apprehension. The others merely watch, just as bewildered.

* * *

Ginny takes Harry out into the hallway and pushes him against the wall. "Kiss me," she says.

He stares at her. "What?"

She meets his eye unflinchingly, determined as she always is, her hands pressing on his shoulders.

"Ginny--" He doesn't know what he intends to say, but it doesn't matter because she cuts him off anyways.

"When you kissed me was when I felt it most," she says evenly. "When you let yourself go and did things you regretted later. So kiss me and... and pretend like you mean it."

"You think I have to pretend?" It's true that he doesn't feel for her what he used to, that there is a strange emptiness beginning to emerge within him where many of his feelings for her used to be, but he still loves her and she is still one of the most attractive people he's ever met, and he still has the memory of a dozen sexual encounters... And the way she is pressing into him so that he can feel her breasts and her thigh brushes his is far too exciting for Harry's comfort. So when she brings a hand up to his hair, and leans in so that he can smell her perfume-- that same damned perfume she wore all last year, sweet and flowery and bringing to mind all their time together and how happy he'd been just to be with her.... Of course he kisses her and pulls her closer, overwhelmed by a strange combination of arousal and nostalgia, not for what actually happened, but for what he'd wanted to happen, how he'd wanted to stay with her forever.

She breaks away and stumbles backwards so abruptly that he is worried he's done something wrong. She nods, not looking at him, and says, "Yes. It worked. The potion... worked."

"Ginny..."

She does look up at him then, and he almost wishes she hadn't, there is such sadness in her expression. She clears her throat and says, "I'm sorry. For everything. I didn't know what I was doing."

Then she is gone, running off down the hallway. He hears her retreat upstairs and turns back to the kitchen, still trying to figure out what the hell just happened. They all look at him questioningly, and he feels his face burn as he shrugs. "She said it worked."

Ron and Hermione exchange looks. "Erm... Why..."

Draco, on the other hand, glares at Harry as if he knows exactly what happened. Guilt roils in Harry's chest, reminding him of when Draco accused him of still being in love with Ginny. He isn't, Harry knows with certainty now, and he tells himself it was just a kiss, and for a good cause. To Ron and Hermione, he

says, "She just wanted to talk to me privately. And maybe she didn't want everyone to be watching if it turned out it hadn't worked."

"But it did?" Ron asks.

Harry nods and grins suddenly. Ron whoops and Hermione clasps her hands together. "I'm so glad, Harry, oh, this is so wonderful..."

* * *

Ginny sits in her room, hugging her knees to her chest on the window seat and looking down at the lonely street. Every once and a while a Muggle walks by, and Ginny can't see their faces but to her they all seem sad and weary. She tries to imagine what their lives are like, letting her mind wander with them down the treeless street. But when there's no one passing by, she has no distraction from the thoughts that make her stomach turn and her chest tighten.

She wonders if Harry feels this way at all. Probably not. He grew up with Muggles, and was never taught that homosexuality was bad. She doesn't even think it is, not anymore. But she doesn't want it to be her. She wants to be in love with Harry again. But all that's left of that is affection for the boy she used to worship, and a hollow space where the other part of him used to be. The part that wasn't him after all.

Was she really in love with Tom Riddle? Her mind skids away from the thought. No. To be fair, it was somewhat different. Harry wasn't exactly possessed, didn't lose control and start killing Muggle-borns... Unlike Ginny. She shivers, unable to keep her thoughts away from that terrible year when she was slowly consumed by Tom's irresistible will. She was obsessed with both him and Harry at the same time, though they felt so infinitely different: Tom, with his soothing waves of cool energy, calming her and drawing her down, she realized too late, into his command, was the opposite of the way Harry made her feel--overheated with embarrassment, nervous, excited, awed but afraid to get too close to such a hero.

It makes sense, then, that Ginny's hero-worship of Harry would turn to something else when Voldemort's strength began to grow once more and the presence inside Harry began to rise to the surface when he allowed it to.

Ginny closes her eyes and leans her head back against the wall. She said she wouldn't cry, and she won't. She won't.

* * *

Draco leaves the kitchen after lunch, and Harry waits a respectable amount of time, helping Ron and Hermione with the dishes, before making the excuse of exhaustion and following him upstairs. He finds Draco sitting on Harry's bed, which at this point might well be termed theirs. He is deftly tying off his bandages with one hand, and looks up as Harry comes in, granting him a small smirk.

"You should really let me do that for you," says Harry.

Draco shrugs. "Why? I know how to do it. I don't need your help."

He's said that ever since he got that wound, for all his loud complaints about the pain. Harry gives up on the subject yet again and comes over to kneel in front of him. "Can't do much with that arm, can you?" he says, grinning wickedly. "I guess you'll have to let me do the work."

Draco's smirk returns. "You really enjoy sucking me off, don't you, Potter?"

This is quite true, of course. He loves the feel, the taste, and the sounds he can get Draco to make...

Harry licks his lips. Draco snorts and says, "You're ridiculous," in a voice that hovers between fond and derisive. But when Harry puts his hands on Draco's knees and then slides them slowly up his legs, leaning forward so that his mouth hovers inches from Draco's crotch, it doesn't have the usual effect. Harry looks up and finds that, while he was pale when Harry came in, Draco is now slightly green.

"I can't," Draco mutters, looking just as surprised as Harry feels.

Harry stares at him for a second, then says quickly, "It's okay. It happens."

"Potter," Draco grinds out. "I'm seventeen. It doesn't happen. And I haven't been drinking." Harry follows his gaze to his left arm, and goes cold. The bandages that Draco applied only minutes ago are already red with slowly seeping blood. "I suppose," Draco continues, his words slurring slightly, "that I didn't wrap it tight enough."

"You mean..." Harry says slowly. Too slowly. Then Draco closes his eyes and a bolt of terror runs through Harry. He springs up and seizes Draco's wrist, clamping his hand down firmly over the wound. Draco screams at the pressure and tries to twist out of Harry's grip, but Harry holds fast because it's more important that he not lose any more blood. With both his hands occupied, though, he can't reach for his wand.

Luckily, through the pounding of his own blood in his ears, Harry hears someone coming in and turns to see Ron. He doesn't need to speak before Ron nods and rushes back out, and Harry knows he is fetching Hermione.

Harry turns back to Draco. "It's okay. You're going to be okay. Try to stay conscious."

Draco mutters something unintelligible, and lets his head rock forward. Harry starts to panic. "Come on," he begs. "Hang in there. You're okay. It's going to be fine."

Harry hears Hermione come in behind him, and she says grimly, "This is disturbingly familiar." When she gets closer, however, and sees the color and distant expression on Draco's face, she goes slightly pale herself. "I think we have a little blood replenishing potion somewhere that should hold him over until I can brew a new batch," she says hurriedly. "Harry, keep--"

"Yes," he says tightly. "Go." Harry keeps his eyes on Draco as she leaves. He had briefly considered making some sort of crude tourniquet, but realized that there wasn't much blood coming from the wound while he was holding it like this, and the issue now was to recover the blood Draco had already lost. "You'll be okay," he tells him once again. "Everything's going to be fine."

* * *

By the time Hermione gets downstairs, Ginny has already dug out the blood replenishing potion, as well as one for sleep. "We're all out of the pain potion," Ginny says quietly, and they share a guilty look. They'd been so caught up with Harry that no one had given a thought to Malfoy's injury, despite the fact that they'd been the ones to inflict it... Hermione sighs and shakes her head to clear it as she runs back up the stairs.

Harry turns around as she comes in, and the look on his face almost breaks her heart. It's the same look she knew she had when it seemed she'd poisoned Harry with the exorcising potion. "It's okay," she says, to both him and Malfoy. Harry moves out of her way and she sits on the bed next to Malfoy. She lifts the bottle of blood-replenisher to his lips, and he swallows obediently as she pours it into his mouth. "Good," she murmurs, and raises the next bottle. He gives her a Look, but drinks it anyways, even bringing his hand up to try and do it himself, though she doesn't let him. "Lie back," she tells him, as his eyes begin to droop. As she'd expected, the sleeping potion is taking effect much more quickly than usual due to Malfoy's compromised condition.

Moving swiftly, she rearranges the pillows as Malfoy obeys her immediately, and Harry sits on the edge of the bed so as to maintain the pressure on the wound. He looks at Hermione inquiringly.

"We were out of potion for the pain," she admits. "So I gave him some for sleep, so at least he'll be unconscious while we re-wrap his arm."

As she expected, Harry clenches his jaw, keeping his eyes on Malfoy, and says, "Why are we out of the pain potion?"

Hermione clears her throat nervously. "We were all worried about you, Harry. We... we didn't notice the potion was running low."

Harry performs something very close to a snarl, and cuts the end of Malfoy's bandages with a scissoring charm. She can see his jaw working as he gingerly unwraps the long strips of cloth.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she says. "I should have paid more attention. It's just that he was always up here with you, and..." She trails off, waiting for him to register what she's just said, waiting for him to realize, maybe, that this is his bed and she and Ron have both seen that Malfoy was here. He doesn't, however, and just keeps unwinding bandages, finally reaching the gauze underneath and beginning to pull that out, too, looking ill. Hermione sighs and says, "Is there anything else I can do?"

He shakes his head, still refusing to look at her, so she stands up and turns to leave. At the door, she thinks to say, "He isn't in danger anymore, with the potion. I'm going down to make some more." Harry nods silently, and she goes.

Fifteen minutes later, Hermione is well into the process of brewing the potion on the stove. Snape has a Potions room with cauldron stands, of course, but being Snape he put it in the basement among a good number of slimy dead things in jars. Hermione prefers the kitchen for this sort of thing, a potion simple enough to be brewed in a pot. When she turns from the stove to check the ingredients, she jumps to see Harry standing there, arms hugging his chest and expression carefully closed.

"Harry! I didn't hear you come in."

"I can't stay up there," he says, a tightness in his voice and in his grip on his own arms, muscles taught with nervous energy. "I can't sleep. And you..." The angry flush that begins to rise high in his cheeks frightens her. "...You know."

Hermione turns the heat down under the simmering potion. "It wasn't difficult to figure out," she says quietly, and looks back to find him walking slowly towards her. She flinches when he opens his mouth, expecting him to shout in his infamous Harry Potter sort of way.

However, his voice is low and controlled as he says, "Who else knows?"

She shakes her head. "I don't think either of them does. I've told Ron that he was in your room because you were fighting, and he collapsed on your bed."

Harry touches her arm, which for him might as well have been a heartfelt embrace. "Thank you."

She blushes, and the place where his hand was is still radiating warmth after he takes it away. He hardly ever touches anyone like that.

She wants to ask him a thousand questions. Is he in love with Malfoy? Does he know what he's doing? How did this even happen? Was he ever planning to tell her? Is he gay? And what about Ginny? But she holds her tongue. She already knows most of the answers, anyway. It's written all over his face when he looks at Malfoy.

Hermione concentrates on stirring the potion and hears Harry take a seat at the table behind her. After a moment, he asks, "When did you... How long have you known?"

When she doesn't answer right away, trying to decide for herself when it was that her suspicions had turned to certainty, he makes an odd choking sound and says, "You.... You didn't... You didn't hear anything..."

There is a clatter as Hermione drops her wand. "NO!" she feels her face burn, but she looks at him to make sure he knows she's telling the truth. "No, no, I didn't. God, no. I think," she bends to retrieve her wand, "that I would be slightly more upset if I did." With a couple of deep breaths, both of their faces lose some of the redness of their intense embarrassment, and Hermione continues. "It's just the way you look at him, the way you care more about him than the rest of us do... And when I was looking for him that morning, you were a bit odd. Then you got so riled up about the spell with the Mark, and during the ritual I heard you call him Draco. I guess that's when I knew." By this point, Harry has his face securely in his hands, propped up by his elbows on the tabletop. "Why?" she asks, turning back to the potion so she doesn't have to look at him. "How long has it been going on?"

A sigh, then: "A long time," comes the muffled response.

Hermione thinks about this for a moment. "I always wondered why you kept going on about him last term. Following him around, and--"

"Not that long!" Harry cuts her off. "Bloody hell, Hermione. You think I'm that stupid? I don't go around sleeping with Death Eaters."

"Evidence would suggest otherwise."

There is a bang that can only be his fist colliding with the table. "He's not a Death Eater anymore. Also, I'll remind you that back then, when he was a Death Eater and plotting to kill Dumbledore, I was following him because I knew he was up to something, and I was right!"

Hermione is not convinced that Harry's obsession with Malfoy back at school was entirely free of a certain kind of attraction, but she isn't stupid enough to say so. Instead, she asks again, "So how long has it been going on?"

"Erm." He pauses. "Sort of my birthday and sort of the last night at your house, depending on how you count it, I suppose."

She nearly drops her wand again. She spins around to look at him. "My house? Oh, Harry, you didn't."

His eyebrows go up in what he probably thinks is an innocent expression. "Didn't what?"

"Oh god, you did. Harry!"

But he looks so thoroughly ashamed of himself that she finds herself sighing and going back to her work, deciding to let this one go. She has to shake her head harshly, however, to clear it of certain Images that she finds rather disturbing.

"Er," says Harry, and clears his throat, clearly as eager as herself to change the subject. "Where are Ron and Ginny, anyway?"

"They went out to buy more analgesic potion. And about that... I'm really, really sorry. There was just so much, while you were sick. We were..." She has to pause and swallow the sob that is suddenly threatening to well up. She is so sick of crying. "We were so scared." She wipes her stinging eyes before she turns around to face Harry. "He was, too. He didn't complain about the pain, didn't point out the potion was running low. He just stayed with you the whole time."

Harry has gone slightly pale. After a moment, he says, "How sick was I? You never answered my question, at lunch. What exactly happened? You said it was a week, yeah? How do I not remember a whole week, if I wasn't asleep the whole time?"

Hermione scoops up a handful of ground willow bark and sprinkles it into the steaming pot before answering. "It's just as well you don't remember. You were in a lot of pain most of the time. We..." She hesitates, not sure how much to tell him, and still shaken by the fear that had taken hold in the past week. It's only been a few hours, after all, since they found out for sure that he was okay. "I worried I'd poisoned you," she finishes, regretting it as soon as she says it. He doesn't need to know just how uncertain she was about the safety of the potion, nor does she want him to feel guilty for making her worry. She silently vows never to tell him anything else about the past week, though of course she'd never intended to let him know about the time he'd seemed to be almost taken over by Voldemort.

He says nothing, however, and she stirs the potion nine times counter-clockwise and turns the heat back up again.

* * *

Harry lies on his side next to Draco, who is still sleeping, and calls his name, at the same time brushing damp hair from his face. He is relieved to find no sign of fever. Draco's eyelids start to flutter. He groans.

"Draco," says Harry again. "I brought you potion for the pain. Ron and Ginny went out and bought some. Here," he helps Draco raise his head enough to swallow a few gulps of the potion.

When he is done, Draco lets his head fall back against the pillow and says, "Really? The Weasels got me

potion?"

"Yep." Harry can't help but play with Draco's hair.

Draco considers this for a moment, putting up admirably with Harry's hands in his hair. "They must know we're fucking."

"If they knew, one or both of us would probably be severely injured right now. Er, more so, that is."

Draco's mouth twists into an ironic smirk. "True, I forgot how appallingly Gryffindorish you lot are. The Chosen One doesn't sleep with men. Right?"

"Unthinkable," Harry agrees, echoing Draco's smile as he leans down to kiss him. Draco responds slowly, then more eagerly, and when Harry breaks away a minute later to revel in the sight of his face, he is pleased to see a healthy flush in Draco's cheeks.

Draco mews, his eyes still on Harry's mouth, which is just centimeters from his, their slightly accelerated breaths mingling together. Harry shifts so that he is lying half on top of Draco, his leg in between Dracos'. He grins; as he suspected, Draco has gained back his health in at least one respect.

Delighted, Harry licks Draco's jawline, up to his ear. Draco squirms against him, saying almost irritably, "I can't fuck you, you know. My arm--"

"I know," says Harry. He licks his palm and unbuttons Draco's jeans, slipping his hand under his boxers as he continues his open-mouthed kisses along Draco's neck, collarbone, jaw, mouth... Draco whimpers and bucks into Harry's fisted hand, his good hand gripping tightly at Harry's hair and his eyes firmly shut.

All too soon for Harry, Draco is coming, shuddering and moaning into Harry's mouth. It covers Harry's hand deliciously, and he can't help licking his fingers. Draco, still breathless, laughs at him, but it's an affectionate laugh, as if at a shared private joke-- nothing like the harsh sounds of mockery that used to

send shivers down Harry's spine and straight to his cock. Harry likes this new version even better.

"Pervert," Draco smirks.

"It's good," says Harry defensively, wiping his hand on the sheets, which are filthy by now from over a week of sweat and blood.

"No it isn't. You just think you're sexy when you do that."

"Maybe," says Harry. He's never really thought about it. He doesn't think it matters much, however. More pressing is the erection straining against his jeans. He looks at Draco meaningfully, earning himself another smirk.

"You're going to have to undo those trousers yourself, Potter."

Harry wastes no time in doing so, and is rewarded by the sight of Draco sitting up and licking his lips. Harry laughs a little breathlessly. "Now who's ridiculous?"

"When I do it," Draco drawls, "it's dignified." He does it again. "And incredibly sexy."

Harry snorts with laughter, but Draco shuts him up by reaching out and grabbing his exposed cock. Harry gasps, and Draco says, "See? Sexy." He gives one swift jerk and then lets go.

"Uh huh," Harry manages, sitting back against the foot board and spreading his legs. Draco leans forward, cradling his left arm to his chest and propping himself up with his right. Harry wraps a hand around the nearby bedpost as Draco sucks him into his mouth. He closes his eyes and moans, long and low. To be honest, he'd been a bit afraid, after what Ginny said, that he wouldn't be able to enjoy sex as much after taking the potion. But everything is good about this. Very, very good. There are few things he likes better than Draco's mouth on his cock, he decides, and they all involve other parts of Draco.

His glasses start to slide down his face as Draco sucks him slowly, drawing from Harry noises that only he can elicit. Harry moves his hands to Draco's hair, as he always does inevitably, and buries his fingers in the pale softness. Draco gives a little moan that thrums through Harry and he has to bite his lip to keep himself from saying something stupid, something he isn't even sure if he means. And he wishes he could touch more of Draco, wishes they could do it properly, but it's too late because Harry is coming anyways, realizing belatedly that he is nearly strangling Draco by fisting his hand where it had crept down to his collar. He lets go and sits back, panting, while Draco lets him fall out of his mouth and raises his head.

Harry leans forward to kiss him, then, acting rashly on impulse, slips a hand under Draco's shirt to where he can feel his heartbeat, which is quick and erratic. Harry closes his eyes so that he doesn't have to see Draco's reaction, and rests their foreheads together. Draco's breath is ragged on Harry's face, and Harry asks, "Are you okay?"

"Tired," says Draco quietly. He doesn't move, however.

"Sorry," Harry whispers, and they stay like this for some time, and the beat beneath Harry's palm slows once more. Just as slowly, Draco's good arm comes up to wrap around Harry's back, pulling them even closer.

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Chapter 12: Marked

Chapter Seventeen

"Are you sure you're going to be okay?" Ron asks Ginny for the fifth time. "You could stay here, you know. You don't have to come." But they both know that staying behind isn't really an option. She has to go back to the Burrow with them to meet with the Order so they can plan their attack.

"I'll be fine," she answers him, though she can't help shifting nervously from foot to foot as they wait for Harry and Malfoy to stop arguing.

"I've actually passed my Apparition test, Potter. There is no way I'm going side-along."

"You didn't take the test," Harry scoffs.

Malfoy sneers. "Not your bloody Ministry test, no. But I, unlike you, have actually proven that I can Apparate. You demonstrated that you can move three yards this morning. What if you splinch me?"

Harry folds his arms across his chest. "That's a risk you're going to have to take, seeing as how it's my wand and I'm not letting you use it." He cocks his head, a smile playing at his lips. "Of course, you could always go with Hermione, if you're so worried."

Malfoy's sneer grows yet more derisive, and he snorts and says, "With the Mudblood? I think not."

"Watch it," Harry snaps, but without venom, as Ron growls and Hermione rolls her eyes. Malfoy huffs and grabs Harry's arm.

"Can we go now?" Ron says impatiently.

"Everyone ready?" says Hermione, looking at them all, and they nod. "Alright, then. See you in a second."

Ginny doesn't wait to watch Hermione disappear before waving her own wand, focusing on her kitchen and trying to convince herself that she does want to be there. In order to do this, she finds she has to pretend for a moment that she is returning to the house of her childhood, not one that cast her out only months ago.

She opens her eyes and is slightly relieved to find that she has Apparated successfully, Ron and Hermione already on either side of her. She looks around to see the whole Order assembled in the small room. Or rather, what is left of the Order. Ginny is selfishly glad that no one she knows well has been killed, though she heard a week ago that Michael Corner was in hospital and Susan Bones' whole family was murdered.

Ginny's mother rushes forward to embrace Ron, and Ginny feels her throat close up. She stares at her feet as Mrs. Weasley moves right on to Hermione, skipping Ginny altogether. As if she doesn't exist. She feels Ron's hand on her shoulder, and this reminds her to look up hopefully. Her father won't meet her eye, Bill glowers at his hands, Charlie looks at her sadly, but Fred gives her a wink and George grins at her. Ginny's heart lifts a little. She'd been petrified that the twins would take their parents' side. Out of all her brothers, she had always identified most with the twins, though it was Ron she spent more time with due to their ages. So her three favorite brothers are behind her. She begins to feel again that she can handle this.

Harry and Malfoy Apparate a minute after Ginny, Ron and Hermione. Harry lets go of Malfoy immediately, as Molly accosts him. Ginny sees Malfoy wobble slightly, and she wonders just how close they had been during the Apparition, but then something shines brightly in the corner of her eye and she turns her head to see Fleur enter the room, her hair glowing fantastically and her smile flashing for, Ginny is sure, the occasion of Harry's arrival. Ginny scowls and tries not to look at Fleur. Instead, she glances at Bill and from his expression gathers that they haven't gotten back together.

Fred and George catch Ginny's eye again and gesture her over. She smiles back and takes a seat at the table between them. Just as they did when she was little, they each elbow her in the ribs where she is ticklish, making her stifle a giggle. Everyone is still sort of quiet, the atmosphere tense. They are all looking at Harry.

He blushes a little, but steps forward, clears his throat, and starts to speak. He talks for a long time, telling them all about the prophecy and the Horcruxes and everything that's happened these past few months. Well, not everything. He leaves out the day he was missing, as well as certain details of Malfoy's

inclusion in their plans. He does tell them about Ginny's ability to sense magic, causing everyone, even Ginny's mother, to glance at her in surprise and no small amount of wariness. She supposes this means that they have all heard about the circumstances of her estrangement from her family. She focuses her eyes on the table in front of her as Harry goes on. Everyone in the room listens without interrupting, wearing expressions varying from awed to incredulous to terrified. When he is done, his voice a little hoarse by this point, there is silence for a while.

Then, Zacharias Smith says, "You destroyed Hufflepuff's cup, Potter?"

"Er," says Harry. "Well, yes. It was a Horcrux."

Smith looks murderous. "That cup belonged to my grandmother's sister."

Luckily, Cho Chang, evidently still his girlfriend, is standing next to him and elbows him, giving him a sharp look. He clamps his mouth shut, looking sullen, and Ginny has to hand it to Cho for at least having more sense than her ridiculous boyfriend.

"So," Lupin ventures now, "you said the Dark Mark itself was a Horcrux?"

Hermione answers him eagerly, launching into her long explanation of the spellwork involved and the brilliance of the concept with undisguised enthusiasm. "Have you had word of any effect of it? Has the Mark started disappearing from people's arms?"

"Why, yes," says Lupin. "That's exactly what I was about to say."

"We've been hearing of desertions from You-Know-Who's army," McGonagall says. "Wizards who take the weakening Mark as a sign of his power waning."

Harry actually grins at this, and Ron says, "Excellent! So when do we attack?"

Then they bring out a map and start talking strategy in earnest. Fred and George point out secret passageways, Lupin talks about how they can't do anything when the moon is full or dark, Moody insists the map must be full of Dark magic, and in general Ron, Harry, Hermione, McGonagall, Smith, and Ernie all have opinions on everything as well. Ginny gives up paying attention altogether when Hermione starts lecturing once again on how it's completely incompetent of Harry not to have read or have any intention of reading Hogwarts, a History.

* * *

They argue late into the night, and Mrs. Weasley finally notices that Draco is not quite steady on his feet, for all that he'd slipped out to the bathroom to change his bandages and take more potion less than an hour ago. She leads him away with a kind smile and he is begrudgingly grateful as he follows her to a small upstairs room. It looks as if it's been used mainly for storage, as there are all sorts of dusty Muggle contraptions all around, but there is a bed, which is all Draco cares about at the moment. Mrs. Weasley wishes him good night and turns out the light on her way out, as if he is one of her children. He's too tired to be insulted, however, and is soon asleep, fully dressed and still on top of the covers.

He is woken by a kiss on the mouth, and opens his eyes to find Potter on top of him and already hard, now biting Draco's ear. Draco sighs softly and moves his hips a little, savoring the hazy pleasure still fuzzy with sleep as he says, "So what did you decide?"

Potter moves to Draco's collarbone and begins to unbutton his shirt as he continues his well-practiced formula of licks, kisses, and nips. "We leave tomorrow," he says. "Well, technically, today."

Draco takes the time to note the dull grey of dawn out the window as Potter concentrates on getting him increasingly more naked. Draco smiles at the feel of Potter's warm hands, his breath, the weight of his body on Draco's. He feels unhurried; though Potter is certainly affecting him, he knows he can take his time and enjoy every last minute of it...

Last. Draco tenses involuntarily, and Potter notices, because he stops and looks up at him, his hands on Draco's fly. This is the last time they will do this. He meets Potter's eyes for a moment, and even opens his mouth half-way, though he has nothing to say.

Then he remembers that after this he will be free. Tomorrow Blaise will be where Potter is now and everything will be right again. Draco relaxes again, and mutters an excuse about a twinge in his arm. "Keep going," he commands, and Potter does, tugging Draco's jeans down roughly.

It isn't until they're both completely naked and Potter's cock is brushing against his that Draco is really able to pull himself back into the moment, letting go all thoughts of Blaise and fears for the upcoming battle. Right now all he wants is this, Potter grinding against him and making him moan. He nips at Potter's swollen and reddened lower lip, trapping it between his teeth and teasing with his tongue. Potter gasps and laughs and reaches for his wand.

He doesn't use the same spell, however. Draco lies stunned for a moment, then says, "Potter, did you just scourgify my arse?"

"Erm," says Potter. "More or less. It's the same spell Hermione uses when she cleans your wound every week."

Filled with some vain hope that Potter is perhaps just firing random spells in delicate places for no special reason, he says, "Why?" Potter starts to smile and Draco knows that look. He clamps his right hand over Potter's mouth forcefully. "Don't you dare lick your lips, Potter!"

Potter laughs into Draco's hand and his tongue flicks out to tickle his palm. Draco realizes he has no choice. He has to let Potter do this. Just because at this particular moment he can't remember quite why he's doing all this doesn't mean that he should stop short of finishing it. Slowly, he lowers his hand, letting the tips of his fingers catch at Potter's lips on their way down.

Potter shivers, suddenly serious. Draco spreads his legs for him as Potter shifts further down the bed. Draco covers his face in his hand, not caring that the gesture is one he normally associate only with Potter. He and Blaise never did this. He feels like a virgin, and is utterly embarrassed at the way he is trembling in Potter's hands.

Potter starts by licking Draco's cock from base to tip, and for a moment Draco hopes that Potter will be

distracted, tempted by the opportunity of one of his favorite activities. But, no. Today Potter gives Draco's cock only minor attention before moving downwards. Draco can feel Potter's breath, warm and heavy with excitement. Potter licks the inside of Draco's left thigh, then his right, then his left again, inching closer to where Draco's legs meet, swirling and flicking, teasing and sucking until Draco, in spite of himself, actually wants it. When Potter runs the flat of his tongue over the place where Draco had always thought no one's tongue would or should ever be, Draco actually gasps and pushes into the tantalizing heat of Potter's mouth, rubbing himself against that tongue.

Then Potter's tongue pushes back, entering him smoothly and making him gasp again, louder, and move his hand from his face to sheets, fisting it there even though he knows it's a cliché and he will feel foolish for it later. At the moment he only cares that Potter's tongue is moving inside him, twisting around and back out again... and then Potter is fucking him-- his tongue stiff and forcing its way in and out and in and out and Draco moves against it, pushing himself down against Potter's face, and moans obscenely loudly.

When Potter reaches a hand up to finally attend to Draco's aching cock, it undoes him and Draco comes immediately, shuddering and covering his mouth against the sheer scream that threatened to escape. When it's over and Potter comes back up to lie next to him, looking every bit the whore that Draco used to call him with come in his hair, Draco keeps his hand over his mouth as something else begins to well up inside him.

He is not going to cry again. He isn't. He refuses to be That Guy. He won't let Potter make him cry again.

And yet, despite Draco's best efforts to check them, the tears insist on leaking out of his tightly closed eyes. Potter makes noises of concern and tries to pull Draco's hand from his mouth. Draco resists, but then the sobs that he is holding in start to shake him and this hurts his arm. So he gives up and moves his hand instead to his eyes. He doesn't need to see Potter looking at him on top of everything. He wishes he was anywhere else, and the humiliation only makes him cry harder. He knows he is too weak to move, couldn't possibly push Potter away in his condition.

"It's okay," the stupid, naive, bloody Gryffindor is saying. "It's okay."

Draco doesn't even know this time exactly what it is he's crying about, only that he's filled with misery, shame, humiliation, guilt, terror, and helplessness. He feels as if he's been torn open, raw and aching, anguished and exposed.

And Potter is making it worse, kissing him tenderly and holding him like that, cradling his head like a baby, like his comfort could do Draco any good.

* * *

Ginny goes with Fred and George back to Diagon Alley. They Apparate into the joke shop and the pretty girl at the counter smiles at them. "'Ello," she says with a crooked grin. "What's going on?"

"We won't be back tonight," says Fred.

"You've got to run the shop, 'm afraid," says George.

The girl raises her eyebrows. "I've got nothing better to do, but what's going on?"

"Big things, m'dear," says Fred, waving his hand. "Big things."

"Incidentally," says George, "this is our little sister, Ginny."

"We think you two might get along," says Fred, with an exaggerated wink that makes Ginny blush and the girl raise her eyebrows again.

"I'm Mindy," she says, and quirks her head at Ginny, scanning her appraisingly. Ginny's face grows even hotter, but she returns the look. Mindy is tall and curvy, with dark blonde hair, large dark eyes, and huge gold hoops in her ears. She blows a pink bubble of chewing gum that pops with a burst of purple and gold sparks.

Ginny isn't sure what to do, not sure even if she wants to do anything. Luckily, she doesn't have to decide

because George takes her arm and tugs her away, saying, "Yes, well, you two kids can talk later. Big things and all that, you know."

They go to the twins' office in the back, and Fred disappears into the storeroom. George settles into a cushy chair and props his legs up on the desk, waving his wand to fetch Ginny a cup of tea. "So," he says. "What d'you think?"

"About what?"

He inclines his head towards the front room. "Our dear Mindy. Not bad, eh?"

"Erm," says Ginny.

"Ah, it's okay." George waves his hand at her. "Take your time."

Ginny sips her tea, and then decides that she can't hold back anymore. "What are they saying about me?"

George hesitates, and Ginny's heart sinks. Finally, he licks his lips and says, "It's a bit like how it was with Percy. No one really mentions you, and when your name comes up, Mum cries a lot."

Ginny stares at her tea, leaning over the mug even though the steam stings her face.

"They'll get over it," George says firmly. "Look at us. Mum was saying she'd never speak to us again since we left Hogwarts, but now she's given up on us. Eventually she'll give up on you, too."

"Thanks, George," she says sarcastically. "That helps a lot."

"No problem. Oy, Fred, did you get lost or something?"

Fred, just walking back in with an armful of gadgets, waves a small vial in the air. "Someone decided that the Felix Felicis needed to be hidden under ten boxes of U-No-Poo."

Ginny gapes. "Where'd you get that?"

"Bought it," says Fred. "Had a time of it, too. Really rare, this is."

"And terribly expensive," adds George. "But we got enough."

"For tonight?" Ginny asks.

Fred nods. "Well, enough for Harry anyway. And only for a few hours."

"Think this is all there's left in Britain," says George. "At least, all that's for sale."

Ginny looks at the bottle dubiously. It really is a tiny amount. "Do you really think it will help?"

They both shrug. "It's worth a shot," says Fred.

Ginny wishes they were still on the subject of their family. At least that no longer inspires sick panic. She has in fact almost accepted the situation there. But the thought of the impending battle, the prospect of Harry finally facing Voldemort once and for all in just a few hours... They can't possibly be ready. Harry's only seventeen. She knows full well that they can't wait anymore while people are being killed, but facing today is like teetering on the edge of a cliff and not even being able to look down and see what's

below. Aloud, she says, "It's all going to be over."

"One way or the other," George agrees after a moment, uncharacteristically solemn as he gazes up at the ceiling and his twin sets his jaw determinedly. This is somehow comforting and frightening at the same time.

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Chapter 13: Marked

Chapter Thirteen

Draco cries until he falls back asleep, exhausted by sobbing and his already-weakened state. When he wakes this time, it is because Potter leaves his side. Draco opens his eyes, cold suddenly without him, and sees him dressing, expression hard and reserved, his mind obviously elsewhere. Draco realizes immediately what is going on and what Potter is trying to do.

"You are not leaving me behind," Draco tells him.

Potter starts and looks around at him, still buttoning his shirt. "You want to come?"

"I'm sure as hell not going to stay here and wait to find out what happens." Draco himself is not quite satisfied with this explanation. He just knows that he has a powerful urge not to let Potter go anywhere without him until it's all over.

All the same, when they Apparate in front of Honeydukes in Hogsmeade no more than an hour later, Draco's head is full of nervous buzzing as he watches Potter try the door. The village is empty, of course, the villagers gone or dead... or worse, Draco thinks as he shivers in the false cold rolling off the distant castle, where all the Dementors in Britain are concentrated. He wonders suddenly if Potter is going to faint when they get closer. His gut clenches, and his fear translates itself directly into anger. How are they supposed to survive when their hero swoons every time he goes near one of the Dark Lord's primary soldiers?

Potter, whose eyes have been unnaturally bright since he took the Felix Felicis, draws his wand and performs a few spells before throwing his weight against the door. It busts open with a bang. They file in after him-- Draco, Granger, the two Weasleys, Fleur Delacour, McGonagall, and a burly Auror named Kingsley. The rest of the Order is attacking the castle from the air in hopes of distracting its occupants from the smaller party now creeping down into a tunnel through a trapdoor in the sweetshop's cellar.

Draco concentrates on putting one foot in front of the other, one step behind Potter, the three adults ahead of them and the rest of the Gryffindors behind. There is a bright spot of light hovering at the edge of Draco's vision and he feels sick, symptoms he identifies as the beginnings of a migraine headache. He may very well be about to die. He may be about to come face to face with everyone he has betrayed, and they may never forgive him.

The tunnel goes on forever. It's a good ways, after all, from Hogsmeade to Hogwarts. Draco stumbles a lot on the uneven ground, the wandlight glowing softly all around him serving more as a reminder that he is unarmed than as a source of illumination. Finally-- just as the odd numbness Draco feels in his head, in his chest, and the dull ache of his arm, spreads out to the tips of his fingers and toes-- they reach the end. Delacour opens the door, as they had determined earlier that it might be best if she proceed first in case she might be able to catch any Death Eater off his guard with her Veela smile.

Draco lifts his head into the light that comes flickering in from the familiar torches along the third floor corridor. Immediately, he regains his bearings, warmth seeming to return to his body in welcome pulses. He recognizes the statue of the one-eyed Witch from whose hump they are grotesquely emerging. It's good to feel the castle so solid under his feet, the first thing that isn't Potter that he has been able to rely on in months. The nausea lessens a little as they make their way down the corridor, the Weasel studying the map as they go and giving directions to avoid guards. They do have to get to the second floor, however, and every possible path downstairs is blocked by at least one of the Dark Lord's followers.

"Alright," says Weasley, "we'll have to take out this bloke here, I reckon. It's just up this corner, round by

the staircase with that suit of armor that sings 'Silent Night' in April."

Kingsley raises his eyebrows and Delacour looks confused, but McGonagall and the others all nod. No one who was at Hogwarts these past few years could fail to know exactly where he is talking about. Draco lets himself fall behind as they come upon the corner. There's the suit of armor, and there...

Draco only catches a glimpse through the small crowd of a man he knows from his childhood, someone who's name Draco can't recall but who used to come to the Malfoys' dinner parties and who often gave him sweets when he was younger. Draco recognizes him, and the next second he is dead.

Draco freezes up, just like he had on the night he saw Snape kill Dumbledore. He stops being aware of his body or where he is or even who he is, existing only as a witness to this man's death. Or rather, his deadness. Draco watches, his vision the only part of him that is breathing, the bright spot at the edge of his consciousness growing and fading like the pulse of this new lifeless life... Potter strides forward, still with the confidence of Felix Felicis driving him, and bends down to pry the dead man's wand out of his hand. Potter is actually touching the corpse.

Not that he hasn't before. No, Potter came back on the day of the Third Task clutching Cedric Diggory's body close to him. He killed Theodore Nott. He took a ring from Lucius Malfoy's dead finger.

When Potter straightens up and turns around, Draco thinks he can see death itself lurking behind his glasses, hiding in the shadows of his hair and resting in the palms of his hands as he walks deliberately towards Draco, and holds out to him the dead man's wand.

Draco takes it. Automatically. Only when his fingers close around the still-warm, smooth grain of the wood does he come back to himself, his mind snapping back to his body like a rubber band, and he feels his blood pounding painfully in his wounded arm again and in his head. He looks up at Potter, but the bloody Gryffindor, the murdering hero, just turns away. Draco also becomes aware that he is shaking. He remembers how to breathe and forces himself to follow when the others press forward, swallowing the scream that tries to escape.

They pass through a tapestry, down another corridor, and through a trick door that they have to open and close several times in order to convince it to lead them to the correct place, and then they are

outside the second-floor girls' toilet. Draco almost loses his head for a moment. This is Moaning Myrtle's bathroom! For a second he thinks wildly that Potter has somehow brought them here to make fun of him. Then, Draco is even more baffled when Potter pushes open the door.

The Weasel is the first to follow, eyes glued to the map in his hand and apparently not giving a second thought to the oddness of this destination. Granger, too, walks in without hesitation, but has a small, amused smile on her face.

"Potter," Draco hears himself say, and is relieved to find that some parts of his brain apparently still function while the rest of him is in a fog of terror and confusion. "Do you need to use the loo or something?"

Potter smirks. His eyes are still distant and gleaming slightly. "The entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is in here." At the stunned look on Draco's face, he adds, "How'd you think Myrtle died? The Basilisk came out of the sink. She died right here."

Draco is still staring at him in horror when, several moments later, Potter turns and says, "Ginny, if you don't want--"

Draco looks around and sees that the Weaslette is the only other person still in the corridor. She jumps at her name, then shakes her head quickly. "No, I'm going." She looks sick, but then again why shouldn't she? They are about to come face-to-face with the Dark Lord. She pushes past Draco, keeping her arms folded tight across her chest, and Potter raises his eyebrows at him.

Draco recognizes this as his cue to move, so he does, following Potter into the grimy bathroom. It's flooded, as usual. Draco has been in here only a handful of times before, but the memories aren't any he wishes to dwell upon. So he keeps his eyes trained on Potter, who is now standing before one of the broken old sinks.

Potter takes a deep breath and says, "Open."

"English, mate," says the Weasel from beside him.

Potter stares at him, and a look of shock spreads across his face. "I can't," he says after a moment, reminding Draco forcibly and uncomfortably of himself only a few days ago.

"Oh," says Weasley, finally looking up at his friend in surprise. "The Horcrux."

Potter's hand goes to his forehead, apparently reflexively, rubbing the scar that stands out raw and red against the pale skin. "Erm."

Granger looks quickly at the Weaslette and says, "Can you--"

The Weaslette shakes her head. "I don't remember anything."

"What's the problem?" Kingsley booms, looking between them.

"I got in before with Parseltongue," says Potter, seeming to have recovered himself somewhat. "I didn't think that I would lose it... Well." He points his wand at the sink. "Watch out."

They barely have time to take a few steps back before the sink explodes. Water shoots everywhere, soaking them all, and McGonagall shouts, "Potter!"

But in a second, the water pressure gives out and Potter turns to them and grins, pointing to the hole he has created in the wall. "We go down here," he says.

Granger is looking positively scandalized. "You just destroyed school property, Harry!"

He ignores her, taking off his glasses and drying them with a charm. "We should hurry," he says. "The Felix Felicis is wearing off." And Draco can see, that, indeed, the hard sheen is gone from his eyes, the carefully-controlled mania replaced by a grim determination. Potter then turns to the ruined wall, which, upon examination, has exposed the entrance of a rather steep tunnel. He crawls into it and without looking back, slides down and out of sight.

Once again, Draco and the Weaslette are the last to follow. He glances at her and sees that she is shaking even more than he is. "What's your problem, Weasley?" he sneers.

She glares at him. "I had a bad experience. What's your excuse?"

"I'm a Malfoy. I can't touch anything that dirty."

She scoffs, but doesn't reply. Instead, she takes a deep breath and climbs into the tunnel. She stays there for a moment, as if steeling herself for the descent, and so just to be cruel and to distract himself from everything, Draco kicks her. Her scream echoes weirdly off the sides of the tunnel as she slides out of sight. Draco's smirk fades quickly, however. After a few more minutes of hesitation, he finally sighs and sits down backwards on the edge of the tunnel and, before he can think better of it, pushes off against the remnants of the sink.

Going backwards was a mistake. Draco thrusts his good arm out to brace against the slippery sides of the tunnel-- more like a giant pipe, as it turns out-- and struggles to keep from somersaulting backwards. However, he flips over when he reaches the end anyways, landing in a gasping and very undignified heap. His left arm did not escape being knocked about in the course of the descent and fall, and the pain now is blinding. He closes his eyes and breathes, fighting the urge to vomit or pass out. When he finally sits up and looks around, he is at first relieved to see that no one is present to witness his humiliation. Then he remembers the circumstances, and his mouth goes dry.

There is no one in sight. Just a cavernous earthen tunnel with others leading off to the sides. He doesn't know which way they would have gone, and he can't imagine how Potter could have left him behind. Doesn't that self-righteous bastard care what happens to his lover?

Draco's head spins, the bright spot at the edge of his vision growing more powerful and the ache in his

head stronger, almost surpassing that in his arm. He feels truly and utterly abandoned, and for what seems like an eternity he just sits there, mourning the collapse of everything he's been working for and counting on for the past two hateful months. What was the point, if Potter isn't going to protect him? He'd really thought that Potter was in love...

He is shaken from his frozen stupor by a noise to his left. He has to turn his head and sees a hooded Death Eater approaching from one of the passages, wand already trained towards Draco.

Draco doesn't pause to think. He springs to his feet, terror moving him like a puppet. His arm stretches out with the dead man's wand, and just as the beginning of a word from the Death Eater, "Ava--" reaches him through the roaring in his ears, his mouth opens around the first, the only, spell that comes to his head. In that moment it comes to him like a dream, and he doesn't have the time or capacity to deny it: Sectumsempra. The Death Eater screams and falls to the ground, just as Draco did.

Then Draco runs. Fast and hard, concerned only with putting as much distance as possible between himself and what he's done. He has no other thought. The air rushing past him grows cold as he runs down one of the tunnels, stumbling every few feet but never stopping until he runs head on into a solid mass that turns out to be another Death Eater. Draco gasps hoarsely and tries to get away, to start running again in the other direction, but the Death Eater holds him fast. And hisses in his ear, "Draco! It's me, you idiot!"

Draco freezes, and looks up at her face. "Pansy!"

She smirks a little, by way of greeting. "I was wondering if I might find you here somewhere, lurking about with Potter and that lot. Is he here?"

Draco shakes his head, not sure whether he is lying or not, because he isn't sure exactly what she is asking.

She narrows her eyes at him. "I don't know what you think of me, but I'm not..." She sighs. "Well, we're Slytherins, aren't we? What do we care about sides and loyalties? Why don't we just get out of here?"

He can't take his eyes off her face, searching carefully for signs that this isn't real, that she hasn't forgiven him and is about to lead him to the Dark Lord. "Slytherins stay loyal to their families," he says.

She takes his arm. "We are family. We're betrothed, remember?" She gives an ironic smirk that quickly slips off her face as she catches sight of the bandages. "What happened to your arm?"

"It's a long story, but they had to cut off the Mark."

Her look darkens with a disgusted sneer. "Potter really likes cutting you up, doesn't he?"

Draco starts to laugh. "You have no idea." He keeps laughing. He is aware that he sounds mad, but he can't stop the sound even though it shakes his whole body, causing pain to shoot through his left arm. It suddenly occurs to him how ridiculous everything is, how absurd all the things they do to each other. And for what? Surely nothing could be worth it.

He sways slightly, and Pansy catches him. He takes a deep breath, finally stopping the tremors of humorless laughter, and closes his eyes. Pansy is tall, and his forehead rests comfortably on her shoulder. His head hurts and his arm hurts, but at least that damn spot of light fades a little when he shuts his eyes, turning ghostly under his closed lids.

They stay like this for a while, Pansy holding him up with the lightest touch, as if afraid of breaking him. Finally, she says, "So can we just trust each other now?"

"Yeah," he says slowly. He is so tired. Of everything. "I think that would be really nice." After a moment, he adds, "I think Potter is going to win. He's here, and he's going to kill him tonight."

She swallows, then says, cautiously and deliberately, as if she is choosing each word with exact precision, "You want to go and help him?"

He steps back and raises his head to look at her. She is gazing at him almost pityingly. "Yes," he says, "but

only because it's useful to be on the winning side, you know."

She nods, but, irritatingly, doesn't seem to believe him. Does she think he's really some sort of Gryffindor sympathizer? But she takes his arm again, this time carefully choosing the right one, and says, "Come on, then. The main chamber is down here." She tugs gently as she leads him on in the direction she was coming from when he ran into her.

As they make their way down the cold and damp tunnel, lit only by torches every fifteen feet and moving ever closer to the most powerful evil Wizard in history and the most powerful seventeen-year-old boy in history (who might not be happy to see Draco with a Death Eater), Draco comforts himself with memories of other times Pansy has led him along like this. Back then, however, she was always tugging with far more force, running and dragging him along to show him a new tree or cave she had found in the woods that surrounded her family's mansion. She was always the only person who could convince Draco to get dirty of his own free will. Then his mother would scold him, but without real venom, and he would get to enjoy a pink rose-scented bubble bath immediately upon reentering the house. When they were very young, Pansy would bathe along with him, and he can remember that they were each fascinated and repulsed in equal parts by the other's foreign body.

They'd been shoved together when they were small, their families having made arrangements before they were even born to unite the two bloodlines, or rather, reunite them, as Draco and Pansy are second cousins. It's really rather fortunate that they both turned out to be gay, so there was no question of either wanting to breed with anyone else. Someday they will have a child and that child will be obscenely wealthy and have at least four parents (Draco isn't sure Pansy could ever keep to one woman; he imagines there would have to be a minimum of two if she was ever going to settle down). Draco wonders if Blaise will be a good father. He smiles to himself and blushes a little, the heat welcome against the cold of this tunnel. Probably, Draco will have to train him to be more reliable.

Draco is forced out of his daydream rather violently when their tunnel opens up into a large hall. A colossal statue of Salazar Slytherin dominates the space, a throne at its feet, but Draco can only see the ground and how it is nearly carpeted with gore and bodies. More than anything in the world, he would like to look away. But as it was with the man they killed earlier, he can't stop staring.

Potter is in the middle of it all, kneeling and shaking slightly, blood shining on his face and hands. There is movement around him, and Draco realizes slowly that it is Aurors rounding up Death Eaters. It's over already. He looks around automatically for a body, some proof that the Dark Lord is in fact dead, and his

gaze rests on a pile of ashes before Potter.

Well, Draco had never expected the Dark Lord to leave a normal corpse, considering he created his own body only two years ago. As Draco watches, Weasley and Granger come up to Potter, Granger kneeling down to embrace him. He nods as they speak to him, but seems almost not to hear them, staring straight in front of him.

Pansy clears her throat. "Looks like we missed it."

"Yeah," says Draco. As he steps forward off of the earthen floor of the passageway and onto the stones of the cavernous room, he slips and his feet go out from under him, causing him to fall flat on his arse in a pool of blood. He looks down, seeing his face, scared and pathetic, reflected up at him in the shining red surface. He is so sick of blood, of flesh sliced and torn open with blasphemous ease. Feeling ill, he raises his head and sees Granger looking back at him from her spot next to Potter in the middle of the room. The look she gives him over Potter's bowed and bloodied head is painful, imploring. Come help him.

So Draco runs away. He stands up and turns back to Pansy, who is watching him sadly, that pitying look back on her face. He doesn't even have the energy to resent her for it.

It isn't until they've been walking ten minutes or more back down the dirt passageway that Draco remembers his plan to break Potter's heart. It seems pointless now, and the boy who wanted to do it so far away, in another lifetime when he hadn't killed anyone or felt so weary that his bones ache with it. He knows he isn't going back. He isn't going to do it. He never wants to see Potter again.

* * *

Hermione's left side hurts where she was burned by a barely-avoided jet of flames from some Death Eater's wand. But she breathes through the pain, accepts it, and keeps hold of Harry. The fact that he isn't resisting or even responding at all to her embrace, and Ron's hand on his shoulder, is concerning. He is staring at the air in front of him, his glasses askew and sweat and blood still glistening on his face, his breathing uneven. Hermione meets Ron's eyes over Harry's head. Ron is biting his lip so hard that he has drawn blood, and the knowledge that he is feeling just as miserable and terrified as she is, is the

opposite of comforting.

They all saw how much of Harry's strength it took to kill Voldemort. Most of what happened was obscured by the alternating bursts of light and smoke, like a hundred old-fashioned flash bulbs bursting all around the two battling figures, but it came down to Harry on his knees and shouting the killing curse at Voldemort, whom he had trapped in place with a simple freezing charm. Then the Dark Lord disintegrated, crumbling before their eyes, and Harry hasn't moved since.

"Harry, say something," Ron begs him.

Harry opens his mouth, and for a minute it seems this is all he will be able to do, but then he speaks, and his voice is disorientingly normal. "I thought I would feel better, once it was over."

"You will," Hermione says. She leans in and kisses the top of his head. "I'm sure of it."

When she looks back up, she sees Malfoy across the room, sitting in a pool of blood. Apparently he's decided to join them after all, now that the danger is over. The sick look on his face prevents her from being too angry at him for staying behind in the bathroom, however. He really isn't up for this sort of thing. He's an innocent in the war, more so than the rest of them for all his double-crossing, for the simple reason that she knows he hates it all. Of course, they all hate the war, all hate killing and being scared, but Malfoy seems to feel it most of all. Maybe that's all cowardice really is, and being brave Gryffindors means they have to push aside their feelings sometimes, or at least all but the useful ones, like anger.

Malfoy isn't moving, however. He looks up and their eyes meet, and his expression turns only more petrified. Why won't he come over here? Surely he sees that Harry needs all the comfort he can get right now? Malfoy was there when Harry was almost dying from the potion. What's different now?

Then Malfoy stands up and turns his back on them, walking away with his Death Eater friend, Pansy Parkinson. Hermione is momentarily stunned. Then she remembers who Malfoy really is. Was she really just thinking of pitying him? He isn't the boy that's been keeping Harry happy for weeks, who stayed by him when he was too ill to move. He's just the same little sniveling ferret he always was. Her jaw clenches as hot anger boils inside her, heat rising in her face and hands. What's different now is that

Voldemort is dead and Malfoy's life isn't in danger any more. If he leaves the country, he'll even avoid Azkaban.

Hermione stands up. Harry looks up at her as she does, and she is too angry even to really register that his disturbing, far-off look is almost completely gone. "I'll be right back," she says. As she turns to leave, she sees Ginny looking after Malfoy as well, though her expression is one of relief. Hermione files this away to consider later. Right now she has to attend to the murderous rage building into a pain behind her eyes. She hears Ginny call her name, but she breaks into a run, tripping occasionally over the bodies that litter the chamber floor.

It seems to take forever to find them, wandering through the twisted underground passages, not knowing which turns they might have taken. But at last she catches a glimpse of Malfoy's unmistakable bright hair, reflecting the torchlight next to Pansy Parkinson's slightly taller, darker form.

"Malfoy!" Hermione screams, as soon as she is within cursing distance. He jumps and spins around, looking satisfyingly terrified to see her advancing with her wand aimed straight at him. "You're just going to leave?" she continues, just barely keeping her voice in check. Next to Malfoy, it doesn't escape Hermione's attention that Pansy draws her own wand.

Malfoy attempts a smirk that turns into a grimace. "You all knew who I was when you took me in. Don't you know the saying, Granger? 'Once a traitor, always a traitor.'"

"You coward!" she shrieks. "If it was all a lie, you could at least have the decency to tell him to his face."

Draco looks suddenly weak once again, all attempts at composure forgotten. He looks away, but says nothing.

Hermione snaps. "HE LOVES YOU!"

"I KNOW!" Malfoy screams back. She stares at him. His eyes are wide and glittering-- surely he isn't crying?-- and his face is blotchy. His expression tugs at her heart for a moment, but she recovers herself

more enraged than ever.

She growls and fires a hex, but Parkinson jumps in front of him, deflecting it easily. She bares her teeth at Hermione, looking suddenly wholly like the Death Eater she is, not the girl who used to spread gossip back at school. "You'd better get out of here, Mudblood," she spits.

"That term's a little outdated now," says Hermione coldly, not lowering her wand. "And I'm going to make sure both of you get sent straight to Azkaban."

"Empty promises, Granger," says Malfoy in a dead voice from behind Pansy. "Potter won't let that happen and you know it." His voice breaks, and he is almost sobbing as he goes on. "All it takes is a little fucking and he's devoted for life. All I had to do was make him feel wanted. He's so stupid. You are all so fucking stupid."

Hermione can't hear any more. Neither can she hurt him, with Pansy in the way. And Harry is still back in the main chamber. So she lets them leave, Malfoy stumbling drunkenly along, probably from exhaustion and blood loss, and Pansy walking with him but never turning her back on Hermione until they are out of sight.

* * *

Pansy leads Draco down the tunnel, heading towards one of the hidden exits installed for exactly such purposes. She isn't sure exactly what has been going on between him and Potter, or how much of his conversation with Granger was the truth, but she expects she'll have plenty of time to get it out of him in the coming months. They'll have to lay low, lock themselves in Malfoy Manor or leave the country. She isn't sure she quite believes that Potter won't send them to Azkaban. Even if he is enamored with Draco, she doesn't imagine his generosity would stretch to include her. She suspects that Draco has too much faith in Potter's goodness. Maybe he got caught up in his own game, and whatever he was trying to do to Potter backfired on him. Or maybe he really did intend to stay with Potter and his friends, and only now backed out.

It doesn't really matter at the moment. He is still Draco, and he is clutching his arm to his chest and breathing shallowly, tears drying slowly on his cheeks. She keeps one hand on his elbow, steering him in

the right direction and lighting their way with her wand, supplementing the dim cast of the torches. When they come to the intersection of passageways where the giant pipe leads from the school above, Draco stops. After a moment Pansy sees why: A crumpled form lies in front of them, blocking their path. The earth around the mass of black robes is dark with blood.

Draco looks away and whispers softly, "That's the Death Eater I killed."

"You--" Pansy stops. She can't believe it. "You killed someone?"

"Apparently."

Pansy kneels beside the body and removes the mask, wondering who it was.

The mask falls from her hand and she moves quickly to block the face from Draco's view, but it's too late: As she pulls Blaise's hood back over his lifeless features, she hears Draco retching behind her.

"It's not your fault," she says, still averting her eyes. "He would have killed you."

"Oh god," Draco moans. "Potter's turned me into him." His breathing changes and she hears him hit the ground with a dull thud.

Pansy levitates her unconscious best friend down one more passageway and up a stone staircase to the trapdoor that opens just outside Hogwarts grounds. She curses Blaise for not caring enough and for not having the decency to at least live through whatever slashing curse Draco used, and Potter for whatever he's done to Draco both mentally and physically, for the bandages on Draco's arm are now soaked through, and she is sure that at least most of the blood is his.

Side-Along-Apparition is a wonderful thing, and she takes Draco to Malfoy Manor. Her own estate, not being quite old enough to be so steeped in enchantments, was seized by the Ministry a month ago and

entailed away to a blood-traitor cousin.

Once Draco is safely back in his own bed, Pansy floos in a Healer who knows how to keep his silence for the right price. Draco stays asleep the whole time it takes to Heal the place where he hit his head when he fainted as well as his arm (a year or two ago, Pansy might have been sick at the sight of what the Gryffindors had done to his arm-- carved out a whole chunk of his flesh, sliced right through the muscle and tendon and down to the bone-- but now nothing surprises her). Pansy herself falls asleep once the Healer is gone, stretched out next to Draco in the king-sized black-and-green bed. She knows it will take a long while for her nerves to stop sizzling. For them the war isn't really over; they will have to keep hiding, keep running. They aren't safe yet.

* * *

"Where did you go?" Ron asks Hermione when she returns, still flushed with anger.

But Hermione addresses Harry instead. "I'm sorry. I tried to stop him, but he left."

"Who?" Harry has gotten to his feet.

"Malfoy."

Harry turns to Ginny. "Didn't you say he was going to stay behind?"

"I thought he was," says Ginny. The truth is, she had been trying to make sure that Malfoy never caught up with them so that he wouldn't be able to hurt Harry. After what she said to him to get him to go back to Harry, Draco's actions now are her responsibility. She might also have been a little miffed that he pushed her down the pipe into this wretched place.

"He left with Pansy," Hermione says. "He isn't coming back."

Harry merely looks confused. "What do you mean?"

Ron cuts in, looking more than a little irritated. "Harry, are you friends with Malfoy or something?"

Harry stares at him for a second, then says, "No, Ron. I can honestly say that I am not friends with Malfoy."

"Then what's going on?"

Harry ignores him. "So where is he now?" he asks Hermione.

She shakes her head. "I don't know. Maybe going home, maybe leaving the country, or just going into hiding."

"Why?" The look on Harry's face-- confused, naive-- is heartbreaking. "He doesn't actually think that they'd arrest him after I speak for him, does he? I mean, if he's worried about Parkinson..."

"Harry," Ginny has to interrupt. "Don't you get it? He's left you."

He makes a dismissive noise and gives her an irritated look. "You don't know what you're talking about," he snaps.

"Oho," she says. "Don't make me tell you how much I know." She glares at him significantly. Harry goes a little pale, but still looks incredulous.

"What's going on?" Ron bursts out once more.

Hermione cuts in, saying, "Look, we don't have to talk about this now. We should go home. It's over and we can go home."

Harry seems to take moment to register this. "Yeah," he says finally, raising his gaze from the floor as a smile spreads slowly across his face. "...Yeah, and I can go outside, too. Hey," he turns to Ron. "How about a bit of Quidditch?"

Ron grins back at him. "You're on, mate."

Hermione huffs and says, "Not until we've all had some sleep. Look at you, Harry, you can barely stand up straight."

"What? I feel fine." Harry stretches as if to emphasize his point, but sways a little and has to grab Ron's shoulder for support. The trio look at each other for a moment, then all burst out laughing.

Ginny looks away, invisible again. It isn't until this moment that she finally gives up all hope of ever being a part of their unique friendship. She will never be one of them, and perhaps now she doesn't want to.

* * *

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Chapter 14: Marked

Chapter Fourteen

"So... is there any chance that any of that didn't happen?" Draco asks Pansy, once he is awake and fed.

Pansy shakes her head, but says, "He was a bastard and he was going to murder you in cold blood. If you hadn't killed him, I would have." Draco isn't sure how he feels about this. But Pansy knows what he is thinking, of course, and continues. "No, I've never actually killed anyone. My job was to find Potter."

"That's right... You found us in London..."

"Did I?" She looks surprised. "Oh, but you were with him?"

"Well," he says. "He wasn't actually home at the time, but yes. You let me go."

She seems very pleased with herself. "Huh. So I Obliviated myself after seeing you? How clever of me. And I did a really good job, too. I don't remember that at all! And not many can pull it off without going insane..."

Draco stops listening as an idea begins to grow in his mind. "Pansy," he says carefully. "You're right; you are really good at memory charms."

She raises an eyebrow at him. "This we already know."

"Quite. So... D'you think you could do your favorite fiancé something of a favor?"

Her expression hardens. "You mean like erase your memory of killing Blaise?"

"Exactly," he says eagerly. "And maybe some of Potter, too. I don't need to remember all that, or the ritual when they cut up my arm, or--"

"Sure," says Pansy coldly. "And why stop there? What about your father taking you to the Dark Lord, and all the times Blaise hurt you and whenever you lost at Quidditch? Might as well just take away all your memories. In fact, why not just kill yourself? It'll accomplish the same thing."

"It's not the same thing at all!"

"It's bloody close and you know it," she hisses. "I'm not doing anything to you."

He sighs and falls back on the pillows. He feels numb, dazed. He is back here in his own bed, back in his house and with his best friend back beside him. And yet the war still happened. Blaise is still dead, and Draco has still slept with Potter. He lifts his left arm, flexing the newly repaired muscle. There is a strange and thin scar running around the place where the flesh had to grow back overnight, a pale line like a melting oval. This and a slight tingling of damaged nerves are the only indications that Draco once pledged himself to the Dark Lord, and later participated in his destruction.

"We'll be okay," Pansy says softly, after some time. "It'll just be really.... quiet, for a while."

* * *

Harry does sleep that night, back at the Burrow, and is woken the next day by fireworks in the next town over.

"Mum says it's just like last time," Ron says as Harry sits up to get a better look out the window at the bursts of color that are only just visible in the sunlight, though the booms are loud enough to rattle the house even at this distance. "People celebrating without caring whether the Muggles see, owls flying everywhere. She says it's just like when you stopped him the first time. Though, of course, this war wasn't nearly so long."

"It was the same war," says Harry. He feels odd, disoriented, as if he can gather no context for what is going on, as if each moment stands on its own. He can't believe there is nothing left for him to do. But, no, there is something else he has to do before everything is made right... "How are we going to find Malfoy?" he says aloud.

Ron, standing by the window, turns to look at him with a wounded expression. "Harry... why won't you tell me what's going on? You used to tell me everything."

"I..." What is Harry supposed to say? "You wouldn't understand this."

"Huh," says Ron dismissively, and looks out the window. "You could at least try to explain it to me. I've always told you everything."

Harry sighs and stands up, figuring he might as well get dressed. "You don't... You can't expect me not to change. And... well, there are some things you wouldn't like." He roots around in his trunk for a clean shirt, and behind him he hears the door open.

"Oh, good," says Hermione's voice. "You're up."

"Pretty hard to sleep through this," Harry points out, as another thunderous boom shakes the house. "The Muggles must think it's the beginning of a war."

"Yes, I expect the Ministry's having a time of it today trying to keep the celebrations under control. Ron, what's the matter?"

Harry, having found a shirt that he is more or less sure has only been worn once, turns around to see that Ron is still looking fairly hacked off.

"He still wants to go find Malfoy," Ron says to Hermione.

Her face crumples into a horrible expression of pity as she shakes her head. "Harry, you can't go after him. He's left you. You have to accept it."

"No," says Harry irritably, "I don't." Why can't they get it through their heads that he isn't going to give up so easily? Draco was probably just scared, and wanted to get away from all the killing. Harry doesn't see any reason why he wouldn't come back. "How do you know he's not waiting for me?"

"Because he isn't, Harry. He used you; can't you see that? He manipulated you until he didn't need you anymore."

"What exactly did he do?" asks Ron.

"You've changed your tune a bit, haven't you?" Harry says to Hermione. "I thought you said he was worried about me, that he never left my side..."

"HARRY!" Ron explodes finally. "I can't believe you don't tell me what's going on!"

"I can't believe you haven't figured it out!" Harry shouts back before he can stop himself. "We're fucking, alright? Draco... and I..." He feels suddenly dizzy. He can't really believe this is happening, that he's just told Ron what he's done.

Ron's mouth is hanging open. Harry really wishes he wouldn't stare at him like that. His face is burning with humiliation. Hermione was one thing, but Ron might never forgive him.

When Ron recovers himself enough to speak, he turns to Hermione, who was watching the two of them, looking scared. "And you knew about this?" he asks her hoarsely.

She nods. "Not... very long. But, yes. I figured it out."

"So why didn't you do something?"

Hermione is blushing now. "I thought they cared about each other! How was I supposed to know--"

"Harry and Malfoy? They hate each other!"

"Not anymore, obviously," says Harry, slightly relieved to have found his voice.

Ron ignores him. "Hermione, I know you have this... thing, where you think it's normal or something to be bent. But Harry and Malfoy? That's taking it a little far, don't you think?"

"What, now you don't believe me?" Harry didn't quite expect this. "I'm not lying, you know. I don't enjoy revealing horrible things about myself--"

"It's not horrible," Hermione hisses.

Ron finally looks back at Harry. "Oh, I believe it happened. I just find it hard to believe you did it of your own free will."

"What?" says Harry, and Hermione says, "Don't be ridiculous."

Ron shakes his head. "Don't you remember what happened when I had that chocolate with the love potion in it?"

"Oh, come on," says Harry. "It's not like that at all. I think you'd have noticed if I went around spouting

love poems about Draco or punching anyone who said anything bad about him--"

"Or started calling him by his first name?" says Ron quietly.

"You're being stupid," Harry says firmly, and glances toward Hermione for support, but she is biting her lip uncertainly. "Hermione!" He glares at her, and she jumps a little and blushes again.

"Yes, I... I don't think Harry was under any spell, Ron. But listen, Harry, it doesn't even matter, because he's left you. It's over."

"If it was over, he would have told me himself." Harry has had just about enough of this. "Now, I'm going to go find him. Hermione, don't look." He turns around, not bothering to check if she has turned away or not, and hastily dresses.

"You see?" he hears Ron say to Hermione in a low voice that nevertheless carries. "He can't be gay, because I've changed in front of him zillions of times and--"

"Ron," says Hermione. "Stop embarrassing yourself."

Once he is dressed, Harry turns around and stalks towards the door. Hermione catches at his sleeve, saying, "It's not a good idea!" but Harry shakes her off and hurries down the stairs, desperate to get away and then prove her wrong.

On his way to the front hall, however, he has to pass by the kitchen and Mrs. Weasley accosts him, hugging him in that way she has that, even though it is usually unwelcome, always manages to make him feel a little better.

"There's eggs and toast and kippers on the table, dear," she says merrily. Then, when she gets a good look at him, adds, "And if you leave some clothes on your bed, I'll iron them for you. Now, go on and eat,

you look as though you could use it."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Weasley," says Harry quickly, "but I can't right now. I have to go find someone."

She looks surprised, and opens her mouth in question, but at that moment her daughter steps out of the kitchen and seizes Harry by the wrist with surprising force. "I'll talk to him, Mum," she says, and without waiting for a response drags Harry away and off into the sitting room.

"You can't go after Malfoy," she says, without preamble.

He scowls at her. It's depressing, more so than he had been expecting, to see her now, simply because a few months ago he had envisioned this as the time when he would be able to take her in his arms again and give her one of those grand kisses that one reads about in novels, and he'd pulled about what would happen next. He is too aware of her fingers wrapped around his wrist.

But he pushes all of this from his mind. "I'll go after him if I want to go after him. You can't exactly complain."

She scoffs. "I'm not jealous, Harry. I'm trying to protect you."

"Protect me?" He laughs. "If you wanted to protect me, you shouldn't have--"

"I know." She finally releases her grip on his wrist. "There are a lot of things I should have done differently. But, please, trust me on this. If you do this, you'll get hurt even more."

"You don't know," he growls. "None of you know. He wouldn't just leave without even saying anything..."

"I'm telling you, he would." She pauses, and he can tell by the way her jaw is working that she is about to hurt him. "I didn't want to tell you, but you obviously won't listen otherwise... He told me months ago

that he was fucking you for revenge. That he was humiliating you just to torture you and so he could break your heart once you killed Voldemort and he didn't need you any longer."

Harry can feel himself actually shaking with anger. He fights to keep his voice low, and it comes out as a grating whisper. "You..." He stops. There are a hundred names he could call her, but nothing seems strong enough. "What are you trying to do to me? You lying--"

"I'm not lying!" she hisses, just as low and just as forcefully. "Please don't make me tell you how much he told me about the things he did to you."

Harry shakes his head. "There's no way--"

"He made you beg," she says. That's all she has to say.

He shoves her into the wall. This time there is no hope of keeping his voice under control. He has to clamp his mouth shut just to keep himself from screaming. His arms are shaking violently where he grips her shoulders.

"I'm sorry," she says, and swallows, meeting his eye. He has to look away.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" When she doesn't answer for a moment, he looks back up at her, fresh anger surging hotly through him, and shakes her. "WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME BEFORE?"

She flinches, shutting her eyes tightly. "I'm sorry," she says again.

"Harry!"

He turns his head to see Hermione and Ron rushing in. He quickly takes his hands off of Ginny and steps

away.

Hermione opens her mouth to talk to him, and Ron is staring daggers at both him and Ginny, but Harry is in no mood for any of it. He takes out his wand and Disapparates on the spot. At Grimmauld place, he'll be able to think.

Thinking turns out to be not that much fun. He destroys several Black family heirlooms in the process of thinking.

At first, all he is aware of is that he hates Ginny. He hates her the way he hated Sirius when he thought he'd betrayed Harry's parents and the way he still hates Snape, a more personal and therefore more powerful hatred than anything he could feel towards Voldemort. She has now caused him so much pain that he is past the point of even being able to enjoy his memories of the time they spent together. She's taken that away from him, too.

But it isn't long before he inevitably has to think of Draco, whom he remarkably doesn't hate. Not yet, anyways. He suspects that he might be more angry once the shock wears off. For now, he is too busy being devastated.

He tells himself the tears are just a result of all the built-up tension of killing the most powerful wizard in the world, not the pain of loss and rejection. He is of course angry at Ginny for lying to him, not at himself for being so stupid as to be tricked once again into thinking that someone could love him...

Harry goes through the house and smashes every mirror he can find.

* * *

A few days after the end of the war, Pansy comes into the library, where Draco is celebrating being able to read for pleasure once again by rereading the collected works of Salazar Slytherin. She waves a letter at him, beaming. "Your mother's coming home tomorrow," she says.

Draco stares at her. "She-- what? I... but she must realize I've got the ring, now. I don't have to let her in."

"What?" Pansy looks surprised. "Why?"

"If you'll recall, my parents sold me to the Dark Lord when I failed to kill Potter the moment he turned seventeen." His hands are shaking so badly that he has to close the book and fold it in his lap, clenching his fists together on top of it.

"Your father sold you to the Dark Lord. Your mother was in America by then. She probably didn't even know what he was doing."

He looks up from his hands. "Really?" He hardly dares believe it. His mother might love him, after all...

"Really." She smiles at him as he feels a melting sort of ache spread through him. His mother. His mother is coming back.

* * *

Breaking all those mirrors was a mistake. Now, every time Harry sees one he is reminded of the experience and what he'd been feeling then, and why. It also doesn't help that he'd tried to Heal the consequent cuts on his hand by himself, hoping to erase all evidence of his breakdown before returning to the Burrow. Unfortunately, he didn't do a very good job, as upset as he was, not to mention inexperienced. Now, a month later, the marks are still red against his skin. Harry has too many scars. He is sick of it.

* * *

Harry is gazing out the window at the green and gray patchwork of the Forbidden Forest and listening to

the familiar sound of Ron and Hermione's affectionate bickering, when a dark and graceful form rises out from among the trees, looping and gliding in the air. He watches the Thestral for a few minutes as it sweeps and circles over the forest, before he hears Hermione gasp behind him.

"Oh! Harry, is that a Thestral?"

Harry looks around at her quickly. "You can see it?"

She gives him a sad smile, as Ron says, "Of course we can." He squints out the window. "It looks like a bat."

"I'd forgot..." says Harry, "that you two'd be able to see them now." He pauses. "I'm sorry you had to come with me."

"Stop it," Hermione snaps at him. "We didn't have to; we wanted to. Now, come on, neither of you has done any studying all day!"

Ron and Harry exchange looks. Hermione has insisted that while they are here helping to restore the castle to how it was before it was taken over by Voldemort and converted into a center of Dark Magic, their free time in between removing curses and restoring enchantments might as well be spent revising so that they can still takes their N.E.W.T.s in the spring.

Harry groans as Hermione sets several large Charms books in front of him and Ron. Ron keeps saying that Harry really shouldn't have to take the N.E.W.T.s at all and should be made an Auror automatically. He does have a point, as defeating Voldemort is pretty much as Auror-ish as it gets. However, Harry also knows that as a real Auror he will have to fight Dark Wizards without Hermione doing most of the work. So he'd best learn Potions and Transfiguration and all the rest of it.

Ron, however, doesn't actually get a whole lot of studying done, as far as Harry can see. They'll start out alright, Hermione assigning them chapters to read according to the syllabus she obtained from McGonagall. The three of them have Gryffindor tower completely to themselves, so they can spread out their books and papers over one of the large tables in the common room and sit in the best chairs. But,

while Harry finds the empty tower rather sobering and lonely, Ron and Hermione take it as an opportunity to be generally unsubtle. It isn't as if they are having long snogging sessions in front of him, but they do nothing to control the looks they give each other or make excuses about why they suddenly decide to rush up to the dormitory together. This is why Ron does so little studying. On their off time he is either playing chess with Harry while Hermione studies, or doing Things with Hermione while Harry studies.

Harry shouldn't mind. He really hates the way he feels about their relationship. Of course he is pleased for them; they are his friends and he wants them to be happy. He just wishes they didn't need to be a couple to do that. When they retreat upstairs, Harry never hears them but he is so afraid that he might, that he often leaves Gryffindor tower altogether. He also can't help thinking that it wouldn't be nearly so bad if only he had someone to run off to dormitories with. And, inevitably, that someone in his head is always Draco.

Draco is sort of always there. Harry can't stop himself from bringing up his name enough that figures in the common room's paintings are beginning to roll their eyes and mutter every time he mentions it. Ron and Hermione argued over it a lot at first. They seemed to forget that Harry could hear them, even though the quarrel was supposedly about him, as Ron insisted that Harry would never sleep with a bloke, let alone Draco Malfoy, of his own free will, because it was just too disgusting for words and Ron could never believe that of his best friend. Hermione shouted back that Harry's childhood traumas made him susceptible to emotional manipulation, that it was understandable that Harry would wish to believe that he was loved even by his worst enemy, and that there was absolutely nothing wrong with homosexuality.

Now, the arguments have died down as Ron and Hermione settle into their relationship, but they each quietly press Harry with their own views. Both tell him to forget about Draco.

"Don't worry, you're not a poof," Ron will say if he catches Harry sulking. "It was just that poncey git playing tricks on you. Just forget about it. What about Cho, eh? She's been round a few times..."

Or, when Harry sees yet another Daily Prophet article concerning himself and his heroism, and remarks again that if Draco really hated him he would have sold the whole story with all its obscene and shameful details to the newspapers, Hermione will say, "Oh, Harry. He isn't worth it. Please, just forget about him. You should move on. You know, I saw Micheal Corner the other day, and he looked quite fit..."

Harry doesn't want Michael Corner and he certainly doesn't want Cho. He doesn't even want Draco. Or, not the real one, at least. He doesn't even know what he wants, but it isn't this loneliness.

* * *

Living with Fred and George again, Ginny understands at least some of what has been missing from her life for over a year: fun. She is planning to go back to school next fall when Hogwarts is scheduled to reopen, and be a year behind like most everyone else will be, but until then she gets to work at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes all day. Her brothers don't pay as much attention to her as they did when she was little, when they spoiled her and let her in on the pranks they played on Ron, raising her as their little sidekick whose adorable face could get them out of a good deal of trouble. At first, she was slightly hurt that they stopped fawning over her almost as soon as she moved in, but she quickly realized she was being childish, and adjusted to the reality of their lives as businessmen. Because, strange as it is, that's what they are.

But Ginny soon finds her own fun. The work takes some getting used to, being on her feet all day and smiling pleasantly even at the rudest customers, always having a joke ready and trying to push the newest items, but she also gets to brag about all the tricks she was accomplice to and tell horror stories of the ones she was victim to. And, more importantly, she gets to work with Mindy. Their interaction was strange at first, and slightly awkward, thanks to the twins' suggestive introduction. Ginny wasn't ready for anything, and Mindy didn't wait long. A few weeks after Ginny started the job, Mindy came into work with a girlfriend. This made everything considerably easier. She thinks Fred and George are perhaps a little disappointed, but Ginny likes the way it all worked out. Instead of an awkward co-worker, Ginny now has two lesbian friends.

They start going out on weekends, and Mindy introduces Ginny to all her other friends, and Ginny finds that, really, the far end of Knockturn Alley, just before it gives way to the red light district, is a very pleasant place indeed.

Getting drunk with homosexuals. What would Ginny's mother say? But it's too much fun to give up, and the acceptance they offer her too seductive. Ginny's mother welcomed her home after the battle at Hogwarts, weeping with gratitude that they were safe, and there hasn't been a mention of Ginny's queerness since, but the tension is still there, and Ginny knows that if she were to raise the issue again, or maybe even if she tried to move back home, she would once again be facing her family's anger

full-force.

She now knows, too, that she is fully and definitely gay. It helped that the twins didn't even question it, simply assumed that she was and accepted it. And if Ginny follows her own desires it leads to kissing girls who taste of Ogden's strawberry liquer in the apple-flavored tobacco smoke of a pub corner, maybe running her hand over a breast that heats her palm, just brushing the hardening nipple... Nothing too heavy. Nothing too deep yet. She goes slow, taking her time with her new freedom and careful not to get involved with any of these older girls, most of whom she won't see again after she goes back to school. For now she simply delights in the fact that she can do all this, that she can touch other girls and not feel that crushing shame. She is still guilty, still embarrassed if someone she knows walks into the joke shop, terrified that somehow they will know what she is. But it isn't nearly so bad, and mostly it only comes to her when she thinks about it too hard, or is reminded of her parents or of Harry. At those times, she occasionally feels sick and disgusted enough with herself to crawl into a hole and die.

All of that is forgotten, though, when her legs are bumping someone else's in a crowd of her new friends and she allows herself to enjoy the thrill of excitement that radiates from the touch.

* * *

Ginny sees Ron pull Harry aside, and knows that he is telling him to be decent to Ginny while they are here. It's Christmas Eve, and the Burrow is full to bursting with loud people, Ginny among them until Harry arrived this afternoon. Since then, the cold looks and poorly disguised scowls have rather dampened her spirits.

She knows she can't expect anything better. She knows she treated him horribly, hurt him over and over again, sometimes on purpose. This is what makes it all the more miserable. She can't be angry at him for his attitude towards her; it's better than she deserves.

Over in the corner, on the other side of the great Christmas tree, Harry looks mutinous and growls something, and Ron raises his voice slightly in response.

"Look, mate, I know you've never had a proper family, but this is how it works! You keep it to yourself, else everyone would be shouting at everyone all the time. Do you see anyone else ignoring her and

giving her dirty looks? It isn't that they've forgotten about the lesbian business, Harry, or that they think it's alright. It's Christmas, and everyone's here, and no one wants a big fight. So could you please try not to ruin anything?"

Harry's face is turned away now, but Ginny hears him mutter something, and Ron looks reasonably satisfied.

He's right, of course, that no one has forgiven or forgotten the circumstances that caused her brief expulsion from the household last summer. She doesn't know that they will ever come to terms with it. For now, though, she is content to settle for the delicate peace. As long as no one brings it up, she can still enjoy her holidays with her family. Even Fleur has come back, and she and Bill are planning their wedding for the coming spring, nearly a year after it was supposed to take place.

Fleur isn't nearly so unbearable now. Ginny is hardly bothered by her at all, unless the blond is particularly showing off her charms, which only occurs when Bill says something especially romantic, or when Harry first enters a room. He, too, doesn't stir up the feelings he used to, but she knew that already. The Fleur thing she really is proud of.

Mindy smiles and winks at Ginny from across the room, where she's listening to Charlie's dragon stories. George brought her to stay for the holidays, passing her off as his girlfriend by not specifically stating the nature of their relationship. His real girlfriend is in Monaco for a three-day poker game. This gives Ginny someone to talk to when the pressure of her family becomes too much, but Mindy also serves as a constant reminder of the act Ginny is putting on.

"Is she your girlfriend?" Ginny starts and turns to see Harry standing next to her. Up close, she sees that he is not looking at all well, despite being in less danger over the past few months than in his entire life previous. He is frowning slightly, his muscles all tense, but at least he's talking to her and his tone is neutral.

"Er, no," says Ginny. "She is a friend, though, and she is... well, you know." For some reason she doesn't want to say the word, any of the words she could use, even though she tosses around the worst of the names with her friends back in London. It's vastly different when she's the only one.

"Mmm," is all Harry says to this. "And how is Luna?"

She almost drops her mug of butterbeer. "You--" she gasps, unable to keep the shock and fear out of her voice.

"Draco told me." He hasn't looked at her for the entire conversation, and he doesn't now.

Stupid. She should have expected that. "Of course he did. Well, whatever he told you, you should know that it was never while I was involved with you."

"Mmm," he says again.

Ginny sighs and decides to answer his question. "She's doing better. Living at home, you know. I go and see her every few weeks. She's getting help, talking to someone. I think she'll be okay."

Harry nods. "I do miss her. I'd hoped she'd come and help at Hogwarts."

There is a pause, in which they both watch the others chatting and laughing and bickering harmlessly. Suddenly, she can't stand it anymore. "I'm sorry," she blurts out. "For everything. Everything."

She chances a sidelong look at him, and sees him lower his gaze to the floor, his jaw working. "Yeah, alright," he says dismissively.

Ginny wants to scream at him, shake him, force him to forgive her. But she hasn't any right. So she doesn't push, doesn't ask him if maybe someday they'll be able to be friends again. First, she has to be sure that she'll be okay even if that never happens, and at the moment she feels almost hopeful.

Later that night, Mindy is helping Ginny clean up for the party, and says, "Gin, didn't you say that everyone but Fred and George had a problem with the queer thing?"

"Yeah," says Ginny, stepping on the heap of trash in the bin to compact it. "I guess so. No one says anything anymore, though." She shrugs. "They aren't big on confrontations."

"Huh. You and the twins really are the black sheep of the family if that's the case, Miss Drama Queen."

"Excuse me?" Ginny rounds on her friend in exaggerated indignation.

Mindy laughs. "But, anyway, your brother-- the one that's friends with Harry Potter? Ron?" Ginny nods, and she continues. "Well, he was perfectly willing to talk about it."

Ginny's breath catches in her throat. Ron indicated, a long time ago, that he might be okay with it all, but the truth is she doesn't know how he really feels. Did he really just badmouth her to a guest?

Mindy catches the look on Ginny's face and says quickly, "No, no, don't worry. It was good. He asked me if I was gay. Incidentally, why doesn't anyone actually believe that I'm George's girlfriend?"

Ginny shrugs. "He's never brought home a girlfriend before, and he's never mentioned you before so it's hard to believe it's very serious, I suppose. What did Ron say?"

"Oh, he was a bit dim about it all but he was trying. He seemed to think I was your girlfriend, and he was disappointed that you never introduced me to him."

"And he was nice to you?"

"Sure. You're whole family's nice, Ginny. Wish I had a family like this. Mind you, I wouldn't trade my mum

for the world. Still, I can see why Harry Potter so famously hangs about here."

"Yeah..." says Ginny slowly. She watches Mindy's giant hoop earrings glint in the fairy lights from the Christmas tree, and thinks of Luna's home-made ones. Ginny realizes that she doesn't have to start over. She wasn't even aware that that was what she was trying to do, but now it seems clear to her. She doesn't have to start over, just rebuild.

She gives the garbage in the bin another stomp, just for good measure.

Yes, she would call this warm feeling hope. Love, but also hope.

* * *

Draco reads the papers everyday, looking for news of Potter. Of course, it is only out of simple curiosity, not because he cares one whit what happens to the bloody Gryffindor. He also keeps an eye on the list of wanted Death Eaters that runs in the back of the Prophet. The names of people he used to call friends disappear as they are arrested, but Narcissa Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange remain even months after the end of the war. Draco's and Pansy's names were never on the list. This ought to show him that it was all worth it, but for some reason it just makes him all the more miserable.

Draco's mother gets up every day and dresses as if she has somewhere to go. Before dinner, she changes again, just as she'd always done before. The fact that she is now a wanted criminal and cannot leave the house seems to have no effect on the appearance aspect of her daily routine. Her days are spent mostly in reading and in writing to relatives. She also keeps a close watch on the papers, both foreign and domestic, and Draco soon discovers that she has been maintaining key contacts in the Ministry while she was abroad, and that her trip across the pond has allowed her to establish connections there as well. She is furious with Draco for letting his influence slip with the hero of the Wizarding world. He doesn't tell her exactly how much power over Potter he actually had, not least because, well, she is his mother and he would rather leave up to her imagination whether or not he is a virgin.

Pansy, however, does not seem to share his concern for his mother's sensibilities. Once it becomes clear that she and Draco will never appear on the almighty Death Eater list, she begins to pester Draco about

going out.

"It's getting better, 'round Knockturn Alley," Pansy tells him one evening at dinner. "You know, all the pubs went really downhill for while there because no one wanted to be called a Death Eater, but everyone's down there now. I swear I saw a Weasley down there the other night."

"And that's supposed to make me want to go?" Draco sneers at his fish course.

"Really, Draco," Narcissa says sweetly, earning a glare from her son. "The Weasleys are quite close to Harry Potter, aren't they? I've heard he's like a son to them. Lord knows why they'd need another one..."

Draco stares at her. "Mother! They're blood-traitors, the lot of them! Filthy Gryffindors! They threw the girl out just because she's gay."

Narcissa chews thoughtfully, processing this new information. She takes a delicate sip of wine, then says, "Perhaps you'd do well not to be seen in Knockturn Alley after all, Draco."

She still doesn't meet his gaze, eye-contact at the dinner table being something never practiced in the Malfoy household, but all the same the look on her face, sad and hard, makes him go cold. His mouth dry, he says the only thing he can think of to say, childish and inappropriate though it may be. "Father would never--"

It has the intended effect. "Your father," Narcissa says icily, each word spat from her mouth in cold contempt, "is dead. I trust you do not wish the same fate on yourself?" She stares straight ahead, at the wall above Pansy, who is still eating as if nothing is wrong. Draco knows that Pansy is used to hearing arguments at mealtimes, and thinks cruelly that she must feel right at home at the moment.

"It looks like you're on your own tonight," Draco says to her.

There is a long pause, until finally Pansy looks back up at Draco's mother and says, "No one recognizes

me there, Narcissa. Don't worry, I'm careful."

Draco blinks several times. Pansy has always called his mother "Mrs. Malfoy." It's true what she says, though, Draco realizes as he looks between the two women. Pansy hasn't brought home a single girl in all the long months she's been living here. Though, of course, he reminds himself a moment later, she could always Obliviate them afterward and they'd have no idea they'd just been to Malfoy Manor.

Late that night, Pansy stumbles into the sitting room, wobbling in her high heels and grinning broadly at him. Once she moves from the doorway, however, out of sight from the hall, she steps quite capably over to him and kneels by his chair, where he was lusting after the new line of brooms from Nimbus. It disturbs him slightly that the brooms are really all he is interested in, the models astride them doing nothing for his nonexistent sex drive.

Pansy grins up at him, the seductive smile making his stomach clench. It's the sort of look he's seen her give to girls who were about to be either taken to new heights of pleasure or Obliviated. Or both. "I brought you a present," she says sweetly.

"Is that what's in the house right now?" Draco asks. The Malfoy ring had started to hum slightly when Pansy came in, signaling that she had brought with her someone Draco hadn't specifically approved to be there.

"He's waiting in the hall," she coos. "Came right along when I mentioned you. Seems he remembers you from Hogwarts. Won't you at least go see if you like him?"

Draco sighs and stands up, going over to peak out into the hall. A small boy, dark blond and dressed rather conspicuously in dragon leather trousers is waiting there, biting his lower lip in nervousness and shuffling his feet a little. His hair and face are dusted with glitter, his eyes rimmed with bright silver. He looks up after a moment, sees Draco, and blushes charmingly.

"You sure he's a poof, then?" Draco says to Pansy dryly.

She giggles, coming to stand next to him. "Tristan," she says to the boy. "This is Draco. Draco, Tristan."

"Yeah," says Tristan throatily. "I know." He looks straight into Draco's eyes and smiles. "You used to sit in front of me in Runes. I skipped a year, you see..." He trails off, still staring at Draco.

Draco feels his own face grow hot under the other boy's gaze. He doesn't remember this kid at all. And you'd think, with a name like that... "Tristan?" he repeats. "Were your parents trying to make you gay?"

"Erm," says Tristan. "I don't think so. My mum's French."

"Huh," says Draco.

Pansy stretches her arms and yawns loudly. "Well, I ought to be off to bed. I'll see you two later." She winks and saunters off to the East wing, where she sleeps. Draco watches her go with resignation. Sometimes he just doesn't understand these games. She sleeps with any girl she fancies, but does she expect him to act the same way? He looks over at Tristan, who is, admittedly, quite fit. Is he supposed to shag him right now, just because Pansy brought him home?

Tristan smiles again and reaches out to touch Draco's arm.

Well, why not? Draco certainly doesn't owe anything to anyone else. There's no reason in the world why he shouldn't sleep with this boy. None at all.

* * *

Pansy waits patiently at the breakfast table to see how her experiment has turned out. Narcissa has long since retired to her study with a sizable pile of missives, to continue her never-ending task of corresponding with Important People. Pansy keeps herself entertained by sending Daisy the house-elf back and forth fifteen times to get her hot cocoa to that imagined perfect temperature and consistency.

Finally, at half past ten, the boys come sloping in to the parlor.

Draco is neat and polished as always, but with little furrows of agitation around his eyes. The corners of his mouth keep twitching downwards, as well. Not, on the whole, does he resemble someone who's had the night of his life. The frog, on the other hand, looks quite pleased, a goofy smile marring his doll-like features.

Draco sits down heavily. "You can go, now, Tristan," he sighs, glancing significantly at Pansy for merely a second before reaching for a scone.

Pansy smirks back and stands as Tristan's happy expression falters slightly. "I'll show you out," she says. "Only Draco's under quite a lot of strain at the moment. You can come back any time, though..." She keeps up her stream of reassurances as she takes his arm and leads him to the front door. Only when they are past the front gate does she release him and draw her wand, still smiling pleasantly.

Several minutes later, Tristan what's-his-name is wandering blithely down the lane, thinking how he really ought not to have gotten so drunk last night that he passed out in the middle of Wiltshire.

Back inside, Pansy reenters the parlor and drops herself gracefully into the chair across from Draco. "So," she says. "You shagged him?"

"Obviously," says Draco, in the midst of blowing on his tea and glaring daggers at the house-elf who dared bring it to him slightly too warm.

Pansy considers him for a moment, takes in his posture and the hard look in his eyes-- guilt, she realizes. She decides that she believes him, and it worries her. "Why?" she asks.

He looks up angrily. "Why? Do you want me to go into a biological explanation? Why does anyone bloody sleep with anyone? I felt like it."

"Funny," she says slowly, "how you never seemed to just 'feel like it' before."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well..." She knows she is treading on dangerous ground, now, but that's the point, isn't it? "You only ever slept with Blaise before."

Draco flushes and huffs indignantly. "I don't know what you're talking about. I slept with plenty of people."

"Yeah? Like who?"

"You know," he says, looking furious. "People. Plenty of them."

"No names in particular come to mind?"

"Hmmph. Some of us don't shag and tell, you know."

"Oh, I see. Noble of you." She stares hard at him, and he stares back, biting into a new scone with unnecessary force and spilling crumbs everywhere. After a moment she sighs and says, "Don't worry, I told everyone you slept around just like Blaise did. But I think that after a while even Daphne Greengrass stopped believing me on that count."

Poor Draco's entire face is on fire as he shifts his gaze down to his tea. He swallows his mouthful of scone, with obvious effort, and says, "Do you have a point or is this just one of those 'insult Draco' days?"

"Oh, you know those always fall on Tuesdays. No, today, Draco, is Truth Day. What exactly happened between you and Potter?"

Draco chokes. "What? What d'you mean, 'between'..."

"Did you seduce him?"

"I only did what Snape--"

"So that's a yes?"

"... Yes."

There is a very pregnant pause. Draco pushes his plate away from him, his blush fading with alarming speed, leaving him even paler than usual. Finally, he says tightly, "I didn't want to. It was the only way. I had to... I had to get someone to protect me, and... Well, you know how much he hated me." He looks at her suddenly, meeting her eye, and she wants to cry at his desperate expression. "I had to," he says again, begging her to believe him, to tell him he was right.

All she can do is shrug, however, and look away, blushing herself at her failure as a friend. She doesn't know what to say to him. She'd suspected that something like this might have happened, so why wasn't she more prepared to hear it? Maybe she expected Draco to be more "over" it by now...

She clears her throat. "When you left..."

"Yeah. I just left. Didn't tell him anything."

"Oh."

He closes his eyes and covers his face in his hands. "I fucked up, didn't I? I don't even know which part I

did wrong..."

There is more silence. Eventually, Pansy, not knowing what else to do, says, "No, you--"

"Oh God!" he says abruptly, tearing his hands away from his face. "He's even got me doing his thing now..." He chokes, staring at his hands.

As tears begin to well up in his cloudy eyes, she reaches across the table and seizes his wrists, causing him to look up at her in surprise, his mouth shut tight in a way that reminds her strongly of his childhood self, trying not to burst into tears when he got hurt.

"Draco," she says firmly, "it's okay. Whatever it is, you can fix it."

He swallows and bows his head, so that his fringe obscures his face. His pulse beats warmly under her fingers and her heart aches in time with it. Ever since they were small, she kept every little time she cheered him up as a victory to be treasured in her memory, and every time she couldn't help him was a wound. He's more than a brother to her.

His hands fist and unfist above her grip, again and again, until finally his shoulders stop shaking.

"Alright?" she says quietly.

He nods.

* * *

Harry asked in the beginning of the summer that Lupin take him to Godric's Hollow. He couldn't very well go on his own, after all, since he had no idea where it was. However, Lupin was busy spying on Greyback, and Hagrid was busy with the giants, and anyway everyone said it was too dangerous. But now the

danger has passed, so Lupin takes him to the village and shows him the place where his house used to be.

Lupin warned him, before. "There's nothing there," he said. "What do you expect to find?"

Harry said he didn't need to find anything. He just needed to go. But now that he is here...

He thought that at least the nothing would mean something. That the overgrown mess of rotting wood and plaster dust and remnants of piping would somehow affect him. But he can make no connection to this place. It has nothing to do with him.

He feels, oddly, embarrassed. He should be sad, maybe even crying, standing here and looking at the place where his parents died and where his life was made into what it is. But there isn't anything here to anchor him, and there was no point in coming here.

He turns to Lupin, and sees that he is pale and sick-looking, his eyes downcast, avoiding the time-softened wreckage before him. Harry envies him for his memories. He is reacting to this place, he is tied to it, and that is terribly unfair because it is Harry whose fate was sealed by what happened here, Harry who had to hear his mother screaming in his head for the past five years and, more recently, watch her be murdered... It was Harry who had to kill Voldemort just to finish what was started here, had to be tortured and watch his friends die and even kill people... Harry swallows his bitterness, pushing it away as he learned to do after Sirius's death. Dwelling on how unfair life is won't get him anywhere.

He turns back to the remains of the house. He is slowly realizing that he has to give up hope of having much of a past beyond what he can remember. At one time in his life he had fooled himself into thinking that he knew what his parents were like. That somehow his father's voice in the Marauder's Map and Aunt Petunia's outbursts about her sister and seeing the pair of them smiling at him in the mirror of Erised meant that he knew something about them. But really he has no idea what sort of people they were, as he was forced to accept when he witnessed Snape's memory of his father. Harry doesn't know his parents, and he never will.

Harry isn't sure, but he thinks Lupin might be shaking. Harry feels suddenly guilty for not being able to summon up so much feeling. If he's perfectly honest with himself, which as a rule he tries not to be, he

has to admit that the reason he had suddenly wanted to come here, more than four months after the trip became feasible, probably had something to do with how he can't really stop thinking about Draco. With Ron and Hermione becoming closer all the time (he suspects that they may be sleeping together at this point), Harry is left alone more and more often. He visits Hagrid sometimes, but mostly he flies around the grounds or sits in the common room pretending to study while in reality staring into the fire and replaying in his head all the time he spent with Draco, trying to figure out how it happened and how Draco was able to manipulate him so easily. Perhaps, sick of feeling the way he does and knowing that it's exactly what Draco wants, Harry somehow decided that being depressed over his parents' deaths was preferable to being depressed over Draco.

Well, if he'd thought that he could push out the new pain with this old one, then it isn't working.

* * *

Draco spends most of his time draped over his favorite armchair in the library, eating sweets and reading his way through the entire Malfoy collection. He's found that he is now able to access many secret texts concerning Malfoy history and magic. He had no idea the manor had so many secrets. For example, the possession of the heir's ring gives him complete control over access to every part of the house. This means that he can keep his mother from finding him in the library and pestering him to do something productive with his time, like apply for a job at the Ministry or rekindle his mysterious relationship with the hero of Britain.

Similarly, Pansy seems determined to talk about Potter. Slowly, over months, she has drawn most of the story out of Draco, and now she brings up Potter unexpectedly, in the middle of the most benign of conversations. For instance, she'll be recounting the latest gossip from her comrades down in Knockturn Alley, which Draco finds interesting, even though he knows none of the people involved, and in the middle of a particularly juicy (and most likely exaggerated) story concerning a woman who ran into her husband at a gay club, each in the arms of their illicit same-sex lover, Pansy will suddenly come out with, "You're thinking about Harry right now, aren't you?"

That's another thing. She has, for some insane, Pansy-ish reason, decided to refer to Potter by his given name. It's oddly unsettling, not least because Draco finds that it is actually affecting the way he thinks of the boy in his own mind.

"What?" Draco snaps. "Don't be ridiculous."

Pansy smirks, and he scowls back. He taught her that smirk, and it's really unfair how often she uses it against him. But she flashes it more and more frequently these days, each time giving him the sense that she is thinking that he is thinking about a certain bespectacled Gryffindor. Which is absurd, of course, because how can Draco not think of him when she looks at him like that, when Potter or one of his friends is in the Prophet every other day, or when one of the characters in his books has dark hair, or whenever Pansy says anything about sex...

Okay. So perhaps he is a little... preoccupied. But how is he supposed to get over it when she keeps smirking? He becomes more and more agitated. Soon he finds he has even more trouble sleeping, and every time Pansy says Harry, Draco flinches a little.

* * *

Narcissa looks down at her son. "Draco," she sighs. "What are you doing here?"

"I was just wondering that myself," he says vaguely, staring up at the ceiling.

"Were you drinking?"

"No."

"Then please explain how you wound up lying on the sitting room floor."

He shrugs, his shoulders shifting against the plush oriental carpet. "It seems as good a place as any to be, I suppose."

"How long have you been here?"

"Oh, I don't know. Since this morning."

Her frown deepens. "Doesn't it hurt your back?"

"No," he says thoughtfully. "It's more the neck, really."

"You know, there are more productive uses of your time."

"Like going out and ingratiating myself to Gryffindors?"

"Exactly. There's only so much I can do from here, Draco. These people don't arrange marriages for their children anymore..."

"What?" Draco blinks and takes his gaze from the ceiling to meet her eye, upside down. "But I'm to marry Pansy."

She shakes her head sadly. "Darling... Her family is in ruins. She's the only one left free, and all of her father's assets have been seized. How can you marry her now?"

He closes his eyes and sighs. After all, he must have known there wasn't any advantage in the match anymore. "So," he says. "You want me to... What? Seduce someone?"

"I believe that, for you, it's the best option, yes."

A smile tugs at the corner of his lips, but at the same time tears begin to leak from underneath his closed

eyelids.

"Oh," says Narcissa softly. Quickly, she fetches a cushion from the settee and kneels beside him to tuck it under his head, wiping his soft hair from his face and kissing his cheek.

He gulps, chokes, gasps, and then curls inward, towards her, bringing his knees up almost to his chest, exactly like he did when he was little.

"Draco," she says softly. "Darling. It's alright. You don't have to do anything you don't want to. I'm sorry I asked you. The war's over; no one's in danger. I'll stay here for as long as you need. You've done so well, my love..." And now she is crying, too, the tears falling on his hair and running down his face to mingle with his own.

He lets out a sound that is a sickening imitation of a laugh, in the middle of his silent sobs. "It... didn't do much good..."

She kisses his hair. "You stayed alive. That's the best thing anyone has ever done for me."

"Mother," he chokes, and he grips the arm that is now supporting his head, and cries harder.

* * *

"Just go talk to him," Pansy says one evening in April, when she has had enough of Draco's sulking. "You have to."

He doesn't even pretend not to know who she means. "Talk to him? Are you insane? What would I tell him?"

"Well," she says, "you could start with 'hello'. That's the traditional way to begin conversations, I

believe."

He scowls at her from the depths of his armchair.

"Come on," she says, and sits down on the ottoman before him. "You want to see him. I know you do."

For once, he doesn't protest. He merely looks cross and says, "It's not exactly that simple, though, is it? I left. And lord knows what sort of things his freckly little girlfriend told him." He voice tightens as he speaks, and Pansy can see his jaw working.

"You'll never know if you don't talk to him," she offers.

"Yes, perhaps it's best that way."

"Look, there's a reason we're not on the Death Eater list. I don't think he would have spoken for you if he hated you all that much--"

"What if he wanted to keep me out of prison so that when he sees me he can kill me himself?"

She can tell he's been going over all of this in his mind since he last saw Potter. She closes her eyes and sighs. "I really can't see Harry Potter as the type to--"

"Pansy!" he interrupts her, and she jumps at the urgency in his tone. He's looking at her with wide eyes. "You don't know what I did! I... I tortured him! Granted, most of it was what he wanted, but there was..." He stops suddenly. "I mean, I had good reason to be horrible to him, but... If she's told him everything..." He shakes his head. "Even Harry wouldn't forgive that so easily." He looks up at her. "Why are you smiling?"

"You called him 'Harry'."

He scowls at her. "It doesn't matter what I call him. He'll still hate me."

Pansy stares hard at her best friend, watching him grow more and more uncomfortable under her gaze. Finally, when he is positively squirming, she says, "We both know that's not true. You did a thorough job at making him love you-- you must have done, to make it backfire. Right? And I'm sure he felt some of that, from you. I mean, look at what you let him do to you!" She gestures to his left arm, though she knows it isn't the worst of his scars by far.

He clutches that arm to his chest reflexively and shakes his head. "I don't know, Pansy."

"Then it's a good thing you've got me here to tell you, isn't it?"

He snorts, but she thinks she sees a small smile. For now, she lets the subject drop, knowing that it will come around again soon enough.

* * *

The problem with Hogsmeade is that there really isn't any decent Quidditch shop. Probably, Hogwarts parents discouraged any such establishment, as children running wild with their pocket gold in a store full of expensive brooms and equipment is generally much more economically disastrous than the same children in a joke or sweets shop. The result, however, is that Harry has to Apparate to Diagon Alley every afternoon to check if the next Nimbus line is in yet. It was supposed to be released some months ago, but there was some sort of problem with the transport of the brooms, and only a handful of the new models actually made it to retailers. Ludo Bagman snatched up all twenty-three of them in the first five minutes of their availability, and is now auctioning them off to desperate players hoping for an edge or a status symbol. Viktor Krum has one of these coveted brooms, which is another reason why Harry goes to Diagon Alley every day, as Ron was extremely interested in how exactly Hermione came to have this information. They've been fighting for about a week now, and most everyone seems to think this will be the end of their relationship. Harry knows better, but would still rather not be caught in the middle of it.

Harry is aware that if Fred and George knew he was at Diagon Alley so much and hadn't stopped by to see them, they would be furious, and to tell the truth he is somewhat concerned about them finding out. After all, news of Harry Potter's comings and goings spreads disturbingly quickly. But he can't risk running into Ginny. He just isn't ready to see her yet unless he really has to. He hasn't decided if he's forgiven her, or if he ever will. He much prefers not to think about it, which is surprisingly easy as he allows himself to dwell on other, probably even more unhealthy, things. Like Draco.

Harry has actually been asking around about him. Most of the people Harry talks to about it, however, think that he is either dead or in Azkaban. So Draco is either holed up in his house or abroad, but at any rate not exactly making his presence known to Wizarding society. Which, Harry supposes, is understandable, as most of the world puts him in the same category as all of the other Death Eaters.

"Harry Potter," says a voice beside Harry. He jumps and turns to see a tall, athletic woman standing next to him among the rows of broom catalogs in Quality Quidditch Supplies. She smiles brilliantly at him, her white teeth flashing against her dark complexion.

Harry feels himself blush and shifts uncomfortably. "Er, sorry... Do I know you?" He feels like he would have remembered her.

"I played for Hufflepuff when you were just a first-year." She grins. "Your second Quidditch match ever, and you caught the Snitch in record time. It was bloody fantastic."

He blushes even harder, but manages to smile back. "Clearly my greatest accomplishment," he says, and immediately regrets it, wondering if he sounded too full of himself. For all he knows, this woman is a reporter. Though she doesn't exactly look the type to be associated with Witch Weekly...

She laughs, however. "The only one I ever saw up close." She holds out her hand. "I'm Preyanjali, by the way." He takes it, feeling a slightly disturbing rush of excitement at the touch. He really has a thing for Quidditch girls, he realizes, somewhere in his sex-deprived brain. "Actually," she continues. "The real reason I came up to you--" she winks, "--was because the other night I overheard Pansy Parkinson asking Ginny Weasley about you."

It's as if a bucket of ice-cold Gillywater was just dumped over Harry's head. Pansy Parkinson? Talking to Ginny? About him? Pansy is probably in contact with Draco...

Preyanjali must have caught something in the look on his face, because she says quickly, "Are you alright? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to--"

He shakes his head forcefully. "No, it's okay. Just... I'm confused. Where did you hear this? And why was Ginny talking to Pansy Parkinson? And what did they say?"

She frowns curiously at him. "It was at the Mermaid down in Knockturn Alley. Pansy was asking if Ginny was still talking to you. Sounded like she was looking for you, or at least wanted to know how you were. So when I saw you here I thought I'd pass the message on to speak to Pansy." She pauses, still looking him over. "Should I not have said anything?"

"I don't know," he says, mostly because he only half-heard the question and doesn't have the energy to work it out. Talk to Pansy Parkinson... Why hadn't he thought of that before? But, wait, he doesn't really want Draco to know he's thinking about him. Does he? No, of course not. Draco used him and Harry should definitely be much more angry about that than he actually is. "Well," he says eventually. "Thank you, at any rate. I--"

"I'm not a lesbian," she says suddenly.

He blinks. "What?"

Color darkens her dusky cheeks. "Just because I go to the Mermaid doesn't mean... I mean, I'm bi, you know. Erm." She stares at her shoes, her confident manner utterly deflated.

"Oh," he says, still confused. "Er." He clears his throat. He knows enough to realize that she was hoping for a date of some sort. "D'you... D'you want to-- No, I'm sorry, I can't. I just... God, I hope you're not a

reporter because I am not coming off very well."

She stares at him for a beat and then bursts out laughing again. "Don't worry," she chuckles. "I'm Keeper for Pudd. U."

Harry gasps, completely distracted once more. "You're Preyanjali Rai! You're their best player!"

Her blush deepens. "That's a matter of opinion, I should think."

"No." Harry shakes his head and grabs a copy of Quidditch Today from the shelf. He flips through a few pages, finds the one he's looking for, and holds it up to her. "See? They've ranked you."

She looks away, a smile quirking her mouth. Of course she would know all about the article and the rankings. She probably has managers and publicists to tell her about this sort of thing. Unlike Harry, who is often surprised by fan mail addressed to him and his wife Hermione, or begging him to stop drinking so heavily or, worse, letters to his friends consoling them for his death. Just because he didn't leave the castle grounds for a few months...

Harry puts the magazine away, suddenly sobered. "Well, I should go. You know. My friends worry and all." She nods. Yes, she does know. Everyone does. "But maybe," he adds, "... I'll see you around, sometime?"

She smiles, brightening a little, and nods again. "Sure, Harry Potter. And you know, I don't understand why you don't try out for a side. You'd be brilliant."

He shrugs. "What sort of hero would I be if I didn't keep defeating Dark Wizards?"

She laughs once more and he gives her one last smile before Disapparating.

* * *

Draco is sorely tempted to burn this newspaper. "Harry Potter dating," indeed. He growls and curses photographs and the way they show Harry-- Draco's Harry! As was demonstrated time and time again... -- looking rather unsubtly at the legs of some slaggish Quidditch star, right in the middle of a shop, and then looking up and smiling at her. And this other one, almost too blurry to make out, of the two of them in a corner of the Leaky Cauldron. The camera-wielder seems to have been apprehended in that case before he could cause too much damage. Only Harry's face is clear, as he raises a glass to his lips and then turns to the camera, stuck in a ten-second loop due to poor exposure.

Ah, what the hell. Draco tears the paper up into tiny strips and throws it in the fireplace. He likes to keep fires going all year round for just such occasions, which, come to think of it, seem to be rather more frequent for him than for the average person.

The library door opens, and he turns to see Pansy coming in, wearing a look of poorly concealed worry. Damn. She's seen the Prophet, just as he'd feared, and now she's found him in front of the fire with an angry flush in his face and newsprint ink all over his hands. Fantastic.

"I thought I'd locked you out," he says politely.

She raises an eyebrow. "You must not really have wanted to keep me out, or it would have worked, wouldn't it?"

"I don't care about the paper or anything Potter does," says Draco, just to be sure she understands.

She surveys him. "Yes, I can see that. Look, I came to tell you it isn't true."

He gives her his best sneer. "How in hell would you know?"

"He only met her once."

"Who?"

"The slaggish Quidditch star." Really, Draco and Pansy have been friends for far too long if she can actually read his mind word for word like that. "She came up to him in a shop and they talked for a little while and that was it."

"Oh? Then how do you explain--" he reaches for the paper, and realizes he's burnt it, "-- the other picture!"

She avoids his eye, and after a moment, says, "That was me. I was with him in the Leaky Cauldron. She and I are both tall, dark hair..." She waves her hand vaguely. "We look the same from the back."

Stunned, Draco takes a few minutes to recover. "Er... Pansy, erm." His mouth is dry. "You didn't... Please, tell me you didn't say anything to him..."

"No," she says quickly. "I told him I hadn't seen you in months."

Draco lets his breath out in a sigh of relief. "Oh, good. I was afraid I was going to have to kill you. That would have been messy. So what did you say to him, then?"

"Well, I was, you know, sort of curious, and I did hear from Ginny Weasley that her brother said that Harry'd not stopped talking about you since you left."

Draco's breath catches again. "Really?"

She nods, a smile beginning on her face. "So the slaggish Quidditch star overheard us talking at Knockturn Alley, and so when she saw Harry in a Quidditch shop she went up to him and told him I was

asking about him. He wrote me, and voilà, we agreed to meet for a drink." She finishes with a self-satisfied smirk.

"Okay, but what did you say to him?"

"Well." Her eyes light up with admiration at her own cunning. "I pretended like I was just curious as to why I wasn't on the Death Eater list. He admitted that he'd done it for you. I asked why, and he asked if I'd rather he arrested me right then, which kind offer I politely declined--"

"Pansy!" Draco interrupts her. "Get to the point! What did he say?"

Her smile breaks into a full-out grin. "Generally, I got the impression that he is still very much in love with you."

"Oh my god." Draco sinks into the armchair beside him. His whole body has gone weak. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. He isn't exactly the most subtle person in the world, you know."

Draco nods slowly. After a few minutes, he says, "What should I do?"

"Play it cool," she says, suddenly at his side, her hand on his shoulder. "Run into him somewhere. There's no way he'd be able to ignore you."

He looks up at her. "'Run into him'? How am I supposed to do that?"

"I don't know." She rolls her eyes. "You're the one who was obsessed with him for seven years. Are you telling me you can't predict where you might find him?"

"Quality Quidditch Supplies," he says, after a moment.

"No, that's where he ran into the strumpet. Haven't you been listening?"

Draco shakes his head. "Pansy, if you knew anything about Quidditch--"

"I do!" she interrupts. "I know which of the girls are queer and--"

"The new brooms," he continues, talking over her. "They're not out yet, not really. Potter doesn't have one, because if he did it'd be in the paper. He'll be dropping by his favorite Quidditch shop every afternoon, no doubt." He pauses, thinking, and adds, "Probably also stopping in for ice cream. He's supposed to be friends with that Fortescue fellow."

Pansy claps him painfully on the back. "See! I knew you'd be able to stalk him. Six years of watching his every move had to pay off sometime, eh?"

"Mmm," says Draco, not bothering to point out that his knowledge of Harry already did come in rather useful last summer. He actually feels slightly ill.

"Draco!" Pansy says in alarm. "Are you alright? It's going to be fine, now. You know that, right? He loves you."

He's doing it again. Covering his face just like Harry. "If you're wrong, I'll kill you," he growls through his hands.

"Great! Now eat something. You've got to pretend you haven't been wasting away here thinking about him for the past six months."

* * *

With exams over and Ron not speaking to her, Hermione has nothing better to do in her spare time than pester Harry. Somehow she can always tell when he's hiding something, and so after several hours of her constant nagging, Harry gives up and tells her about his conversation with Pansy Parkinson.

In the silence that follows, Hermione purses her lips and flips some pages in the book she isn't reading.

Harry sighs. "I told you you wouldn't like it." She doesn't respond. They've argued over the issue of Draco so many times that everything has been said. "It doesn't matter anyways," he adds. "If she doesn't know where he is--"

Hermione slams the book shut. "Are you really that stupid? Of course she knows where he is. He probably sent her to talk to you."

"What? Really? You think?"

"Why else would she talk to you? If she really didn't know why she wasn't on the list, why would she risk it being a mistake? She probably didn't even expect you to believe her. Malfoy's obviously trying to get something from you."

"Hermione, what else would he want from me now?"

"How would I know? Maybe he's after your money, or your good name..."

"Or," says Harry quietly, "he's in love with me, too."

Hermione sighs and rests her elbows on the table and her forehead in her hands. "Harry. You can't keep doing this. I'm serious. It's really starting to scare me." She lifts her head enough to peer at him.

He looks away. "It scares me, too. I just... It's not like I'm not trying, okay? You think I like being this pathetic? I--"

"Stop." Her voice is sharp. "Please, just stop. I don't want to hear it anymore. Maybe if you're too thick to see that he used you, then you deserve him." She stands and stalks off to the girls' dormitory before he has a chance to protest.

She's probably right anyways. But, really, if Harry hasn't 'gotten over' Draco, as Hermione so loves to say, in so long, maybe he never will.

Stupid, Harry thinks to himself.

Still, when he goes the next day to Diagon Alley and catches a glimpse of a shining blond head outside Florean Fortescue's, he stops dead in his tracks, causing several people to bump into him and mutter rude complaints until they see who he is. He hardly notices, however, as a wave of heat that has nothing to do with the pleasant weather surges through him. He should have realized long before that even if his emotions didn't betray him, his body would.

But he fights it, all the way, because he is Harry Potter and that's what he does.

* * *

"Dra-- Malfoy, what are you doing here?" Harry sinks immediately into the seat across from Draco.

Draco smirks and leans forward on his elbow. The table is small, and so this movement brings him inches from Harry. "You sat down rather quickly, didn't you? Either you really want to talk to me, or there's something else you want to do to me..." Draco hadn't exactly planned on being like this, teasing Harry

the way he used to, but there is something about the way Harry blushes and tries to look annoyed that is irresistible.

"Don't flatter yourself," Harry snaps. "I just want to know why you're here."

Draco raises his eyebrows. "Why does anyone come here? I wanted some ice cream."

"You had to come here for that?"

"What, now you own Diagon Alley?"

Harry huffs and looks away. Draco grins and slides a hand onto Harry's knee under the table. He can't help it, anymore than he can help saying casually, "Miss me, Potter?"

Harry has gone very still, the flush in his face growing deeper. "No," he says, after a moment. "I hate you."

"Harry Potter, you are a terrible liar." Just saying his name somehow sends sparks down Draco's spine and to the hand that is already tingling where he is touching Harry's leg. He begins to move his thumb in slow circles against the denim of his jeans, pressing lightly against the subtle heat of Harry's skin underneath.

Harry closes his eyes and bites his lip. And this is just his knee! Draco had hoped that seeing each other after nine months apart would have affected Harry as much as it did Draco, but he hadn't dared to expect quite this level of responsiveness. "I'm staying in room sixteen at the Leaky Cauldron." Draco had meant to sound coy, teasing, but his voice comes out low and husky. So much for trying to hide how much he wants Harry.

Harry's eyes snap back open, but he doesn't look surprised. He swallows visibly, and says throatily, "Don't

you want to finish your ice cream?"

Draco feels that a remark about preferring to lick the dessert off of Harry's body would be a little too much. Still, images flood his head and it takes him a minute to collect his thoughts enough to respond. "Eager, aren't you? All I did was tell you where I'm staying." He smirks again. Harry, propped up by his elbows on the table between them, has been ever-so-slowly leaning further and further in, as if pulled against his own will, so that now he is so close that Draco has only to speak in the lightest whisper.

Harry opens his mouth, but merely sighs as Draco inches his hand forward, resting it halfway up the inside of Harry's thigh. It's now Draco's turn to swallow nervously, as the change in Harry's breathing, and the feel of that breath on his lips, draws his eyes to Harry's slightly open mouth. His bottom lip is red and swollen from the way he has been worrying it between his teeth. Draco briefly closes the inch between them to run his tongue across it.

Harry shudders... Then pulls back, sitting bolt upright and quickly pushing his chair back from the table. Draco feels cold as his hand is shaken off of Harry's leg and that warm breath on his face is taken away. Harry shakes his head vehemently. "Are you mad? I can't--" He cuts himself off, looking angry. "You have to leave now."

"What? Why?"

Harry glares at him. "This can't happen." He lowers his voice and adds tightly, "Especially not here."

"Then you leave," Draco says petulantly, sitting back in his chair and folding his arms across his chest.

"I can't," Harry hisses emphatically.

It takes Draco a moment to figure out what he means, and when he does he laughs. "Alright, then," he grins, adding in a whisper, "I'll just wait for you, then?" He leaves an irritated Harry Potter sitting awkwardly at the table with Draco's unfinished sundae, and the tablecloth significantly covering his lap.

* * *

Harry keeps his arms crossed tightly on the tabletop. He has to calm down. First of all, this is ridiculous. It's completely ridiculous and stupid and probably a very bad idea. If Ron and Hermione knew that he was actually considering going to Draco's hotel room and... Well, okay, not considering. Definitely going to. There's no point in trying to pretend that isn't where his body will take him as soon as he masters himself enough to be able to stand up from this table.

He is acutely aware of all the people around him. If anyone saw what just passed between him and Draco, it will be all over the Daily Prophet tomorrow. Interestingly, the most anxiety-inducing aspect of this possibility is that his friends would see it and know how weak he is. They wouldn't understand at all. He can just see Hermione's face, pitying and disappointed and angry all at the same time, and Ron, just plain angry.

Well, they've got no right to judge him. Neither does anyone else, including all the people passing by on the street and sitting around him outside Florean Fortescue's. He watches Draco's ice cream melt in its dish. It's a shame to let it waste. He unfolds his arms to tug the bowl towards him, picking up the spoon to lick it first. However, once it is in his mouth and he thinks about how only a matter of minutes ago it was in Draco's mouth, and he runs his tongue along the smooth metal that is still too cold to have that blood-like tang, he realizes that this is doing nothing for his condition.

He sits there for a long time before he is finally able to get up and, leaving some money on the table, head off down the street towards the Leaky Cauldron.

* * *

Draco paces his room. Yes, he is actually pacing. Waiting for Harry. At one point, he is suddenly struck with the absurdity of it all. Draco Malfoy, the prince of Slytherin by virtue of being from the highest family, is fidgeting nervously as he waits for Harry Potter, the half-blood hero. But the war changed everything, he supposes, and many of those changes weren't actually all that bad.

Case in point: a knock comes at Draco's door, carefully measured, neither timid nor eager, and when Draco answers it, he finds Harry looking back at him, blushing again and stepping quickly into the room. Draco shuts the door swiftly, simultaneously wrapping an arm around the other boy's waist. Harry more or less falls into him, and presses their bodies together against the door.

And then Harry's hands, so familiar but still so exciting, are running across Draco's cheeks, his hair, his neck, down to the buttons of his collar. Draco tries to think of something to say, but all his mouth wants to do is taste Harry again, so he leans forward quickly, the jerky movement causing his mouth to collide with Harry's ear. Harry, still working on Draco's buttons, laughs and tilts his head to connect their lips and tongues in a sloppy but forceful kiss.

Draco curses clothing. What idiot decided that shirts should button all the way down the front and that denim should be this thick? There is a spell, of course, to remove clothing instantly, but it requires concentration and Draco has never heard of anyone being quite able to perform it in any situation where it might be useful. So it is with no small frustration against clothing manufacturers that Draco pulls Harry's shirt over his head.

For a moment, Harry's arms are trapped in the sleeves and he is caught with his wrists over his head, as if bound as used to be their habit, and Draco pauses. Harry's face shows no fear, however, no hesitation, and no hint of the hard and somehow malicious masochism that dominated him during that time. Harry is, in fact, gazing at Draco with something else completely, something that Draco had never wanted to see before but now craves more than he cares to admit.... Draco gives another tug, and Harry puts his free arms to immediate good use in the area of Draco's waistband.

All those times for those few months they were together, Draco had been given some illusion of freedom in his control over Harry. He had gotten off thinking, "I can do anything I want to him." But this is the first time that statement has actually been true. Only now can he actually lose himself in exploring Harry's body, lick the inside of Harry's wrists so that he shivers at the unexpected sensation, run his hands all over everywhere, rest his palm at the pulse in Harry's neck, bite at the place where his hip bone juts out from the plane of his abdomen.... This is the first time Draco is really and truly free to do what he wants to do and only what he wants, rather than what he thinks he should want or what will help his dignity.

Harry, judging from the sounds he his making and the way his body is moving against Draco's, is loving it. His leaking cock leaves sticky trails on Draco's cheek, his chest, the crook of his arm...

Harry sits up on the bed. His entire body glistens with damp from sweat and Draco's insistent licking. His cheeks are blooming with attractive color, his mouth red and open and panting, his hair mussed about his head like a dark halo. For a moment Draco loses the power of speech. Actually, he loses the power to do anything at all except look. He watches the pulse going in Harry's neck and suddenly wants to feel it against his tongue, to feel Harry breathing against his mouth and hands...

Before he has a chance to act on impulse, however, as he is now so gloriously free to do, Harry leans forward and skims his hands down Draco's chest. The warm touch makes Draco shudder and his hips jerk forward involuntarily. Then those hands are curving down around his waist and Harry is choking a little as he mutters, "Please. Let me... I want to feel you again..."

It's so hard-- almost impossible-- not to come right then, or as Harry's hot mouth envelopes his cock, sucking him deep into his throat, or when Harry moans and closes his eyes blissfully... and then Harry pushes two fingers slowly into him and begins to move them back and forth and presses just in the right place and Draco very nearly loses control.

But he can't let it happen like this. So when his cock begins to twitch dangerously in Harry's mouth, he uses the last of his strength to say, "Stop... Harry, you have to stop."

He obeys reluctantly, pulling away enough to say, "Why?"

"Because I'm going to come, you stupid prat." Draco is still fighting for breath, still fighting the pull of impending climax.

Harry looks up at him, and suddenly laughs. "Is that a problem for you?" His fingers are still inside Draco, and he begins to move them again.

"NO!" Draco shouts, and seizes Harry's shoulders to push him away, though the touch only brings him closer to the brink of orgasm.

Shocked at the desperate plea in Draco's voice, Harry freezes.

"We... we have to do it properly," says Draco quickly, before Harry gets the wrong idea. "I want to come with you. Don't you see? This is... the first time." Draco can't articulate it any better than that, so he stares imploringly at Harry, willing him to understand.

Harry's eyes widen and after a moment he nods and smiles slowly and softly. Draco beats down the shameful emotions that well within him at that look, then remembers that he doesn't have to. "Harry," he says, holding out his hands and letting the syllables come out as a sigh... Like a lover.

Harry comes to him obediently, and Draco takes his time in wrapping his arms around him, kissing his mouth slowly, and laying him down. Words and broken images flood Draco's mind-- memories of Harry all jumbled together with pieces of romance novels and trite love songs. Harry on a staircase, looking down at him coldly. "I guess Voldemort's just a warm-up act compared to you three..." The way Harry's kisses were sometimes so long and slow and rhythmic that it was like drowning. A million angry looks Harry had given him over the years, a thousand insults, and a hundred pleas. And Draco can't help thinking about how this is supposed to be and wondering if they are doing it right and whether Harry will know, whether he knows, what Draco means with all of this...

But when Draco performs the spell and Harry moans with the magic that Draco knows must be sending that wonderful, soft sensation throughout his body, when Harry twists and murmurs, I missed you, into Draco's mouth... Then everything is gone except Harry, here, alive and flushed and beautiful and wanting Draco as much as Draco wants him.

So Draco no longer hesitates. He pushes into Harry, and it's almost too much already just because he's wanted this so badly for so long. He doesn't even consider holding back his gasps of pleasure, released against Harry's heated lips and mingling with Harry's own low and drawn-out moan. Harry wraps his legs around Draco's waist and pushes back, burying Draco's cock up to the base. Draco tightens his fist where it has gathered in Harry's hair and dips his tongue into Harry's mouth once more as he begins to move. Harry's arms tighten around Draco's body even as his legs relax, spreading once more as Draco's thrusts grow faster and deeper.

They breathe the same breaths, their mouths so close together but open and panting, all attempts at kissing abandoned as the heat and movement of Draco's cock inside Harry consumes both of them.

They do come together, Draco's spilling inside Harry sending him over the edge.

Sweaty, hot, sticking and tangled together, they kiss briefly before Draco pulls back to see Harry more properly, watching the progress of his breath, his pulse, the flush slowly fading from his cheeks but lingering on his lips. Harry's eyes have fluttered closed, and Draco wonders if he will ever get this Gryffindor to face sex completely. Ah well. It isn't as if they don't have time to work on it.

They are still clinging tightly to each other, and Draco didn't know that there could be a feeling as comforting as Harry's chest expanding and contracting against him and his heart beating so close...

“So you'll stay,” says Harry, after several minutes. There is no question in his voice, only complete trust.

Draco smirks. “You're going to have to explain to your little friends that you're in love with a Death Eater.”

Harry opens his eyes and smiles back, apparently unfazed by the l-word and saying, “You know, I really don't think you get to use that title anymore.” He reaches for Draco's left arm. “Even 'ex-Death Eater' doesn't exactly capture the extent of what you did.” He runs his finger lightly across the thin scar marking where he himself had sliced through Draco's arm a half-year ago. “It's healed nicely. I noticed you seem to have regained full use of that hand.”

“Indeed,” Draco purrs in response to Harry's wicked grin and lets said hand trail across Harry's chest, running teasing circles around hardening nipples and earning some quickened breathing.

“I wish...” says Harry, with apparent difficulty. “I wish we could Heal all of your scars... I wish I could erase everything I've done to you."

Draco pauses in his caresses, raising his eyes to meet Harry's with a quirked eyebrow. “Surely not everything?”

Harry blushes. “Every time I hurt you,” he amends.

“I could say the same,” Draco points out. “So why don't we just call it even, then?”

“Can we do that?”

“Well, we could at least try.”

There is a short pause, then: “Does trying involve lots of... this sort of thing?” Harry's grin is back as he climbs on top of Draco, straddling him and licking his neck.

“Mmm,” says Draco. “Yes, I should think so.” He reaches up and twists a hand into the black mess of Harry's hair and pulls him into a kiss.

“Then,” says Harry, breaking away for just a moment, “I'll try all my life.”

* * *

End

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